



House in disorder

Parliament is not a gladiatorial arena of victors and vanquished

Just as the monsoon session of Parliament began on July 20, the student protest demanding the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan, as Union Education Minister, gathered momentum. The BJP had the context and the confidence to turn the session into a theatre of its triumph, powered, most remarkably, by its victory in the West Bengal Assembly election. But the popular reaction to the brutal crackdown on the protesting students by the Delhi Police turned its plans upside down, as rogue policemen were filmed assaulting and attempting to sexually abuse young people. Though no accountability has yet been fixed for the blatant violations of the law by police personnel, the BJP and the Union government have had to face sustained criticism from the Opposition and sections of public opinion. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah barely attended the proceedings. Several Bills were passed, with inadequate deliberation. The government passed a Bill which facilitates the operation of a February guideline by the Home Ministry on the mandatory singing of the full version of *Vande Mataram*, the national song, at state functions. The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill, passed amid Opposition protests, overlooks concerns about its potential to undermine federalism and the rights of those on resource-rich land.

The amendment to mining regulations follows the unfortunate pattern of hurried lawmaking and the continuing expansion of the powers of the central government at the cost of States and local communities. The session also legislated stronger measures against malpractices in examinations, in an effort to calm the anger of students. Whether those measures will be adequate to restore trust in the education system, remains to be seen. Mr. Pradhan eventually resigned during the session. Two other legislative attempts, the first, to rush through a new architecture for the delimitation process and the second, to regulate foreign contributions, did not entirely materialise, but both remain alive. It need not have been this way. The government should hold broader and more transparent consultations on both delimitation and the proposed FCRA amendments. The FCRA Amendment Bill will now be examined by a Joint Parliamentary Committee, but the exercise should not be reduced to a mere numbers game. The Centre must convene an all-party meeting, circulate draft legislation, and consult State Chief Ministers on its proposals on delimitation. The Opposition may have succeeded in stalling the government's moves on delimitation and the FCRA, but it should not be triumphant. As the BJP itself discovered, political circumstances can turn rapidly. At any rate, Parliament should not be treated as a gladiatorial arena where one side vanquishes the other. It must remain a forum for constant conversation and the collective pursuit of solutions to the problems confronting the nation.

Internet unbound

India's social media now resemble China's tightly controlled cyberspace

The Union government has summoned Facebook and Instagram parent Meta, and given senior staff from the firm a dressing down. Publicly, the reason is the brief removal, in India, of a video message by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, the government is hardly making a secret of its intent to nudge Meta to suppress posts of protests such as the one at Jantar Mantar. A barrage of takedown notices have already erased or suppressed some of the more emblematic forms of the protests. Instagram Reels, where users are shown automatically recommended posts from various creators, have emerged as one of the most influential forms of mass media in the country. Seeking suppression of political speech on such a platform would put India in unenviable company, joining the ranks of Pakistan, where TikTok was banned for some time in 2021 until it agreed to "control immoral/indecent content". More importantly, it would bring India much closer to the tightly controlled digital ecosystem of China, where nearly all dissent is wiped out in mere minutes. All that possibly stands in the way of India's cyberspace drifting to that status quo is a lack of capacity to check posts in real time, a "problem" that is ripe for a destructive AI-based solution.

Meta is no bastion of resistance in spite of being a central site of the mobilisations over the last few weeks. For months, it has crawled when asked to bend, by needlessly taking down every post referred to it under Section 79(3)(b) of the Information Technology Act, 2008, a censorship route that merely notifies platforms that the reporting agency feels the content referred to is illegal. Despite posts taken down under this section almost never going to court, Meta has uniformly chosen to comply automatically. This has set the stage for the arm-twisting that the government appears to be undertaking. The conditions that enabled widespread censorship in China were fostered over the decades preceding the Internet's growth. In the absence of those conditions, and in the absence of a single-party system with a stated ideological commitment to centralise control, the Internet cannot be tamed. But warping the public's cultural self-perception is damaging for society, and must be stopped. These draconian measures can be used by successive governments if left unchecked. The current dispensation has drawn the wrong lesson from the protests and the accompanying online zeitgeist. Mass mobilisations are the lifeblood of democracy, not an aberration that bears no repetition.

The nation has entered its 80th year of independence. This is an occasion when all Indians, rising above their differences, will join together in paying homage to their freedom fighters, whose endless exertions and sacrifices delivered the people from the British colonial rule. This is when a subject nation rose to freedom to embark upon its 'tryst with destiny' and found its soul in the promised freedom and dignity of a people, long oppressed.

India has since traversed a long distance, navigating a turbulent course of history, managing religious, caste and regional conflicts as also economic disparities. India has suffered wars, terrorism, famines and pandemics. And, today it can justly pride itself in its scientific and technological accomplishments, its defence and nuclear capabilities, a robust economy and a leadership role in the shaping of a new world order.

The erosion of fraternity

But an objective audit of the nation's trajectory as a democracy must contend with grave challenges to the aspiration for an inclusive and benevolent society. Without a partisan apportioning of blame or underplaying national achievements, India must consider whether its politics as practised in the decades gone by has secured fraternity amongst fellow citizens. The heightened disparities and communal discord have resulted in the othering of large sections of its people.

The pervasive arrogance of power at all levels defies the constitutional and moral constraints upon its exercise. Transgression of constitutionally demarcated jurisdictions by the co-equal branches of the Indian state and the strained Centre-State relations are ominous signals for the future of India's federal polity. The pursuit of politics fixated on the acquisition of power at any cost, unconcerned with the means and ends, is a clear affront to the moral injunctions that undergird the founders' vision of a just political order. Electoral outcomes influenced by money, muscle and a pliant bureaucracy subvert the autonomy of voters and interrogate the purity of the country's electoral processes.

A political culture in which opponents are crushed into submission, conscientious dissenters are trodden to unbearable levels of humiliation, and their reputations maligned and families targeted, question the idea of politics as the highest form of public service that, as Thomas Mann famously reminded us, determines the destiny of man in our times. Clearly, substantive democracy is more than majoritarian triumphalism. It is about the vindication of justice, freedom and human dignity perched at the zenith of constitutional fundamentals.

The mixed performance of their roles by constitutional institutions has added to the nation's democratic deficit. The Supreme Court of India's role as custodian of individual freedoms



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and as sentinel on the *qui vive* has been increasingly scrutinised in recent times. Notwithstanding the richness of its profound pronouncements in Puttaswamy (2017), Romila Thapar (2018), Navtej Johar (2018) and the 'Bulldozer' justice case (2024) *et al.*, some of its recent decisions, particularly in bail matters, and delays in its adjudicatory processes have been criticised as abnegation of the judicial function.

In some instances, it has preferred a "formal or barren legalism" (against which, years ago, Chief Justice of India H.J. Kania had cautioned us), to justify long incarceration of the accused without trial. The Court appears to have failed to enforce its edicts and indifference to media trials that impinge on the fairness of the judicial process has dented its credibility. The functioning of the collegium system in the matter of appointment of judges has contributed to the diminished moral authority of the highest court.

Parliament, as the highest forum of India's representative democracy, has long ceased to be an institution for informed deliberations about the country's future. Floating political loyalties of elected representatives of the people mock its institutional sanctity. The Election Commission of India needs to rescue its battered reputation as the chief superintendent of the country's electoral processes by dispelling widespread doubts about its functioning, even as it may rightfully claim credit for successfully conducting the world's largest electoral exercises over the years. Exceptions apart, the credentials of the Indian media as guardians of public interest are suspect. Most journalists and television anchors now combine the role of presenter, prosecutor and judge in the service of their masters' preferred agendas. That the pillars of Indian democracy have frayed over the years is an inescapable conclusion tested on the touchstone of practised politics and constitutional philosophy.

The worrying indifference of the citizenry

But the failure of India's politics to promote substantive democracy does not rest with any one party, leader or an institution. The indifference of a vast section of the citizenry to the brazen aberrations of constitutional governance has contributed to a gradual hollowing out of an otherwise promising democracy, rendered hostage to visceral animosities and ideological bankruptcy. Hannah Arendt, the philosopher, reminded us of the "banality of evil", implying the necessity of an enlightened citizenry to participate in the life of the nation in a dialectical relationship between politics and society. Amartya Sen's idea of democracy premised on "participatory living and government by discussion" eludes us. Indeed, the popular response against routinised state violence and atrocities against the weak has not been loud enough to invite the necessary structural changes in the processes of

governance. It is trite, therefore, that "the ballot box echoes the living room", leaving us Indians with the shell without the substance of democracy.

Because politics mirrors the state of society, and its values and failings, the task of national renewal must begin by looking inwards to apply the correctives. A social and political order that allows the brutalisation of a person in custody without meaningful recourse, which contents itself with illusory and wholly inadequate welfare schemes for crores of indigent persons and is not outraged enough at the unspeakable atrocities against children, youth, women and the marginalised, invites a decisive self-indictment. We know that "when society rewards greed, politics becomes transactional. When it condones deception and lies, leaders tend to follow".

Ennobling politics is not about manipulative conversations in which patriotism and truth are perceived as mutually exclusive. Politics that insists on a history made to order, negates the historical continuum and carries within the seeds of its rejection. Responsive democracy can thrive only in an inclusive society guided by a moral compass transcending the seductions of realpolitik. Elevating politics suffused with purpose presupposes a social milieu in which conscience prevails over power and where idealism is not dismissed as a utopian impossibility. The obvious needs reiteration, lest it is forgotten.

The choice before Indians

It is, therefore, for We, The People, to ensure that a larger political morality rooted in ethical fundamentals prevails over narrow identities in a renaissance of political culture that defers to justice, social, economic and political, as the ultimate command of the Constitution. Wisened by history and empowered by reason, it is for Indians, as inheritors of a free nation, to ensure that a democracy envisioned to enrich lives does not waste itself through acquiescence in injustice of any kind.

The debt of gratitude owed to India's freedom fighters summons Indians at this transformative moment to make choices that will place them on the right side of history — on the side of freedom and justice for all.

In conclusion, this writer repeats what he had written when India turned 75. "It is time to conquer our fears, reclaim our freedom and anchor our politics in honour that values principle over power". And as Frantz Fanon had reminded us, it is for each generation to "discover its mission, fulfil or betray it". The outcome of the recent students' protest at Jantar Mantar carries a hopeful message that democracy and dignity, despite the challenges, are secure in the idealism of the youth, inspired by a purifying sense of justice.

The views expressed are personal

Indians must
confront the
country's
democratic
failings and
reclaim hope

Financial democracy, the Jan Dhan transformation

Does ideology matter in governance? Yes, it does. A case in point is the Jan Dhan Yojana, which marks 12 years this Independence Day and has served the cause of Antyodaya, a concept propounded by both Mahatma Gandhi and Deendayal Upadhyaya. Simply put, it means that the most deprived should be considered the most deserving when it comes to the distribution of the fruits of development.

Independence Day is usually understood in political terms. India became a sovereign republic, established democratic institutions and introduced universal suffrage. But political independence alone does not guarantee economic liberty. For millions of Indians, even decades after 1947, the formal financial system remained distant. A bank account, formal credit, insurance or a reliable channel to receive government support could not be taken for granted. Add to this the menace of pilferage, and the systemic failure is complete. No wonder a former Prime Minister had to admit that when a rupee was sent from Delhi, only 15 paise reached the recipient.

The vision

On August 15, 2014, from the ramparts of the Red Fort, the newly elected Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, made financial inclusion part of his Independence Day address.

Among several major announcements made during the address, he announced the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY). The idea sounded simple: every household in India should have access to a bank account, a RuPay debit card and insurance cover. At Vigyan Bhawan on August 28, during the launch of the PMJDY implementation, Mr. Modi quoted Chanakya: *Sukhasya moolam dharmah* — the root of happiness is dharma; *Dharmasya moolam artha* — the root of dharma is artha; and *Arthasya*



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Twelve years of
Jan Dhan have
led to financial
inclusion and
independence

moolam rajyam — the root of artha is the state.

The argument was that economic means are fundamental to human well-being and, therefore, creating access to those means is also a responsibility of the state.

The bank account was not simply another government benefit; rather, it was an entry point into the formal economy. The PMJDY, therefore, deserves to be viewed through the lens of Independence Day and the Prime Minister's thought leadership. India's first independence was about freeing the country from colonial rule. The second challenge was to build a state in which freedom could actually be exercised by ordinary citizens. If a citizen cannot access formal finance, receive money directly, save securely or establish a connection with the institutions through which economic opportunity flows, political freedom remains incomplete in a very practical sense.

The PMJDY attempted to address one part of that gap.

The numbers tell a story

The architecture also reflected the idea of Antyodaya: the last person in the queue should not remain outside the system. A zero-balance account meant that having little money was no longer, in principle, a reason to remain outside the banking system. A RuPay card and an overdraft facility were intended to make the account something that could actually be used.

Financial inclusion is not merely about opening accounts; it is about becoming part of a system of savings, payments, credit, insurance and economic opportunity. Twelve years later, the scale of that first step is difficult to ignore. By July 2026, the PMJDY had crossed 58 crore accounts, with deposits running into ₹3 lakh crore. More than half of the accounts are held by women, while roughly three-fourths are in rural and semi-urban areas.

But Jan Dhan's real significance lies beyond the account numbers. It became the first layer of the larger JAM trinity architecture: Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile. Once citizens had bank accounts connected to digital identity and mobile infrastructure, the government had a much more direct channel through which benefits could reach them. This transformed the possibilities of Direct Benefit Transfer. The same infrastructure eventually became part of India's broader digital public infrastructure, alongside systems such as UPI. A bank account opened under Jan Dhan became part of an increasingly digital financial ecosystem. A woman who entered the formal banking system through a Jan Dhan account in 2014 and a merchant accepting a UPI payment in France or the other countries it can be used in, in 2026, may appear to belong to two different stories. In reality, they are connected by the same financial infrastructure built over the past decade.

An account, an identity

More importantly, a bank account also became a solid symbol of identity — something that faceless people from marginalised sections could rarely have. It served as a form of "recognition with respect" offered by the system. Financial democracy through Jan Dhan made those on the periphery visible, counted and, importantly, proudly identified.

Sixty-seven years after Independence, in 2014, the Prime Minister used the country's most symbolic political stage to speak about financial, digital literacy and inclusivity. Jan Dhan followed by UPI has now become a story of our everyday lives.

The "Mera khaata, bhagya vidhata (My account, the destiny maker)" tagline for Jan Dhan remains true as it shapes the destiny of Viksit Bharat 2047 by financial inclusivity and opportunities ahead.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A place for the heroes

As we celebrate India's 80th Independence Day, a deep sense of regret weighs heavily upon us: India still does not have a comprehensive and integrated national museum where the complete history of its great freedom movement, the sacrifices of countless

known and unknown freedom fighters, and the long and arduous journey towards independence can be preserved and presented in one place. The leaders of post-Independence India devoted themselves to the monumental task of bringing together a nation of extraordinary diversity in languages, cultures,

religions, communities and traditions, and building a modern, democratic and sovereign state. For many among the younger generation, the lives and sacrifices of countless freedom fighters, revolutionaries, social reformers and nation-builders are becoming increasingly

unfamiliar. Their contributions cannot be adequately preserved merely through a few chapters in textbooks or ceremonial remembrance on national occasions. If we cannot properly preserve the memory of the struggle and sacrifices of those who gave their lives for our freedom, then what is the

deeper meaning of celebrating Independence Day?
Sasti Brata Kabiraj,
Durgapur, West Bengal

The politics of language
The politicisation of English is deeply regrettable. Promoting Indian languages need not come at the expense of English; the two

can develop simultaneously. India's linguistic diversity has historically demonstrated its capacity to accommodate multiple languages and cultural influences.
Laxmipriya Sahoo,
Rengali, Angul, Odisha

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GROUND ZERO



A worker holds a cricket bat at a workshop in Anantnag district, Jammu and Kashmir. IMRAN NISSAR

Deflating the wind in the willows

Kashmir's famed ₹700-crore bat-making industry supports at least 50,000 livelihoods. Since 2021, its bats have made their way to cricket grounds around the world, with 47 international players using Kashmir willow bats in major tournaments. But a shortage of willow, climate change, and smuggling are putting the industry under pressure. **Peerzada Ashiq** reports on its rise and the challenges threatening its future

In Halmulla in south Kashmir's Anantnag district, larger-than-life pictures of cricket stars such as Sachin Tendulkar, Virat Kohli, M.S. Dhoni, Shahid Afridi, and Babar Azam line the bat shops on National Highway-44.

Fawzul Kabir, 40, founder of GR8 Sports, is busy inspecting the English willow clefts neatly stacked into a 12-foot-high tower. Clefts, or wedge-shaped blocks of willow wood cut from timber, are turned into bats and customised to meet the evolving demands of cricket.

While displaying different bars, Kabir says, "A bat used by an opener is different from that which is used by a middle-order batsman and a slogger. Bats used for one-day matches are different from those used in the T20 format. Each player has a preference of his own."

The craftsmanship of local bat-makers comes into play in producing bats sturdy enough to endure wallops or dents, even after being hit by a leather ball. "Seasons are important in maintaining the uniqueness of the bat. We allow the willow clefts to brave the rain and snow in the open. Sun-dried clefts are the best to compete in international markets," Kabir explains.

Inside his well-equipped bat factory, Kabir tosses a ball into the air and lets it fall onto a bat, listening to the sound to check for the "sweet spot". "It's a science I mastered after my bats faced rejection in many countries in 2010, when I showcased some of my samples," he explains. "Our bats would not meet international standards. And just as we began producing international-quality bats, we have been hit by a shortage of raw material."

Famous for its mountain slopes, lush meadows and clear streams, Kashmir enjoys another reputation: the craftsmanship of its bat-makers. According to government data, Kashmir has 195 registered bat manufacturers, mainly in south Kashmir, and around 150 cleft dealers. They shape willow planks into sturdy, beautiful bats that find their way to cricket grounds around the world.

This international fame came only in 2021, when a bat-making company from Kashmir was certified by the International Cricket Council (ICC) and bagged a contract to supply bats to the Oman Cricket Board. However, it was during the Cricket World Cup 2022 that the Kashmir willow made it to the spotlight when UAE player Junaid Siddique hit the longest six of 109 meters off a Sri Lankan bowler, Dushmantha Chameera.

The industry is also an important source of livelihood in the region, for at least 50,000 locals. However, it is now grappling with several issues, including shortage of raw material, changes in climate, and smuggling.

A growing industry

The Kashmir willow is a deciduous tree native to Europe and western Asia. It was brought to the Kashmir Valley during British rule in 1895 by British officials Sir Walter R. Lawrence and J.C. MacDonell, the first chief of the Forest Department in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), to meet fuel needs and provide green fodder for cattle.

According to Yaseer Ahmad Mir, Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Salix alba, a species of English willow, was also introduced to make cricket bats, as it was



Kashmir willow timber is being smuggled to places such as Jalandhar and Meerut, which have their own bat-making units and flourishing export industries.

YASER AHMAD MIR
Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Fashion Technology

difficult for the British to export bats from England. "They found the climatic conditions of Kashmir suitable for making these bats," he says.

The willow wood is usually sourced from areas surrounding Anantnag. English willow trees are harvested after 12-15 years of growth, or when they attain a girth of 120 cm at 1.5 metres above the ground and stand about 12 metres tall. They are then cut into blocks or clefts and left to dry under the sun for months.

The wood is hard-wearing, relatively light, and easy to sand and shape. "The quality of willow is improved by drying and pressing it during its production stage," says Mir.

According to data from the Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Agriculture and Science Technology, a mature willow tree with a girth of 100 centimetres produces about 15-20 willow clefts. Accordingly, around 1.2 lakh mature Salix trees are felled to produce 30 lakh cricket bats per year. This is double the number manufactured a decade ago.

Kabir says 47 international players have used Kashmir willow bats in international tournaments, including the ICC T20 World Cups in 2021 and 2022 and the ODI World Cup in 2023. They include India's Munaf Patel, Yusuf Pathan, and Wasim Jaffer; Pakistan's Mohammad Yousuf; Bangladesh's Saqib Al Hasan, and West Indies' Kusal Perera and Chris Gayle.

He says: "We have not only made cricket bats lighter, but also ensured that the ping, balance, and stroke is matchless."

In the 2024 ICC Women's T20 World Cup, West Indies players Aaliyah Alleyne, Zaidia James, and Shamila Connell wrote a new chapter in Kashmir's bat-making story by using the bats made in the region for the first time. Kabir says that achieving this feat in women's cricket required bat manufacturers to undergo a series of tests. The tests assessed lighter bat weights and sweet spots at multiple points on the blade, based on the preferences of the women cricketers.

Kabir says the bats are affordable compared to those produced elsewhere. "Compared to willow bats from the U.K. that cost ₹1.5 lakh-2 lakh, the bats produced here range from ₹300 to ₹20,000. This makes them much more affordable. States such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Delhi queue up with or-

ders for bats every year," he says.

The plan to tackle the quality crisis

However, just as it was growing towards the ₹700-crore mark and deepening its roots in international cricket, Kashmir's bat-making industry is struggling to meet both domestic and international orders, Kabir says. The price of English willow is an indicator of the shortage: per foot, it has gone up from ₹300 in 2021 to ₹1,250. "The Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) government needs to step in to bridge the gap and help the bat industry here expand," he says.

Javed Ahmed Rana, the Forest Minister of J&K, agrees that the declining availability of quality willow timber is one of the biggest challenges confronting the cricket bat industry in the Union Territory. To tackle the shortage, "a coordinated drive is in place to revive willow cultivation across Kashmir," he says.

According to the Forest Department, the government plans to plant 1,100 willow trees per hectare across 200 hectares of forest and State land, with a target of 2.2 lakh trees starting this year. The move could help the bat industry increase production to 50 lakh bats per year.

According to Rana, the J&K government is identifying "suitable low-lying and marshy areas across the Valley for expanding willow plantations". It has roped in the State Forest Research Institute to introduce improved willow species and clones to enhance both productivity and sustainability. He says the government needs to build a self-sustaining willow cultivation ecosystem through scientific management, quality planting material, identifying new plantation areas, and greater farmer participation.

In 1917, the Forest Department under the Dogra rulers, identified alluvial and riparian willow species and planted them along rivers, stream banks, and point bars. Wetland willows were also planted in areas with saturated soils, including around the wetlands of Wular Lake, Harran, Hygam, Hokursur, Mirgund, Mamandangi, Gund Jehangir, and Shahgund. An official estimate suggests that about 5 million willow trees existed in and around these areas.

Irfan Ali Shah, Conservator of Forests, North Circle, says the Forest Department at present manages approximately 67 hectares of land under willow plantations. "These plantations are managed scientifically according to approved working plans under the Willow Plantation Working Circle. Sites are selected based on soil moisture, drainage, water availability, productivity, and the ecological needs of the species," he says.

English willow is particularly suited to mildly waterlogged and moisture-retentive areas, "where adequate soil moisture can support satisfactory growth during its rotation period". Besides south Kashmir, Baramulla, Kupwara, and Bandipora are also emerging as hubs of willow cultivation.

"The Litter Forest Division in Bijnepahra plans to plant English willow cuttings in available open spaces in the Momanjani and Katriteng plantations, covering about 5 hectares. The initiative aims to expand the existing willow resource and promote scientific regeneration in suitable areas," says Shah.

Changes in weather patterns

Changes in climatic conditions too are adding to the industry's woes. Nazir Dar, a bat manufacturer from Bijnepahra, says many wetlands around local springs have dried up in the past five years. "Springs would feed water bodies and allow willows to grow thick and tall. The construction of houses and the entry of waste, especially polythene, into water bodies have choked scores of springs in Anantnag district," he says.

Shah too admits that this is a challenge but adds that the situation is under control. "The availability of adequate moisture is an important factor governing the growth and establishment of willow, particularly in areas traditionally associated with wetland or waterlogged conditions. The drying of wetlands or their degradation as well as reduction in water availability can all adversely affect willow regeneration," he says.

However, he is quick to add that it would be inappropriate to state that wetlands in south Kashmir have completely stopped supporting English willow cultivation solely because of drying of water bodies. "In some locations, declining water levels or changes in hydrology may have reduced the suitability of certain sites for new plantations or natural regeneration," says Shah.

He says changing climatic patterns could have an impact on English willow particularly because it is closely associated with adequate soil moisture and water availability. The changes in temperature, precipitation patterns, and duration of dry periods events may influence the growth, establishment, and productivity of willow plantations.

"However, it would be prudent not to attribute any observed decline in willow exclusively to climate change without systematic field-based evidence. The observed changes may also be influenced by land use changes, water body degradation, harvesting practices, plantation management, and availability of suitable planting material," he adds.

Problem of smuggling

Smuggling remains another challenge to the industry in Kashmir.

After the dilution of Article 370 in 2019 by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Central government, the Jammu and Kashmir Willow (Prohibition on Export and Movement) Act, 2000, was just one of the two local laws retained to "to curb smuggling of willow clefts".

"Kashmir willow timber is being smuggled to places such as Jalandhar and Meerut, which have their own bat-making units and flourishing export industries," says Mir.

Until the mid-1970s, Kashmir willow wood was transported to various manufacturing units across India. "But when the J&K government realised the importance of the willow wood and the potential of the industry in Kashmir, it restricted the number of clefts that could be sold outside. After the ban, the smuggling of willow increased. Locals claim that over 25 lakh clefts are smuggled every year," Mir adds.

English willow timber is harvested twice a year in May and September. Kabir says he goes to private willow tree fields in Ganderbal and Kupwara every year in the spring and identifies the female species of English willow by monitoring the movement of pollinators. "The willow trees with flowers are the female species. They are light weight, flexible and without knots, and have a good shine. It is this species that allows us to produce Grade A bats of international standard and fetches us the highest profit."

But access to good-quality timber remains a challenge. With the inconsistent quality of timber denting its reputation in the domestic market, the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2025 has come as a shot in the arm for the bat industry.

Mir was one of the members of the committee that prepared the dossier report for the GI tag of the Kashmir willow bat.

"The GI recognition gives Kashmir willow bats additional value. It is also a strong marketing tool that can help expand their reach and increase their prices," explains Mir.



Bats stacked at a workshop in Anantnag district. IMRAN NISSAR



Anantnag

The Indian EXPRESS

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IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES ALL

Bar Council breaks law to crawl, its chief must go

THE BAR COUNCIL of India has rolled back its illegal, arbitrary and overreaching direction to State Bar Councils to not enrol 2026 graduates of NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad. But that cannot, and should not, be the end of the matter. It is necessary to rewind and pause on the now-withdrawn decision — to see how it combines a repressive reading of citizens' fundamental rights with an overblown understanding of the restrictions that can be imposed on them; how the BCI arrogates to itself powers that are not, by law, vested in it; how the institutional failure of the Bar to hold up its end undermines the justice delivery system. The BCI's attempt to impose blanket restrictions and administer collective punishment on an entire batch of law students came after about 450 students of NALSAR were directed to Chief Justice of India Surya Kant attending their convocation as chief guest — earlier, a remark by the CJI had become the trigger for the formation of the Cockerroach Janta Party, and another comment on the students' protest subsequently seemed to underline perceptions of the Court's insensitivity. On Friday, CJI Surya Kant himself snubbed the BCI: "It's a dialogue between students and me. Who are they (BCI) to unnecessarily raise an issue?" The BCI's rebuke is welcome and reassuring. But the need remains urgent for the CJI to instruct an honest reckoning.

The BCI is mandated to regulate legal education, recognise law degrees, supervise State Bar Councils, exercise disciplinary jurisdiction over advocates. Its avowed bid to curb the freedom of expression of young citizens and clamp their right to disagree with a constitutional authority by blackballing them is a blatant misuse of its powers. The Advocates Act, 1961, under which the BCI was established as an independent statutory authority, provides a finite list of grounds for disqualification from enrolment — participation in a peaceful students' campaign is certainly not one of them. In its zeal to cosy up to the judicial and/or political establishment, the BCI ignores that the constitutional guarantee of free speech includes the right to protest peacefully, and that the SC has laid down that restrictions must be tailored narrowly. The attempt to silence budding advocates is especially jarring in the aftermath of the students' protests — it shows an institution that has not learnt any lessons from the movement on the street.

The CJI's rebuke isn't enough. BCI chairman Manan Kumar Mishra has embarrassed himself and undermined the institution he leads. The attempt, on his watch, to intimidate tomorrow's bar and, indeed, the bench, to shrink the spirit of tomorrow's court, calls for a course correction that can only begin with his exit. If the Bar Council needs to do justice to its mandate, Mishra must go.

Kerch Strait warning, a call for vigilance

IN MARCH 2022, the FAO's benchmark food price index hit an all-time high, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. More than four years later, those fears of a global food crisis have revived with an escalation of two-way strikes on ports, grain terminals and cargo vessels across the Black Sea, Kerch Strait and Sea of Azov. From an agricultural trade perspective, the intensified tensions in this region arguably pose a greater threat today than the conflict in West Asia. The war has somewhat adjusted to the supply-demand balance from the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. This was also the case with Russia-Ukraine, where the initial cycle of major missile and drone exchanges had given way to a gradual resumption of grain shipments.

That period of relative calm has been shattered by the effective halting of operations in the Greater Odesa port complex that handles about 90 per cent of Ukraine's agricultural produce exports. More than 80 per cent of Russia's grain exports move through ports on the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, which have all again been targeted by Ukrainian attacks. The resultant paralysis of export trade can spill over into a global food supply crisis similar to that in 2022. Russia and Ukraine together account for over a quarter of the world's wheat exports, with these shares at roughly 15 per cent in corn and barley and 60 per cent-plus for sunflower oil. Past supply shocks show these spreading from one commodity to another; when sunflower oil becomes scarce, it drives up soyabean and palm oil prices, too.

Those risks are also magnified through the interactions of different "systems" — in the present scenario, that would include both wars (Russia-Ukraine and US-Iran) and weather (El Niño and European heatwaves). A perfect storm from such interactions cannot be ruled out. All the more reason for policymakers to stay vigilant. The Modi government can be credited with reasonably insulating Indian consumers and farmers from the shortages in transport fuels, LPG, LNG and even wheat triggered by the West Asia war. Similar supply-side management may be required if the Kerch Strait becomes no less a cause for concern than Hormuz.

The historian who looked from the margins

IN *Essays of a Lifetime: Reformers, Nationalists, Subalterns*, Sumit Sarkar writes: "As the shining promise at the dawn of Independence began to dim by the late 1960s and early '70s, and as a new wave of popular struggles began in various forms against the post-colonial ruling classes, I felt it was more important to explore the historical limits of mainstream nationalism." Sarkar, who died on Thursday, did not focus just on nationalistic icons. He explored the textures of the lives of farmers, workers, lower caste and class communities.

Sarkar entered academia when modern Indian history was still largely framed through the binary of colonial oppression versus Indian resistance. From his first major work, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, he demonstrated how ordinary people could be both historic actors and victims of Marxist social history. This commitment to history from below found its most eloquent expression in *Modern India*, the textbook that helped make him one of the founding figures of Subaltern Studies. Sarkar would eventually distance himself from the group as it increasingly turned towards cultural theory. The historian, he believed, had to take the challenge of communism head-on.

Sarkar the historian was inseparable from the public intellectual who refused to submit to doctrine. The teacher, whose classes in Delhi University brought all the complexities of Marxist social history, would return the Rabindra Puraskar in protest against West Bengal's Left Front government's treatment of the Nandigram protest. As history textbooks continue to be "streamlined" and "rationalised", Sarkar's words in *Essays of a Lifetime* resonate: "So far, we Indian historians have written the histories that we wanted to write, following no agenda but our own. That seems to be a fast-vanishing luxury."

The Editorial Page

The nationalism that evokes pride, the nation we are

INDEPENDENCE DAY discourses, speeches and poetry oscillate between, to borrow Freudian terms, the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The pleasure principle is the affirmation of India's grandeur. It offers, like all nationalisms, a vicarious sense of pride, achievement and hope. No political project, especially a nation, can thrive without a sense of pride, the mechanism by which we produce identification with a people or a cause. It is difficult for a politician to be successful without evoking pride, self-belief, and even a sense of romance. Anger and a sense of injustice only get you so far in politics. But almost as a counter-reaction, there is the temptation to counter the pleasure principle with the reality principle: What is the actual state of the nation?

The Hindi poet Raghuvir Sahay was the master of this. In his poem 'Adhinayak', he captures the three standard counters used by the reality principle: Authoritarianism, material deprivation and the maintenance of illusion. He poignantly asked: Who is the Adhinayak who makes us sing these praises? Harcharan, the ordinary impoverished citizen, is conditioned to sing the national anthem, without either true freedom or prosperity. The conditioning is to keep up appearances, to go through the liturgical motions of nationalism, keeping the illusion alive for the rulers that all is well. We are asked to sing its songs but are not allowed to speak in our own voices.

Nissim Ezekiel, in 'The Patriot', used exaggerated Indian English to mock the superficial nationalism during the Emergency.

The remarkable thing is that every single theme he touched on in 1977 still applies almost verbatim. The first is the gap between the professed fidelity to tradition and actual conduct. The profession of non-violence and peacocks to Gandhi do not abate the violence. But how much of the adherence to tradition is performative? "Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct! I should say even 200% correct! But modern generation is neglecting — Too much going for fashion and foreign thing." There is a reference to unrest: "Other day I'm reading newspaper/ Every day I'm reading 'Times of India/ To improve my English Language/ How one goonda fellow/ Threw stone at Indirabehn/ Must be student unrest fellow, I am thinking." The discerning citizen re-reads the goonda as student unrest.

The conversion of a student-unrest fellow into a goonda is the alchemy of the authoritarianism and coercion of Emergency, gestured at in the next lines: "I end me the ears — Everything coming/ Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception." There is the genuine concern of the Patriot: "What you think of prospects of world peace? Pakistan behaving like this/ China behaving like that/ Its making me really sad/ I am telling you/ Really, most harassing me." There is a mocking pun on substance being mistaken for complete virtue: "In the total testostaterally completely total." And then there is the poignant: "One day Ram Rajya is surely coming." This very Indian formulation manages to combine complete certainty



PRAPAT BHANU MEHTA

India is great because now we have to learn to speak of ourselves as great, and the more bombast with which we speak, the more evidence we have of our greatness

(surely) with radical uncertainty (one day).

If the pleasure principle demands assurance, the reality principle has to confront the radical uncertainty. Looking at Independence Day speeches, it is quite remarkable how much uncertainty dominates them till Lal Bahadur Shastri's tenure. Jawaharlal Nehru's Independence Day speech in 1960 almost gives up on the pleasure principle in favour of the reality principle. It is all the more remarkable because this is before the war with China in 1962. Nehru reminds his audience that only two courses are open to India's destiny: "Either to hold our heads high and march forward or downfall if we are weak. There can be no middling status for us." This is meant to be a call for action. But then he immediately goes on to say: "However, this is not in my hands. You have made me Prime Minister for a few days so I am here. There are innumerable defects in me."

This could be false modesty, absolving himself from blame, or merely reminding his audience that the nation will not be made from declamations from on high. But then comes the mirror to the nation. Referring to India's Independence, Nehru said "After hundreds of years, India shone once again and the world heard her voice, which had a profound impact because it was the true inner voice of the nation. India began to be respected once again. But very soon the same people of India who had shown great courage seemed to revert to their own weaknesses and began to fight among them-

selves in the name of religion or caste, language and province. The world began to wonder if it had made a mistake in judging this nation." Shastri's first speech as Prime Minister was pithy and direct, this time confronting the fact that India was facing a potentially catastrophic food crisis.

In Nehru's speeches, the confrontation with fragility, vulnerability and uncertainty is central. There is the constant refrain that there are two dispositions that can keep India down. The first is pettiness. Pettiness is not the same as self-interest. Self-interest can at least be tied to prudence; pettiness is more destructive. It is almost as if Nehru is haunted by Gandhi's remark, that "our best interests are not our differences, it is our littleness." The second fear, he writes: "Telling lies and deceit are all the offspring of fear."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speeches over the years have been varied. The Vaisakhi Bharat framework has one virtue. It puts a timeline on Ram Rajya's arrival. Ezekiel's "one day" is 2047. But Modi is focused on satisfying the pleasure principle of nationalism. That has got trapped in its own circular logic. India is great because now we have to learn to speak of ourselves as great, and the more bombast with which we speak, the more evidence we have of our greatness.

In 2014, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan forcefully confronted India's filth. But also for the reality principle, it seems like our national self-esteem has, since then, reached heights our municipal councils are yet to discover.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

An I-Day wish for my daughter



PADMAPRIYA JANAKIRAMAN

ON THIS DAY in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru promised the country dignity and opportunity, adding that the pledge would be redeemed "not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially". Seventy-nine years on, it's worth asking: Which part of that promise did Indian women actually receive?

Simone de Beauvoir wrote that one is not born a woman but made one. In Indian households, this translates into daily instructions: Sit properly, do not laugh loudly, that job is not for you, ask permission. NO. Shh.

This year, I didn't just read that sentence, I lived it. Revathy, a fellow actor, and I resigned from an actors' association in Kerala we'd belonged to for years. Walking away was self-respect. What lingered was the harder question: What does independence mean if you can enter a room but never get to run it?

The issue isn't only that women don't get to run the rooms they enter. It's that we haven't fully entered most rooms that matter. India produces the world's highest share of female STEM graduates, yet only 27 per cent reach the STEM workforce. Women hold under 30 per cent of teaching posts in central universities. Among senior advocates, women constitute 3.4 per cent. Women hold just 13 per cent of key department-head roles in entertainment, and at India's leading newspapers, 87 per cent of editors and proprietors are men.

Kerala's reckoning makes the point better than any statistics: Be it the Hema Committee report or the allegations and cases that continue to surface across universities, the music industry and cultural institutions. Different stages, same script, same silence beforehand.

On the rare occasion a woman reaches the top of her field, another ceiling awaits. An actress can become the biggest star in her industry and still find the door to directing and producing shut, unlike a male co-star with a fraction of her following. A sports woman can lead her country to a World Cup and still have little say in how her federation is run.

Somewhere between being visible and being in charge, female ambition gets labelled: Difficult, too emotional, not a team player. Expected to absorb it quietly, she gets a work for it when she does: Resilient. We should be less impressed by

how well women endure and more curious about why endurance keeps being the job requirement.

I read an essay this year by a woman describing the 13 years her assault case was in court, how she was sorted endlessly into victim or liar, fragile or ambitious. A complicated person is harder for the system to process than a label. The recent acquittal of a woman who was sexually assaulted belongs here too: A courtroom decides one man's guilt, but can't answer whether an athlete has real recourse when the person she complains about also controls her career.

Set against all this is the argument that our laws favour women who pose as victims. Researchers looking for evidence keep finding none. What exists, reliably, is a conviction rate for crimes against women, stuck around one in four, with 19 of 20 cases still in trial. A system rigged in our favour is doing an astonishingly terrible job of it.

The label problem got personal for me this year. A daughter arrived and turned one recently, and the news coverage fixated almost entirely and incorrectly on my age. Male actors, on the other hand, become fathers to celebratory headlines, not an audit of their birth certificates. It's the same old instinct of reducing a woman to a label easiest to print, skipping the part where she's an actual person.

Here is what freedom should mean this August 15 — walking home at the hour a brother does, without a lecture attached: unpaid work counted as work, not personality; being believed the first time, not the fourth. And for a one-year-old who joined this argument without being consulted, never having to be extraordinary just to receive the dignity that should have arrived with her birth certificate.

Beauvoir wrote: "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth." She wrote that in a world still deciding whether women deserved a vote. It does not have to remain true by the time my daughter is old enough to read. That's the only inheritance worth arguing for this Independence Day.

The writer is an actor, producer and co-founder of the Women in Cinema Collective



DEEPAK KUMAR

I stood up for a fellow citizen. I would do it all over again

WHEN I look at our country today, I feel we have not truly achieved freedom. To me, freedom means a person can breathe freely. That they can live their life with their family, friends, and relatives without fear. That they can practise their religion and interact with their neighbours and society at large with dignity. In recent years, for our fellow Muslim citizens, that freedom has become increasingly harder to come by. This brings home to our country and Constitution. Every community has contributed to India's independence. This country is made by all of us. It is of all of us, it belongs to all of us. This is why I always stand up for my fellow citizen. In January, I was celebrating Republic Day at a friend's shop when I noticed that seven to eight men from the Bajrang Dal had barged into the shop of an elderly man, Vakeel Ahmed, and started misbehaving with him over the name of his shop, claiming the word "Baba" belonged to Hindus alone. I tried to calm them down, but when that didn't work and they started asking me for my name. I said, "My name is Mohamud Deepak." It was too close to them. We're all humans.

In the days that followed, Bajrang Dal members put up an Instagram post calling for all "Hindu" men to unite and teach me "a lesson". Another group of men claiming allegiance to the outfit released Kotdwar from Dehradun. They hurled threats and abuses against my family in front of my gym. I am willing to die for my country, but when it comes to your family's safety, you are forced to think of the consequences. I have a five-year-old daughter, a wife, a mother. After the incident, my daughter couldn't go to school for some time. I was forced to stay inside my house for two-and-a-half months. My gym is my only source of income. I have a house loan and my daughter's school fees. Before the incident, my gym had 150-200 members; that has dropped to 40-42.

I do not believe these groups' actions represent the Hindu faith. Even as they accuse the "other" of being against Hinduism, it is they who muddy the name of our religion and gods. They do so by intimidating others and inflicting pain, disrespecting other religions and people in the name of our gods. "Hindus" aren't angry with me. Recently, I attended an event in Dehradun, attended mostly by Hindus. Nearly everybody came up to me and expressed appreciation for what I had done. I have received love and appreciation from people of all backgrounds, who have helped me at a very difficult time.

I have no regrets, and would do it all over again. As much as I have been harassed, whether by these groups or the police by way of an FIR and summons, I have also been blessed to witness more and more people speaking up for what is right. I see on social media now that when goons come to shut down shops, others resist. People tell me that by raising my voice, I have managed to dent the climate of fear.

Today, the Hindu-Muslim divide has become so deep I fear it will not leave people's hearts and minds in the foreseeable future. Governments are stoking hate for political gain. My country and its people are so much more than this. If there are wrongdoers, there is no paucity of those willing to stand up for the greater good. Change happens when people stop watching from the sidelines and start facing the situation. The time for that change has come.

The writer owns a gym in Uttarakhand

As much as I have been harassed, I have also been blessed to witness more and more people speaking up for what is right. People tell me that by raising my voice, I have managed to dent the climate of fear

40 YEARS AGO

August 15, 1986



Swoop on Badal group

THE POLICE arrested more than 100 workers of the Akali Dal, led by Parkash Singh Badal, on the eve of the party's protest day. The arrests were made throughout Punjab to ensure peace during Independence Day celebrations in the state, official sources said.

Reforms proposed in tax laws

ACCEPTANCE of self-assessed income-tax returns, increase in the basic general exemption for wealth tax from Rs 2.5 lakh to Rs 5 lakh and extension of benefit of deduction from taxable income to payments made towards cost of new residential property,

including repayment of loan and interest, are among the major proposals for simplification and rationalisation of direct tax laws. The Finance Ministry has also proposed exemption from tax on capital gains from transfer of agricultural land and from shifting of industrial undertakings from congested areas. Existing provisions resulting in computation of artificial or notional income are proposed to be deleted to get a new concept of the real income.

President's warning

THE PRESIDENT, Zail Singh, asked India to be vigilant over the known efforts by some external powers to take advantage of the situation

for disrupting the unity of the country.

SAARC call to fight terrorism

THE TWO-DAY meeting of the SAARC foreign ministers in Dhaka ended with condemnation of the act of terrorism and calling for concrete measures to fight the menace. The SAARC council of ministers in its first meeting since the launching of the forum in December last year accepted undisclosed recommendations of the study group on terrorism and asked the experts to report on measures of implementation to identify the offences which are to be regarded as terrorist and which, for purposes of extradition, are not to be regarded as political.

The Ideas Page

From the freedom that was won to the Bharat we build



C.P. RADHAKRISHNAN

ON THIS great occasion of the 80th Independence Day celebrations of Bharat, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to each Bharatvasi. I also pay my respectful tributes to all freedom fighters who sacrificed themselves to secure independence for Bharat.

Last week, during my visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, I had the honour of hoisting our national flag as a part of the Har Ghar Tiranga campaign and commemorating the first hoisting of the Tiranga by our great patriot, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. It was a deeply moving experience for me to stand on the sacred soil where Netaji's Azad Hind Fauj first raised the Tiranga on Indian territory on December 30, 1943. This occasion also brought to my memory Netaji's visit to Madurai in September 1939 at the invitation of Pasumpu Muthuramalinga Thevar. This historic moment inspired countless patriots of the region.

Another deeply inspiring moment was my visit to the National Memorial Cellular Jail, where the great sons of Mother Bharat, Veer Savarkar, Yogendra Shukla, Batukeshwar Dutt, Sachindra Nath Sanyal, and many others were imprisoned and kept in solitary confinement by the colonial forces. Even today, the walls of the National Memorial echo the stories of courage, suffering, and supreme sacrifice of those who laid down their lives so that Bharat might live in freedom and dignity. The visit inspired me to pen this article as a mark of my homage to all the torchbearers who ignited the flame of patriotism within millions of people, leading the nation towards Independence.

It was immensely pleased to launch the Har Ghar Tiranga Campaign in the Andaman Islands on August 9, as we commemorated the Quit India Movement. In 1942, the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, launched the Quit India Movement, giving the nation a stirring slogan, "Do or Die". As a result of this call, a fervent desire for inde-

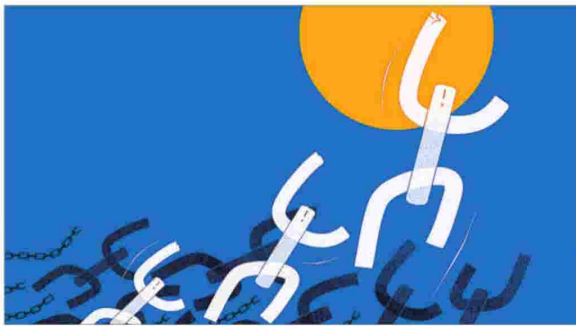


ILLUSTRATION: C.P. SAKRIMAR

pendence spread across the country. Today, thanks to the generation that stood against the colonial forces, we are fortunate to breathe the air of freedom and live with constitutional rights under a democratic system. Millions of freedom fighters across the nation fought with unwavering dedication and sacrifice, and many laid down their lives to see our Mother Bharat free.

Freedom fighters, be they from Kashmir in the north or Tamil Nadu in the south, from Gujarat in the west or Assam in the east, people belonging to all regions, backgrounds, ages, and genders, joined together for one common goal — the freedom of Mother Bharat.

The valour of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, the enduring symbol of resistance during the First War of Independence, the courage of Mangal Pandey, the fearless call of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who awakened a nation with the declaration, "Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it" — every voice strengthened the march towards freedom. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai challenged colonial economic domination by launching India's first indigenous shipping enterprise, proving that the fight for independence was waged not only on the battlefield

I pay homage to Tiruppur Kumaran, known as Kodi Kaatha Kumaran (Kumaran, the protector of the flag). He came to be known by this title after sacrificing his life in Tiruppur (my hometown), refusing to let the national flag fall even in the face of death

but also in commerce. The revolutionary zeal of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev inspired generations to embrace sacrifice in the cause of liberty, while the indomitable spirit of Rani Gaidinli kept the flame of resistance burning in the Northeast against British rule. In Assam, the young Kanaklata Barua, carrying the national flag with unflinching courage, laid down her life while leading the Quit India Movement. Bhagwan Birsa Munda and many other tribal leaders led historic resistance against colonial rule. Many more are the stories of resilience, courage and determination that can be pulled out from the pages of history. Together, they form a rich tapestry of courage and sacrifice, reminding us that India's freedom was won through the collective resolve of countless heroes whose legacy continues to inspire generations.

As we celebrate this Independence Day, I pay homage to Tiruppur Kumaran, popularly known as Kodi Kaatha Kumaran (Kumaran, the protector of the flag). He came to be known by this title after sacrificing his life in Tiruppur (my hometown) during the freedom struggle, refusing to let the national flag fall even in the face of death.

Even at a young age, the flame of patriotism burned brightly in

Kumaran's heart. Inspired by the call "Swaraj is our birthright", he joined the freedom struggle. Deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's ideals, Kumaran founded the Desabandhu Youth Association to awaken the spirit of nationalism within the people, especially the youth. Kumaran firmly believed that true freedom could be achieved only when people became conscious of the injustices of colonial rule and developed the courage and clarity to resist them. Committed to Gandhian principles of social reform, he actively championed the cause of prohibition, viewing it as an essential step towards social and national regeneration. As part of this, he participated in the picketing of toddy shops, encouraging people to shun alcohol and embrace self-discipline in the larger cause of India's freedom.

Holding the national flag in his hands and accompanied by a few brave souls, Kumaran led a march on January 10, 1932, during the Civil Disobedience Movement. Powerful chants of "Vande Mataram" echoed in the streets of Tiruppur. The colonial forces attacked the group and Kumaran sustained head injuries, laying down his life for the nation with "Vande Mataram" on his lips and the flag held close to his body. He was only 27 years old.

As I write down the age of Tiruppur Kumaran, I am reminded of other youths who sacrificed their lives for Mother Bharat, including Bhagat Singh (23), Sukhdev (23), Rajguru (22), Khudiram Bose (18), Kanaklata Barua (18), Anant Laxman Khere (19) and Vanchinathan (25), and many more.

I commend the initiative of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in bringing the untold heroes of our nation's movement to the centre stage. I pay my tributes to the known and the unknown freedom fighters.

On this momentous occasion, let us reflect and renew our commitment to our motherland. Let us dedicate ourselves to building a Viksit Bharat @ 2047 in this Amrit Kaal and work together for the progress and prosperity of our nation. That will be the most fitting tribute we can pay to the bravehearts who fought with unwavering courage and sacrificed their lives to win our freedom.

Jai Hind. Long live Mother Bharat.

The writer is the Vice President of India

How independent does my state want me to be?



SIDDHESH GAUTAM

EVERY YEAR on Independence Day, I find myself wondering about two different worlds. One is the world of the nation of flags, speeches, celebrations and the nostalgia of freedom from colonial rule. The other is a more intimate world, the world of lived experiences, where independence feels limited, unevenly distributed and often denied. These two worlds keep floating in my head, conflicting and yet coexisting.

As someone who comes from a Scheduled Caste background, I often try to understand independence through the memories and histories of marginalised communities. What did freedom mean for us before the departure of the alien ruler? And what did it become afterwards as we remain dependent on other forms of power, of caste hierarchies, social exclusion and inherited inequalities? For many people, independence is a feeling, a philosophical idea and even a state of mind. Perhaps it can be, if one possesses land, labour, resources and social acceptance. But for the rest of us, independence remains a deeply political and material question. It remains, in many ways, a state affair.

I often ask myself: How independent does my state want me to be? What freedoms does it encourage, and what dependencies does it cultivate? Who is allowed to dream, dissent, or organise and love? These questions become difficult to ignore when we look around us. We celebrate freedom in a country where Dalits are still murdered for asserting dignity, where Adivasi communities continue to lose their forests and homes for the benefits of a few billionaires, where Muslims are often viewed with suspicion, where Christians are frequently mistrusted, and so on. A nation cannot claim complete independence while entire communities continue to negotiate their basic right to exist with dignity. Freedom cannot merely be the absence of a foreign ruler; it must also be the presence of justice among the people.

I worry, too, about the independence of young minds. We often imagine that today's generation has limitless opportunities. Yet many young people are trapped inside dreams they never chose for themselves. They inherit aspirations manufactured by markets, by algorithms, rather than imagination. Success is increasingly defined by consumption, status and competition. We are encouraged to become efficient workers before we become thoughtful citizens. To me, one of the greatest struggles of our time is the struggle to free ourselves from the pressure to chase lives that may be profitable but not meaningful. Independence is not only the freedom to choose between careers or products. It is the freedom to imagine a different society altogether, to ask uncomfortable questions, to dream beyond what is currently available.

The question of independence becomes more urgent when we think about women and queer people. How independent is a woman if her mobility, safety, clothing or choices are constantly scrutinised? How independent is a queer person if their identity is a subject of debate or meme rather than acceptance?

I also think about the independence of dreamers. Across the country, there are countless young people whose ambitions are not defeated by a lack of talent or hard work, but by corruption, discrimination and caste privilege. They encounter systems that reward connections over merit, hierarchy over potential. If a dream is denied because of caste, gender or social status, is that not merely observed as an individual tragedy, it must be documented as a national failure.

We often speak proudly about India's diversity, yet we rarely ask whose culture gets celebrated and whose is expected to disappear. Which languages are considered refined? Which histories are preserved? Whose gods, stories and traditions are seen as universal? Cultural independence cannot mean the dominance of one culture over all others. It must mean the flourishing of many cultures together. A democracy that enforces cultural uniformity eventually weakens its own imagination.

For me, Independence Day is therefore also a reminder of the unfinished work before us. We certainly need freedom from colonial mindsets, but we also need freedom from the discriminatory values. We need independence from caste prejudice, communal hatred, patriarchy, homophobia, corruption and the belief that some lives matter more than others.

India's future depends not only on how we remember our freedom struggle, but also on how honestly we confront the unfinished work among us. True independence is a continuous project of expanding dignity, justice and possibilities. Only then can Independence Day become more than a commemoration, a promise fulfilled. And then, we will not even need to celebrate independence on one day. We will feel it every day in our skin and bones.

The writer is a graphic artist and author of The Blue Book

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dry parliament

PASSING NINE out of 11 bills with only the concerned minister speaking makes parliamentary participation resemble a Delhi weather forecast — isolated showers in select pockets while the rest of the House remains bone dry (Monsoon Session was arid, Parliament fell short, IE, August 14). While disruptions are routinely blamed, a 15 per cent productivity rate points to a structural failure in which the electorate is ultimately deprived of its representatives' scrutiny.

Krishan Kumar Chugh, New Delhi

Badal attack

A LEADING politician being attacked with a curved knife by a man dressed as a Nihang while his family was on a pilgrimage to a Sikh holy site in Maharashtra is outrageous (Kirpan attack on Sukhbir Badal in Maharashtra, assailant held, IE, August 14). The attacker is said to have told investigators that he held Sukhbir Singh Badal responsible for the popularity of drugs in Punjab. In a democracy, political problems have political solutions. Resorting to violence against a politician one disagrees with has no place in a civilised society. The incident calls for a detailed, high-level judicial inquiry that must probe it from all angles.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

SC and environment

I ECHO the Justice's view that development and the environment need not be in conflict (SC has nurtured environmental law. Do its decisions look distant today?, IE, August 14). Rather, they are complementary to each other. To sustain a liveable world, we must voice environmental concerns and support those who advocate for them on our behalf. The public and the Supreme Court should work together towards building a sustainable future, for nature, at the end of the day, belongs to everyone.

Abhay Negi, Dehradun



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

SEVERAL POSTS on social media have underlined how the Leader of the Opposition ignored two leading corporate leaders at a private function in Delhi. His constant diatribe against the economy and vilification of those corporate giants were in the news. They remind us of the early decades of independence, when socialism became the fad of the ruling class and hatred for profits and wealth creators was the prevailing order.

A recently released movie on an OTT platform deals with the consequences of that socialist mindset. It shows how in early 1991, India's forex reserves tumbled below \$1 billion, creating a massive balance of payments crisis. People attribute India's economic turnaround to the reforms brought about by P.V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh. But the film highlights the role played by Prime Minister Chandrasekhar, who was running a lame-duck government in 1990-91.

The crisis was so acute that then RBI governor S Venkatarman said that the only option left was to mortgage India's gold reserves to the Bank of England and the Bank for International Settlements, Switzerland and borrow dollars. Chandra Shekhar, who began his political career under the tutelage of socialist stalwarts like Acharya Narendra Dev and Ram Manohar Lohia, faced an ideological

On this Independence Day, when India has comfortable forex reserves of \$700 billion, including 880 tonnes of gold reserves, we can breathe easy

dilemma. But Venkatarman convinces him that the country is more important than his socialism.

On this Independence Day, when India has comfortable forex reserves of \$700 billion, including 880 tonnes of gold reserves, we can breathe easy

It began with Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Moscow in 1927 to participate in the decennial celebrations of the October Revolution. He started calling himself a socialist after his return and declared in 1929, as the president of the Indian National Congress, that "India will have to go the socialist way". When he persisted with this rhetoric, a revolt happened in the Congress Working Committee in 1936. Seven senior leaders, including Sardar Patel, Jawahar Prasad, C. Rajagopalachari, J.B. Kripalani and Jammalal Bajaj, resigned. Gandhi had to elicit a commitment from Nehru that he would not make socialism Congress's official policy. Nehru was forced to honour that commitment as long as Gandhi and Patel were alive. But after 1980, he returned to his pet theme.

In 1955, the Congress session in Avadi, Tamil Nadu passed a resolution declaring a "socialist pattern of society" as the goal of this govern-

Jagjivan Ram to Kharge, the distance not covered



ANSHUL AVTI

THE CHILLING incident in Haldwani reminds us that caste prejudice will not die until the system itself is strangled. It will show up again and again, like a shapeshifting virus, not just in the meetings of Dalit leaders but in the everyday lives of millions — in schools, playgrounds, offices and temples. Caste in India is the most perverse project of humiliation ever conceived, and in 2026, it is alive and well.

The Haldwani purification rite, after Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge had left the stage, has a personal resonance. In 1978, when my grandfather Babu Jagjivan Ram was deputy prime minister, he went to Ba-

naras to inaugurate the statue of Sampurnanand, an upper-caste Kayastha leader who had been CM of Uttar Pradesh in the 1950s. The venue was at the entrance of Sampurnanand Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya.

As Jagjivan Ram arrived, the atmosphere was tense with the sneers of right-wing student groups and caste Hindus. The paradox of an overachieving Dalit man, wielding great power and turning the caste *dharma* on its head, was the stinging point. As soon as the statue was garlanded, casteist insults were hurled at my grandfather for having defiled the statue of a venerated Hindu deity. After the event, the statue was smeared with cow dung and washed with *ganjaval* amid the chanting of Vedic verse.

The incident made national news. In the following session of Parliament, there was an uproar across party lines — from the ul-

ing Janata Party and the Congress opposition — followed by speeches of condemnation, apologies, and demands for inquiry and punishment. Jagjivan Ram is believed to have stayed silent as the debates raged for two days, but one of his comments echoes the sentiment of Congress President Kharge on Haldwani: If this could happen to him in his position, then what is the day-to-day plight of ordinary Dalits? As was the case

For the pro-caste warriors, there was a danger that prejudice was flattening or sub-optimal. That the incident in Haldwani came after the Jantar Mantar protests may not be a coincidence

then, Parliament needs to suspend all else and debate casteism again, particularly because it's 48 years later. Casteism collapses the concept of time and makes it dysfunctional. Regrettably, the reverse is not true.

For the pro-caste warriors, of whom there are far too many, there was a danger that prejudice was flattening or sub-optimal. That the Haldwani incident came after the Jantar Mantar protests may not be a coincidence. "Gen Z" may be a temporal category, but these socially diverse protesters had deep ideological moorings and awareness. Social justice and inclusivity seemed fundamental to the agitation even though the immediate target was the paper leaks. To the upholders of classical *dharma*, irrelevant, woekish interlopers, especially masses of youngsters, were dangerous and needed to be dealt with. The recently whitewashed NCERT text-

books that blanked out the existence of caste-based prejudice altogether had clearly not made any impact. Which is why there has been a series of protests by caste warriors and saffron groups to publicly reach out to the protesters, hoping to co-opt them. Others in Haldwani have had to enact de-contamination rituals as a symbolic assertion of caste power and a warning to potential disrupters. Both reactions have a common impulse.

In liberal circles, there has always been talk about ending discrimination and bigotry, most of it insincere, some patronising, some even well-meaning. But this misses the point. It is the caste system that is the head of the snake; all discrimination flows from it. It is this that must go. Perhaps this defining generation will decide its future.

The writer is national spokesperson, Congress

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TECH

In US plan to back private hacking, parallels with China and Russia

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, August 14

THE DONALD Trump administration has opened a new front in the US's cyber strategy, allowing private American companies to participate in government-authorised hacking operations against criminal groups operating overseas. This includes operations that could secretly enter, disable or even destroy their computer systems.

But companies cannot independently decide what to attack: every operation is meant to be carried out on behalf of, and under the supervision of, the US government. A national security presidential memorandum signed by Trump says: "By partnering with vetted United States companies... we will enhance our ability to counter TCO threats and combat transnational cybercrime, fraud, and other predatory schemes against American citizens."

TCOs, or Transnational Criminal Organisations, are criminal networks whose activities extend across national borders, often using jurisdictions outside of a country to target another's citizens, companies or infrastructure.

The move marks an unusual expansion of the private sector's role into an area that has largely remained the preserve of intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and military cyber units.

STRATEGY SHIFT

After years of criticising adversaries for drawing non-state actors into cyber campaigns, US is now building its own mechanism.

But this model is not entirely identical. It's much more formalised than, say, in China or Russia.

checks covering their technical abilities, previous cyber operations, personnel, reliability, and physical security. Large tech companies and smaller firms are both eligible. The targets are supposed to be criminal organisations attacking US persons or interests, and not entities that are formally part of a foreign government or wholly under its direction. There are nevertheless risks. Cyber attackers routinely hide behind compromised computers belonging to innocent organisations, making attribution, and avoiding collateral damage, difficult.

Echoes of China and Russia

The approach has some parallels with a model Washington has repeatedly accused China and Russia of using — mobilising private or nominally independent hackers to extend the state's cyber capabilities.

In China, US authorities have described an extensive "hacker-for-hire" ecosystem in which private cybersecurity companies and freelance hackers work for Beijing. Last year, the FBI said a private firm working with the Chinese government sometimes took government assignments and sometimes hacked targets independently before trying to sell the stolen information to state agencies.

Russia's model is even less formal. Chatham House research has described an ecosystem ranging from criminal gangs and hackers to private companies, some directly linked to intelligence agencies, some financially supported, and others simply tolerated as long as their activities broadly serve Russian interests.

Drishhti IAS

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DEFENCE

Photo-recce missions: Airborne imagery was key in Kargil, and remains crucial

Amrita Nayak Dutta
New Delhi, August 14

OPERATION SAFED Sagor — the acclaimed Netflix series based on real events from the air operations conducted by the Indian Air Force (IAF) during the 1999 Kargil war — highlights the photo reconnaissance (photo-recce) missions executed by the No. 17 'Golden Arrows' squadron during that time.

The squadron, equipped with MIG-21 aircraft, played a crucial role in conducting multiple photo-recce sorties. These missions, along with those carried out by other IAF fighter squadrons, were instrumental in identifying the extent of the Pakistani intrusion along the Line of Control.

What is a photo recce mission?

A fighter aircraft photo-recce mission is one in which a fighter or fighter-derived aircraft is tasked with collecting the imagery of an area, installation or activity for intelligence purposes, rather than attacking the target.

It is different from a strike and an air defence missions, which are meant, respectively, for destroying a decided target, and for locating and engaging one. An aircraft on a photo-recce role may fly into or close to a hostile location, capture images and return.

They are typically used to map enemy positions, identify and locate targets for subsequent strike missions, assess the damage after an air strike, monitor military activity, and update intelligence on enemy deployments and defensive positions.

They can also be used to conduct terrain or route reconnaissance, particularly around difficult or contested areas, assist in battle-damage assessment after an operation and provide imagery for mission planning, including routes, target coordinates and changes to the battlefield.

Such missions can also be flown to locate wreckage of any aircraft.

Which aircraft and squadrons had a dedicated photo recce role?

The erstwhile Canberra PR.57/67 and



A Su-30 fighter. Currently, Su-30s and Jaguars perform photo recce missions.

MIG-25SR squadrons were dedicated to photo-reconnaissance roles. Aside from that, the Jaguars, MIG-21s, MIG-27s, Mirage 2000s and the latest Su-30s have also been

earmarked for this role at different points. For instance, the No. 17 squadron, depicted in *Operation Safed Sagor*, was flying dedicated photo reconnaissance missions in the initial part of the Kargil conflict and was later given bombing roles. Similarly, the No. 14 squadron played a critical role in photo recce missions during Operation Parakram, which followed the Kargil conflict.

As of today, with MIG-21 squadrons being phased out, only the Jaguars and the Su-30s perform photo reconnaissance missions. That is just one of their many roles. Earlier, older cameras with photographic film were used for such missions. The film would then be later developed into high-resolution images and analysed to decide the further course of action.

During the Kargil war, tactical photo recce was carried out by MIG-21s using the Vinten 751 camera. Its focal length of only three inches — a shorter focal length provides a wider field of view — helped the air-

craft in taking pictures from a low level, said Air Chief Marshal B S Dhanoa (retd), who was then the Commanding Officer of the No.17 'Golden Arrows' squadron. "It was a British camera placed inside a Russian fuel tank," he said. While Dhanoa's squadron specifically conducted tactical photo reconnaissance missions, strategic photo reconnaissance missions were undertaken by other IAF squadrons.

Air Vice Marshal Sunil Nanodkar (retd), who was the Commanding Officer of the No. 14 Squadron during Operation Parakram, explained that the Jaguars would fly multiple sorties for strategic photo recce. The Ambala-based No.14 Squadron is equipped with Jaguars.

"We would stay within the border and undertake oblique photography up to 75 km, using Long-Range Oblique Photography (LOROP). (The camera would capture imagery of major enemy deployments deep inside the enemy territory," he said.

Nanodkar explained that multiple types of cameras and equipment were deployed around that time to capture imagery, including the LOROP, Vicon pods and the British Aerospace pod. "Can't drones replace such missions?" Photo recce missions have evolved significantly since then. Nanodkar explained that recce light pods and reconnaissance missions are now used for photo recce missions. "The images are no longer captured in a photographic film but are relayed directly to commanders through ground stations on a real-time basis and are simultaneously examined for further course of action," he said. But with the increased deployment of satellites and drones, are fighter photo recce missions still required? Yes, particularly during wartime. "All three can provide real-time images of the ground. However, satellites have specific revisit times, and drones can be vulnerable during a conflict or war. In such situations, fighter jets could carry out high-speed photography at any given time," Nanodkar said.

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ECONOMICS

The threat to food prices: Weather and renewed war



HARISH DAMODARAN

BOTH WEATHER and war — this time around Europe and Russia-Ukraine than West Asia — are starting to exert upward pressure on international food prices.

On Tuesday, a massive drone strike by Ukraine destroyed two of Russia's biggest grain export terminals in the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. The serious damage has forced suspension of operations from the two terminals that together have an export capacity of 15.6 million tonnes (mt) per year, according to a Reuters report.

Russia-Ukraine war heating up

Since mid-July, Ukraine has also stepped up attacks on grain vessels, maritime infrastructure and ports on the Sea of Azov and the vital Kerch Strait that connects it to the Black Sea. These have significantly restricted movement of Russian agricultural produce through ports such as Rostov-on-Don, Taganrog, Taman, Kavkaz, and now Novorossiysk.

Russia has, likewise, targeted Ukrainian port facilities and vessel operations around the Greater Odesa region.

This shipping hub on the Black Sea coast — comprising three deep-water ports of Odesa, Chornomorsk and Pivdennyi (formerly Yuzhnyi) — handles some 90% of Ukraine's agricultural exports.

The intensification of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine over the last month comes on top of excessive heat and dry weather in the European Union (EU).

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has projected EU's wheat production to fall by 7.5% from 145.1 mt in 2025-26 to 134.2 mt in this marketing year, while its output of corn (maize) is expected to dip from 56.8 mt to 50.2 mt (a nearly two-decade low), barley from 56.4 mt to 52.3



mt, oats from 8.9 mt to 8 mt and rye from 7.7 mt to 7.2 mt.

All this is beginning to affect food prices. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) benchmark food price index touched a three-and-a-half-year high in July.

The latest Ukrainian hit on Novorossiysk — followed by Russia's on Ukraine's largest Danube port of Izmil in southwestern Odesa, bordering Romania across the river — have driven up prices of corn and wheat at the Chicago Board of Trade exchange by 4-5% since Tuesday.

Export prices of wheat from the US are currently ruling at \$321 per tonne, as against \$235 a year ago, while similarly climbing for grain from EU (\$239 to \$262), Canada (\$259 to \$292), Australia (\$255 to \$291) and Argentina (\$234 to \$239).

Europe's severe summer

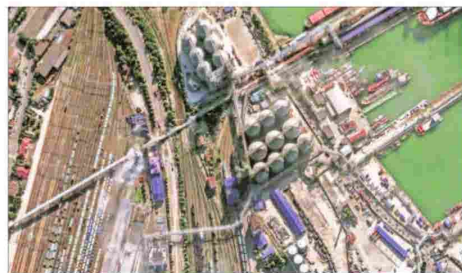
Two things are happening. First, the reduction in crop yields due to record-breaking temperatures from late spring through the summer months are likely to push greater grain imports by the EU.

But the simultaneous escalation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict has, secondly, also

Bread basket

Russia and Ukraine had a combined 27.4% share of global wheat exports in 2025-26.

Together, they also accounted for 15.8%, 12.5% and 61.5% of the shipments of barley, corn and sunflower oil respectively.



A satellite image shows smoke in a port in Russia's Novorossiysk on Wednesday. (ANTOR VIA AP)

meant logistical disruptions to Black Sea shipping. Low river water levels caused by drought, limiting the possibilities for alternative routes such as via the Danube and even affecting inland transportation to ports, haven't helped either.

For an idea of what the recent escalations have entailed, Ukraine recorded 57 attacks on vessels and 67 on port facilities in July. By contrast, the whole of 2025 saw ships being attacked just 14 times.

As per USDA data, Russia and Ukraine had a combined 27.4% share of global wheat exports in 2025-26, while accounting for 15.8%, 12.5% and 61.5% of the shipments of barley, corn and sunflower oil respectively.

While there is no shortage of production of grain or sunflower seed in either country, the crisis is about shipping out the produce, as the intensified cross-border missile and drone strikes leads to increased shipowner and crew reluctance, soaring insurance premiums and reduced vessel calls at ports.

Ukraine's Agriculture Ministry has already cut its forecast of the country's farm produce exports for 2026-27 from 64.4 mt to 29.6 mt, with wheat shipment estimates alone downgraded from 17.6 mt to 8.3 mt.

Russia can consider alternative routes that include ports on the Baltic, Caspian and Far East seas or overland rail links. At the end of the day though, more than 80% of its grain exports go through the Sea of Azov and Black Sea.

The current surge in Russia-Ukraine hostilities has huge implications. The FAO food price index had peaked in March 2022 when the war had just begun. Prices remained elevated till early 2023, by which time grain shipments had resumed through safe maritime corridors in the Black Sea established under a UN-backed initiative.

With Russia and Ukraine launching a fresh wave of strikes on vessels and ports along one of the world's most strategic shipping lane for agricultural produce, it could potentially add to the problems from the continued blockade of the Strait of Hormuz — not to speak of heatwaves in Europe and El Niño.

In short, while the Strait of Hormuz has drawn the world's and India's attention through much of this year, the other major trade chokepoint — the Black Sea, Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait — may matter no less in the coming days.

LEGAL

No provision for blanket enrolment freeze, BCI role narrow

Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, August 14

ON THURSDAY, the Bar Council of India (BCI) directed state bar councils to not enrol graduates of NALSAR University of Law's 2026 batch over their protest against the convocation invitation to Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant. Within hours, however, the BCI withdrew the order and closed the proceedings. The episode raises larger questions over what powers the BCI actually possesses under the Advocates Act of 1961. Can the BCI actually tell state councils to stop enrolment?

The NALSAR-CJI row The row began when around 450 students of NALSAR objected to the CJI attending their convocation as chief guest. The BCI then wrote to state bar councils, telling them to hold off enrolling anyone from the batch, citing an inquiry it wanted to run against what it called "an organised campaign" against the CJI.

By late evening, however, BCI chairperson Manan Kumar Mishra reversed course, saying the council was satisfied that the batch had no role in any "disturbance or movement" and closed the matter. On Friday, the CJI said: "Students have the right to protest. The BCI action was absolutely unnecessary."

The BCI order BCI's rules contain mechanisms that

allow urgent decisions to be taken quickly. Ordinarily, the council is expected to meet after notice to its members. But its rules permit meetings to be convened at short notice where urgency demands it.

There is even faster route — decision-making by circulation. Instead of convening a meeting, a proposal can be circulated among members and acted upon once the required approval is obtained, subject to later confirmation by the council.

The chairman also possesses limited independent powers. Rule 18 allows the chairman to pass interim orders in matters arising out of the council's supervisory jurisdiction. Because such orders are interim, they may also be modified or withdrawn without a full BCI meeting.

There is a formal review provision too. Section 48AA of the Advocates Act states that the BCI or any of its committees, except a disciplinary committee, may "of its own motion or otherwise review any order" within sixty days.

BCI can't enrol advocates

The Advocates Act creates a two-tier structure: State Bar Councils under Section 3 and the BCI under Section 4.

Section 7 empowers BCI to lay down "standards of professional conduct and etiquette for advocates", supervise State Bar Councils, promote legal education and recognise universities whose law degree quality for enrolment as an advocate. Section 49 gives it broad rule-making powers.

What it can and can't do

The Bar Council of India can lay down standards of professional conduct and etiquette for advocates, supervise State Bar Councils, promote legal education and recognise universities.

But no provision in the Advocates Act of 1961 gives it the power to actually enrol a person as an advocate.

Many of these powers begin only after a person enters the profession. A law graduate who has not yet been enrolled is not an advocate.

But none of those provisions actually gives the BCI the power to enrol a person as an advocate. That function belongs to State Bar Councils. Section 6 lists among its functions of a state bar council the power "to admit persons as advocates on its roll".

The carve-out

The BCI, however, is not completely absent from the enrolment process. Section 26 of the Advocates Act creates a narrow carve-out. If the enrolment committee of a State Bar Council proposes to reject an application, it must refer the matter to the BCI along with "a statement of the grounds in support of the refusal of the application". Section 26(3) then requires the State Bar Council to dispose of the application "in conformity with the opinion of the Bar Council of India".

Section 26 deals with individual applications that a State Bar Council has already proposed to reject. It does not expressly contemplate a blanket freeze on an entire graduating class before any applications have even been filed.

The Advocates Act also contains specific grounds for disqualification.

Section 24A bars enrolment of a person convicted of an offence involving "moral turpitude", offences under the Unlawful Activities Act, or dismissal from government service on similar grounds. The disqualification lapses after two years.

The BCI's communication on Thursday acknowledged that it was not proceeding

under Section 24A. Instead, it said that allowing enrolment while an inquiry was pending could create a "fait accompli".

Even when enrolment is denied, the Act builds in checks. Section 26(2) requires a state council to lay down its grounds for refusing to enrol someone in writing. The BCI's role kicks in only after a state council has proposed such a denial. Where the BCI wants to remove a name already on the roll over fraud or misrepresentation, it must first give that person a hearing.

Senior Advocate K K Manan told *The Indian Express*: "We are living in a democratic country. To criticise or to do any agitation, it is our fundamental right given by our constitution. Nobody can take that away. BCI should withdraw it, failing which we will start our agitation against BCI."

The limits of BCI's powers

The BCI regulates legal education, recognises degrees, supervises state councils and exercises disciplinary jurisdiction over advocates. But many of these powers begin only after a person enters the profession.

Chapter V of the Advocates Act deals with disciplinary proceedings against advocates. Sections 35 to 37 concern misconduct by advocates and appeals from disciplinary orders. Those provisions apply to persons already enrolled on a state roll.

A law graduate who has not yet been enrolled is not an advocate. The disciplinary framework does not naturally extend to such a person.

DRAFT SHANTI ACT RULES RELEASED

Foreign nuclear technology must have its design certified in country-of-origin

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, August 14

FOREIGN NUCLEAR technology sourced for a nuclear power plant or reactor must have its design certified or approved by the regulatory body in its country of origin and must already be operational there or in another foreign country, according to the draft rules of the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, released by the Department of Atomic Energy on Friday.

"The technology intended to be imported or acquired domestically does not adversely affect the interest of India, does not constitute an unreasonable risk to public health and safety and is in conformity with the national policies framed under the Act," the rules read.

The rules define "the country of origin" as those countries which are self-reliant in nuclear reactor design and supply chain ecosystem whose regulatory approvals are trusted

globally. As per the rules, technology providers shall ensure availability of design support and all necessary permissions and supporting documents from original technology developer, it added.

"Provided also that the person sourcing the technology shall ensure that all related intellectual Property Rights vests with the technology developer," it added.

The draft rules provide for a single composite licence for building, owning, operating and decommissioning a nuclear power plant or reactor.

The rules also recognise captive nuclear power, including its use by energy intensive industries such as aluminium and cement, as well as data centres, semiconductor manufacturing and AI applications.

A key provision is the proposed "in-principle approval", which the licensing authority may grant after admitting an application where the applicant has not yet selected a site or re-



Technology providers shall ensure availability of design support and all necessary permissions and supporting documents from original technology developer, rules say. REUTERS

actor technology. The draft does not amount to a final licence. The draft also provides that an in-principle approval can be revoked if there is a supervening public interest or if material facts emerge indicating that the applicant is owned, controlled or dominated by entities considered inimical to defence and national security or public health and safety. It can

also be revoked if obtained through misrepresentation or suppression of material facts.

On nuclear liability, operators would be required to maintain insurance or financial security for nuclear damage, with the financial security remaining in place until spent fuel is removed from the relevant storage pool. The draft also provides for a Nuclear Liability Fund, to be funded through a levy on operators. For specified government-owned installations, the Central Government would assume liability under the conditions set out in the rules. The draft rules lay out the regulatory framework for a wider nuclear power ecosystem, including private participation, nuclear energy generation, foreign reactor technology, licensing, safety oversight and nuclear liability.

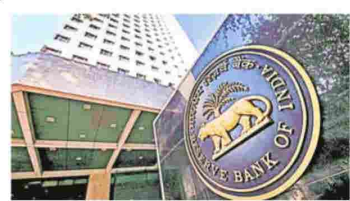
The Department of Atomic Energy has invited comments and suggestions on the draft rules, with September 4, 2026 as the last date for submission.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

\$52-bn in, FCNR(B) window closes early

• MOBILISING CAPITAL

- The RBI had introduced the special US dollar-rupee forex swap facility on June 8, allowing banks to mobilise fresh three-to-five-year FCNR(B) deposits and swap these deposits with central bank at concessional rate
- The latest data reported by authorised dealer banks show that the three components of the special forex facility have attracted a total of **\$56.846 billion** till August 13



Total foreign currency inflows under the RBI's special forex swap facility	Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank) or FCNR(B): \$52.3 billion	Overseas Foreign Currency Borrowings: \$2.805 billion	External Commercial Borrowings: \$1.741 billion
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George Mathew
Mumbai, August 14

THE RESERVE Bank of India (RBI) on Friday said it has decided to close its special forex swap facility for fresh Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank) — FCNR(B) — deposits prematurely on August 13, following an encouraging response "that has brought in \$52.3 billion through this route."

The swaps against FCNR(B) deposits mobilised under the facility, however, can be undertaken with the RBI till September 11, the central bank said.

The schemes for External Commercial Borrowings (ECBs) and Overseas Foreign Currency Borrowings (OFCBs) will continue to remain open until December 31, 2026.

The RBI had introduced the special US dollar-rupee forex swap facility on June 8, allowing banks to mobilise fresh three-to-five-year FCNR(B) deposits and swap these deposits with the central bank at a concessional rate.

The facility effectively covered the entire hedging cost for banks.

The latest data reported by authorised dealer banks show that the three components of the special forex facility have attracted a total of \$56.846 billion

in foreign currency inflows till August 13. FCNR(B) deposits accounted for the overwhelming majority at \$52.3 billion, followed by OFCBs at \$1.741 billion.

The scale of FCNR(B) mobilisation is significantly higher than the amount raised in the initial weeks of the scheme. At that stage, bankers expected the inflows to accelerate in August and September.

Non-resident Indians and persons of Indian origin can open FCNR(B) deposits. It's fully repatriable and exempt from tax in India.

The RBI's special facility was part of a broader package announced in June to encourage foreign capital inflows, strengthen the rupee and improve foreign exchange reserves.

The central bank had also eased norms for state-owned enterprises to borrow overseas and provided a concessional swap facility to encourage ECBs by public sector firms.

"Unlike 2013, the rupee has not appreciated significantly due to global uncertainties, geopolitical risks, and weaker capital flow dynamics. Additionally, RBI's large forward forex obligations may constrain any visible rise in reserves," CareEdge Ratings said

in a report. Overall, the scheme should be viewed primarily as a liquidity and stability measure rather than a driver of sharp currency appreciation or reserve accumulation, it said.

At the core of the FCNR(B) facility was the RBI's decision to absorb the hedging cost for banks. By allowing banks to swap the foreign currency raised through eligible deposits with the RBI at concessional terms, the central bank made FCNR(B) deposits a more attractive source of overseas funding. The move was important because the cost of hedging foreign currency deposits had made the mobilisation of such funds less attractive for Indian banks.

The central bank's intervention effectively lowered that cost and enabled banks to offer more competitive rates to non-resident depositors.

The RBI had also temporarily withdrawn the interest rate ceiling on fresh FCNR(B) deposits of three-to-five-year tenors until September 30.

Banks subsequently began offering higher rates to attract overseas funds.

Several banks were offering rates of around 7% on FCNR(B) deposits to attract capital.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

• BRIEFLY

SEBI floats easier KYC norms for NRIs, OCIs and foreign investors

Mumbai: The SEBI on Friday proposed a set of relaxations in KYC norms for individual Persons Resident Outside India (PROI), including Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs) and foreign nationals. The proposals, aimed at making it easier for overseas individuals to enter India's securities market, seek to simplify onboarding through digital processes and reduce the need for physical documentation. ENS

India's forex reserves climb past \$700 billion

Mumbai: India's foreign exchange reserves rose to a four-month high of \$707 billion as of August 7, bolstered by robust inflows under policy measures to strengthen balance of payments. The reserves jumped \$14.1 billion week-on-week, the largest rise since January, the RBI said on Friday. The rise was led by a \$9.9 billion weekly gain in the central bank's foreign currency assets. Measures to draw dollar inflows announced in June include discounted hedging facilities for overseas borrowings by govt firms and banks alongside tax cuts on foreign investments in government bonds and a free-of-cost hedging facility for banks to raise overseas FX deposits. REUTERS

Ashok Leyland Q1 net profit rises 1.5% at Rs 667 cr

New Delhi: Commercial vehicle maker Ashok Leyland Ltd on Friday reported a 1.5% increase in consolidated net profit at Rs 667.77 crore for the first quarter ended June 30, 2026. The company had posted a consolidated net profit of Rs 657.72 crore in the corresponding period of the previous fiscal. Ashok Leyland Ltd said in a regulatory filing. Consolidated revenue from operations stood at Rs 13,069.59 crore in the quarter under review as against Rs 11,708.54 crore in the year-ago period, it added. PTI

NMDC Q1 net profit grows to Rs 2,005.71 cr

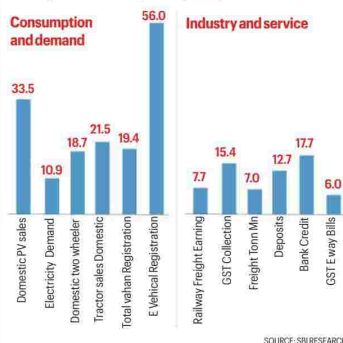
New Delhi: State-owned NMDC Ltd on Friday posted a 2% rise in consolidated net profit to Rs 2,005.71 crore in the June quarter, supported by a growth in revenues from iron ore sales. The company had clocked a net profit of Rs 1,967.46 crore in the same quarter a year ago, according to a regulatory filing. During April-June, the company increased its total income to Rs 7,142.54 crore, up 1.5% from Rs 7,038.97 crore in the first quarter of the preceding 2025-26 fiscal. NMDC said it earned revenue of Rs 6,802.12 crore from iron ore sales, around 10% higher. PTI

• Robust growth

SBI Research, in its recent report, said that the Indian economy is expected to have logged an 8% growth in the first quarter of the financial year 2027 (Q1FY27). It said that most leading indicators pointed towards this robust expansion. And it also said that the early trends seen in July also indicate a similar trend in the second quarter (Q2FY27).



Leading indicators July 2026 (%YoY)



• MARKETS

Sensex 78,009.25 -70.71 -0.09%	NIFTY 24,366.00 -29.85 -0.12%	Gold ₹1,52,363	US Dollar ₹95.44	Silver ₹2,33,842	Oil ₹91.60
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NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA RULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION. GOLD PER 100G, SILVER PER 1 KG. CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF AUGUST 13

• Heavy correction in share prices at the start of 2026 has provided investors an opportunity to rack up cheap IT stocks

IT stocks partly recover H1 losses, but longer-term outlook remains clouded

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, August 14

THE INDIAN IT services sector broadly maintained a cautious near-term outlook while announcing April-June quarter earnings, citing headwinds such as AI-related revenue deflation, subdued spending by US-based clients, and uncertain earnings visibility.

While these factors had weighed on IT stocks in the first half of the year, most have since recovered a substantial portion of their losses after hitting their 2026 lows around the start of July. The benchmark Nifty IT index, which was down 32% from its peak in the start of July, has since recovered and is now down around 17%.

Bellwether TCS is now down 26.5% in 2026, compared with 38% at the start of July. Some have even risen into positive territory. Tech Mahindra, which was down around

16% at its lowest for the year and was the best-performing large-cap IT stock, is now up 2% in 2026. Coforge, which had slumped 35% at its lowest, is now up nearly 9% for the year.

Thus, near-term concerns remain for the industry, but the stocks have rallied. So what has then changed for the sector?

Cheap valuations provide opportunity

The heavy correction in share prices at the start of the year has provided investors an opportunity to rack up cheap IT stocks as a valuation bet, even as their trajectory remains uncertain. The Nifty IT currently trades at a valuation of around 19-20 times its one-year forward earnings (FY27 in this case), compared to the 5-year average of around 25-27 times.

This has allowed institutions such as mutual funds to top up IT stocks as earnings remain more resilient than

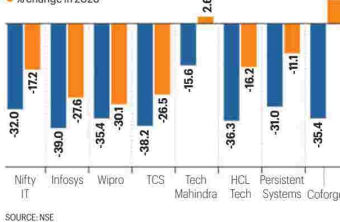
most had expected. "The market has already discounted the news of uncertain outlook projected by companies in Q1. There is no major negative news in sight currently, like a new model from Anthropic, which will incrementally impact IT services," said Sumit Pokharna, an analyst tracking the sector at Kotak Securities.

"Most mutual fund guys still have a decent exposure in the IT sector. They realised that this is a good time to average (by accumulating more IT stocks), and they came on news channels and highlighted that they are looking to add more positions in IT because they believe most of the concerns are already priced in," he added.

Major fund houses such as Motilal Oswal, ICICI Prudential, and SBI MF have recently turned more positive towards the IT services sector due to a strong risk-reward profile and a hedge against the exorbitant

• Turning the corner

- % change at lowest in 2026
- % change in 2026



AI bet seen globally.

While data for the last month will only be available once the July-September quarter ends, the April-June quarter has seen domestic institutions add to their exposure across many IT companies.

These institutions, including mutual funds, insurance companies, and pension funds, had increased their stake by 3 basis points in Wipro and by 6 basis points in TCS during the first quarter, data from the exchanges showed.

"IT firms continue to win large deals across a wide range of themes such as vendor consolidation, digital transformation, legacy modernisation, new product lines to save costs, and GCC set-up."

"Deal wins were reasonable for TCS, Infosys and HCLT, muted for Wipro and healthy for TechM," a report by Kotak Institutional Equities from last week noted.

Better-than-expected Q1 earnings

While revenue growth was subdued across the sectors, profits and margins remained robust for most players during the quarter.

"IT firms continue to win large deals across a wide range of themes such as vendor consolidation, digital transformation, legacy modernisation, new product lines to save costs, and GCC set-up."

However, while the sector was positive, concerns regarding AI deflation, a subdued demand environment, high competition, and margin pressure remain in the upcoming quarters. In fact, the AI impact of deflation has already started to show in Q1.

Viable anti-AI bet

The Indian IT sector also provides a strong anti-AI bet for investors and has benefited from foreign institutional investors (FIIs) returning to the Indian market in July, according to experts.

FIIs bought Indian equities worth \$2.1 billion in July, turning buyers after four straight months of selling as the geopolitical uncertainty eased, crude oil prices subdued, and the AI-heavy South Korean stock market crashed.

This buying has continued in August. "We have possibly seen FIIs also buy IT stocks as a strong bet against AI as they returned to India."

It's early to say if this is a definitive change in trend or a short-term bet, with AI productivity still at a very nascent stage. We will have to wait and watch if more investors bet against AI, or if AI will surge again, "a fund manager track-

ing the sector at a domestic AMC said. The crash of the AI-heavy South Korean market, which had more than doubled at its highest in 2026, coincided with the rise of Indian IT stocks.

The Kospi index started crashing in late June and is currently down around 23% from its peak.

Data from the National Securities Depository Ltd showed that FIIs bought IT services shares worth \$352 million in July, compared to the \$788 million of IT shares they had dumped in the previous month.

In fact, these investors turned positive on Indian IT stocks after five months of selling, during which they had dumped IT shares worth \$3.5 billion. Other global IT services companies have also seen a similar trend.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

The Big Picture

SATURDAY, AUGUST 15, 2026

23



PHOTO: JAYPRAKASH NAIIDU

A FLAG GOES UP

For years, Kondapalli served as the base for Battalion No. 1, the armed unit of the Maoists. The village school shut down, the bus service was halted and people lived in fear, caught between security forces and the Maoists. Ahead of Independence Day, JAYPRAKASH S NAIDU travels to the village in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district to see what happens when the State finally moves in

HUNGA MUCHAKI says little. When he speaks, he does so haltingly — unsure of the question asked of him, probably suspicious of the outsider who wants to know more about him. In his 28 years, most of it as a Maoist, rarely has anyone asked him what he wanted for himself, his wife, his daughters, about his dreams. So he listens, doesn't talk for very long, and then says, "We want a borewell for irrigation, a pond, land rights and small roads. We want a doctor to visit us, otherwise we have to travel over 30 km to Basaguda."

As a Maoist commander, Muchaki had resisted government intervention; but now, five months after surrendering and opening a kirana store in his Kondapalli village, Muchaki is unapologetic as he demands from the State what he sees as rightfully his.

And then, he goes quiet, his attention returning to the reels on his smartphone.

The phone came to Kondapalli, in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district, in December last year, when a cellphone tower was erected on the edge of the village. The steel tower, which rises above the mud houses and small shops, was among the first few signs of change in a village that was until two years ago deep in the Maoist heartland, one of nearly 400 villages in Chhattisgarh's Red Corridor where the state had little say or presence.

Kondapalli was part of the Maoists' South Bastar division and served as a base for Battalion 1, the most dreaded unit of the armed People's Liberation Guerrilla Army. Located 79 km from Bijapur, it was where roads would deep into the dense jungles of sal, teak and bamboo, where government offices and the school building stood empty, and the buses never came.

Now, 80 years after Independence, with Union Home Minister Amit Shah declaring the country Maoist-free, the State is back in Kondapalli, establishing itself through a string of visible markers of development — roads, panchayat bhawans, an anganwadi, an upper primary school and a road.

Along the Red Corridor

Former Bijapur Superintendent of Police Jitendra Kumar says Kondapalli, a village of 600 people, lay in the Maoists' South Bastar division, part of what they called the "Liberated Zone". Every year, the Maoists would gather hundreds of villagers to a 64-foot-tall memorial in Komatpalli, part of the Kondapalli gram panchayat, to celebrate Martyrs' Week.

The division, he says, was one of the strongest Maoist formations and among the last to fall. "They could gather the support of over 400-500 people in no time," says SP Kumar, who is now posted in Kabilidham. "Kondapalli was important to the Maoists also because their supplies came from its local market."

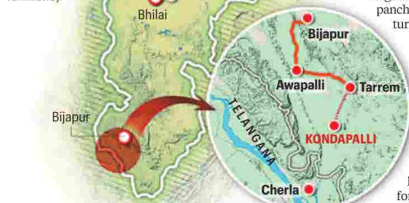
That changed in November 2024, when the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) announced that it was establishing a forward base in Kondapalli. A series of encounters followed, after which the Maoists were pushed into Telangana, where they eventually laid down arms in March 2026.

For the State, the entry into Kondapalli and nearby villages signalled the end of a decades-long insurgency that had claimed at least 4,741 lives in Bastar region alone since 2000.

"The battalion (Battalion No. 1) used to

ROAD TO KONDAPALLI

Kondapalli, which sits on the border with Telangana, is closer to Chhela (46 km) in the neighbouring state than its own district headquarters of Bijapur, which is 79 km away



(Clockwise from below, left) Villagers gather for a chat in Kondapalli; the new nation shop is painted in the colours of the Tricolour; the road from Bijapur to Kondapalli

camp in the jungle outside our village. They are gone now, but in their place, security forces camp," says Manish Esam, husband of the sarpanch of Kondapalli panchayat.

It's an uneasy space to be in, so Hunga Muchaki prefers to largely stay quiet and cautious, glancing up from the reels he is watching only when a customer turns up at his kirana store, asking for a packet of biscuits. He says he watches action flicks and tribal songs, pointing to the YouTube and Instagram icons to indicate how he gets there.

A former commander of the Revolutionary People's Committee, a grassroots governing body of the Maoists, Muchaki surrendered in March 2025 with 12 other villagers and set up the shop with the money he got as part of the state's rehabilitation policy.

Muchaki was a teenager when he joined the Bal Sangam, the Maoists' children's wing, and later, its cultural troupe, the Chhetra Natya Manch, where he sang about saving *jai, jungle, zameen* (the land and its resources).

He didn't have much of a choice, says his younger brother Lachu Muchaki, 22, a CRPF

recruit. "Those days, at least one person from every village had to join the Naxals. So there was a lot of pressure on families to give up their sons or daughters. Once he joined them, the Naxals convinced Hunga (Muchaki) that the government would steal his land and they would eventually have to leave the village. All he wanted was to save his land," says Lachu, who left the village and completed his school while staying in a hostel in Usoor, Bijapur.

The Maoists ruled with an iron hand — villagers say those leaving Kondapalli gram panchayat were questioned on their return.

But residents claim that for many of them, even this came with a feeling of being seen. "There wasn't much development, but there was a sense of security. They redistributed land and gained our trust. They helped us make our houses, though cutting trees was punishable. If anyone fell sick, villagers were asked to donate money for the treatment. They also made small roads and a pond. But then, the forest officials and *panwari* (the village records keeper), stopped coming. When the administration brought electric poles, they destroyed them and we had to depend on solar lamps. When those failed, we got used to staying in the dark," says a villager who doesn't want to be identified.

The Maoists came down heavily on violators and those they suspected of being police informers. "Wrongdoers were publicly beaten up under a tree, and those who were suspected of being informers were killed. Those who learnt their lessons stayed back while others left the village," he says.

"We were people caught in the middle," says Lachu, talking of how his uncle Masa was killed by security forces on the suspicion that he was a Maoist.

Suka Tamo, a villager, talks about the time in December 2022 when his 18-year-old daughter Somdi left home to take the cattle out to graze, but joined the Maoists instead. Last year, Tamo learnt that she was among the 30-odd Maoists killed in a security operation in Telangana's Karagutta hills.

"I had no idea why she joined the Maoists. But my sons stayed away," he says.

A bus comes to Kondapalli

As a blue bus from Chhela in Telangana turns the corner on the main road and stops just outside the Kondapalli school, a group of villagers lurch forward. The bus is already full, a few sitting on the luggage rack on the roof. Since March 2025, when the bus service began under the state's rural bus scheme, it has been making two trips a day, taking villagers both to Bijapur, 79 km to the north, and to Chhela in neighbouring Telangana on the other side, where many of the young men work as daily-wage labourers.

Venkat Swami Punem, the 53-year-old village head or *mukhiya* of Kondapalli, is glad the bus has returned before it could fade from his memory. "Back in the 1980s, I used to take a bus from our village to go to school in Awapalli, some 27 km away," says Punem as he watches the bus groan and disappear in a cloud of dust on the unpaved road outside the village.

Years after the Maoists came from Telangana in 1985, the bus stopped, and an entire generation grew up without ever seeing one. Kondapalli, which sits on the border with Telangana, is closer to Chhela (46 km) in the neighbouring state than its own district headquarters of Bijapur.

Those days, says Punem, a circuitous 209-km, five-hour journey through Chhela was the only way to travel from Bijapur to Kondapalli.

Now, a 90-minute car ride from Bijapur to the village doesn't have to cross into Telangana. Instead, passing through two busy junctions, Awapalli and Basaguda, and reaching Tarrem on the Sukma-Bijapur border. For the next 18 km beyond Tarrem, Google Maps falters, still recommending the older, longer route through Telangana.

The Defence Ministry's Border Roads Organisation (BRO) began working on the Tarrem-Kondapalli road soon after November 2024, when security forces pushed back the Maoists in a series of encounters.

The road, which snakes through jungles, is still a work in progress, with the occasional motorcycle or truck carrying construction material lumbering along.

The road passes Kondapalli to eventually

cross over into Telangana, a stretch where the BRO installed nine Bailey bridges over river streams and 43 precast culverts to ensure smooth connectivity during the rains. Before the road came up, says Punem, he and the others who worked in Telangana would walk for two days, carrying their food supplies, including 30 kg of rice. "Once we reached, we would stay there for 45 days and get work plucking chillies on farms. Now, we have a daily bus to get there," he says.

He doesn't go to Telangana for work anymore. Both of his sons stayed outside the village to complete their technical diploma courses. "I talk to them on the phone," he says, proudly displaying a smartphone that one of his sons gifted him.

The light's back

While the Maoists ruled, all signs of the State had ceased to exist. Voting stopped, government offices were broken, and officials stopped coming.

"The village voted for the first time last year, in the local body polls. When the Maoists were around, we were told not to make any demands from the government," says Manish Esam, a 41-year-old villager.

Last July, Kondapalli got electricity from the grid; the cellphone tower came up next. Other changes followed: villagers were told to turn up at the police camp where they were enrolled under Aadhaar, and given birth certificates and bank accounts.

An anganwadi and a residential school are also under construction in the village. "Over the next two years, the village will get a cricket ground, a health centre, a cement road and government scheme benefits," says Bijapur District Collector Vishwadeep.

Then, on June 2, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai visited Kondapalli, a first for the village.

A new, blue school

But nothing symbolises the village's transition, and hope, better than the government school.

Sometime in the 2000s, the Maoists had burnt down the only school in the village and the adjoining hostel to dissuade security forces from using it as their shelter. And then, just like that, an entire generation of youngsters in Kondapalli were left staring at a blank slate.

Muchaki was among those who dropped out that year. But now, he sees hope. His two daughters study in the new school building that came up in the summer of 2025.

The school stands by the main road, painted in a bright, happy blue. Years ahead of Independence Day, tricolours flutter in the open compound where children queue up for the morning assembly.

Mangal Ram Veko, 42, one of the seven all-male teaching staff, says, "After the school was burnt down, children studied in a shanty in the same compound. Then, in 2020, we got an asbestos-roofed building there. Now, a proper building has been made for primary and middle school students. We also have blackboards and benches and students are able to focus better. We have 158 students, and the numbers are increasing."

Veko, who calls himself "the first graduate in Kondapalli," says he could complete his education only because he left for the Salwa Judum days to study in a hostel in Basaguda and then moved to Dantewada for college. The Salwa Judum, a civilian counter-insurgency force set up in 2005, was declared illegal by the Supreme Court in 2011.

The Kondapalli school has classes from 1 to 8, beyond which students have to travel 33 km to Basaguda or Pamed, 23 km away.

As Veko talks, 14-year-old Mantu Tamo looks on in admiration. Tamo, whose uncle is a surrendered Maoist, now has an ambition: he wants to be a teacher, just like Veko. "They teach well," he says.

'There is so much to do'

Geeta Esam, 25, remembers growing up scared of the knock on the family door — the Maoists would turn up, and they had no option but to give them rice, salt and chillies. Geeta hated it that she had to do this for her father's assassins. "In 2006, during the Salwa Judum days, they beat up my father for hours. I still do not know why," says the 25-year-old who works as a cook in the village school.

Geeta says she never went to school — there was enough to do at home, and three younger siblings to take care of. While one of her brothers died in a road accident on his way home from college, another works as a farmer after completing his Class 12, while her sister works as a teacher in Pamed.

Life has always been tough in these parts, more so if you are a woman. "We had women dying in labor, or on the way to hospital because there were no medical facilities nearby. There was no road either. We carried women on cots. Even to get rice, we had to travel to Awapalli, which used to be a day's journey," she says.

Last year, her mother opened a bank account and now gets Rs 1,000 from the government under the state's Mahatma Vardana Yojana for women. There's much more the government needs to do, she says. "We need a health facility, a school for higher studies and a self-help group for women so we can do poultry work, farming and other livelihood activities."

But what changed her life was her phone, a Redmi model that she bought for Rs 10,000 after the Maoists left. "They used to seize phones and ask villagers to turn them up. Now, I use it freely. I call my mother at home while I am at work," she says. "I like watching Telugu movies, news, cooking videos, sewing and stitching tutorials. I plan to learn some skills online and earn some money. There is so much to do," she says.

Soon after the Maoists came from Telangana in 1985, the bus stopped, and an entire generation grew up without ever seeing one



An Independence Day 5-Point Plan

Wishing viksit isn't same as wishing viksit

Like on every August 15, we could, again, rehearse our favourite ritual: declare ourselves hurtling towards 'Viksit Bharat'. The tricolour flutters, speeches resound, national song and anthem are sung back-to-back, and hashtags bloom. But as the old pre-Independence saying goes, aspiration without perspiration is just feel-good. If India — and India Inc — truly wishes to graduate from 'wanting' to 'getting', it would do well to heed 5 basic things you're unlikely to hear today.

One, put your money where your mouth is. India Inc loves to avuncularly chat about sustainability, skilling and social responsibility. But, too often, the cheque is smaller than the tweet. A developed country is built not on slogans but on investments — whether in infrastructure, research or human capital. Two, going off-script. For a nation that endlessly invokes 'innovation', 'disruption' and 'AI', India remains notoriously formulaic. Corporate boardrooms and bureaucratic files actually cling to precedent as if novelty was sin. True progress demands risk-taking, and original thinking, not 'Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full'. 'There, make law real. Our laws are progressive, on paper, but implementation



is thin. Labour laws, environmental safeguards, traffic rules, civic norms, entrance exam regulations — these must be operational, not merely so.

Four, value time. IST — Indian Stretchable Time — whether in project deadlines or in service industries from flights to banks, erodes efficiency. This problem needs tackling on a war footing if India is to sync not just with the world but itself. Five, trust in institutions. Bypassing or undermining regulators, courts, universities, systems in the name of 'jugaad' weakens the very scaffolding India's economic enterprise is built on. Independence Day should remind us that aspiration alone won't do. Putting one's back to the grind, not getting bogged down in 'cultural battles', and valuing *qualitative* details, are a better way to use all this nation-loving as fuel for genuine nation-building. Happy Independence Day!

Welcome Turnaround, Bar Council Members

Bar Council of India's (BCI) withdrawal of its circular threatening to bar NALSAR University of Law's 2026 graduates from enrolling with state bar councils, after a section of students objected to inviting CJI Surya Kant to the university's convocation, is excellent news. This confirms two things: one, that BCI is humble enough to admit to its momentary lapse in which it may have tried to come across as being more loyal than the king; two, that the council does, indeed, know the difference between the prerogative to withdraw an invitation as legitimate disaffection, and breaking the law or any norm that can invite legitimate punishment.



The chief justice himself fumigated the air a day later when he described BCI's 'intervention' as a matter between him and the students. Threatening aspiring lawyers with sanctions for 'disrespecting' a constitutional authority can come across as a bit heavy-handed, and could have revealed more about those making such a threat than about those it was directed. Council members, who must have merely intended to impart a lesson in public politeness, did well to make a turnaround.

Excessive zeal rarely does its intended beneficiary any favours. It can, in fact, erroneously suggest that one is defending someone perceived to have a thin skin. Institutions command respect not by suppressing dissent but by giving enough leeway to absorb it. BCI's reversal, therefore, deserves to be welcomed, especially because it came before the council could inflict any reputational damage to itself. In reaffirming the distinction between criticism and coercion, and between legal wrongs and perceived slights, the episode has reinforced a principle every practitioner and purveyor of law ought to recognise instinctively.



JUST IN JEST

British imperialism lives on, in acronyms and anonymity

Order of the Empire? Where's the Empire?

If there's a day when the word 'Empire' has to pop up in (normal) people's heads, it has to be today. Yes, 79 years ago, we kinda started the ball rolling to what would ultimately lead to the British empire being declared kaput. But hang on. Is British imperialism — as opposed to monarchism — dead? We ask because if there is no empire, how can there still be GBE, KBE/DBE, OBE, CBE, MBE (not related to MBA), and BEM — grand cross, knight/dame, officer, commander, member of the Order of the British Empire, and recipient of the British Empire Medal, respectively, eh? It's as if Rome continued to award 'Gladiator of the Western Empire' medals centuries after Visigoth redecoration. Or Russia pinning 'Soviet Hero 2026' on some Kremlin favourite. Sure, who wouldn't want a shiny bauble with imperial gravitas? Even Brit anti-imperialists get teased as Christmas punch getting one of these acronyms tagged on to their names. But without sounding predictably postcolonial, what's the point of having a lottery prize of a cruise vacation to Tooty Pompeii?

Unless, of course, the empire *still* exists — hidden in the heavy foliage of Farage nostalgia, in the back of Charles Mountbatten-Windsor's mind, and in the quiet insistence that Britain's imperial reach remains tucked away. Have enough G&T? Gymkhana or Tolly, and the Empire exists on August 15, 2026.

Build entrepreneurs, not tenderpreneurs — markets, not ministries, must build global startups

DEEP END IN INDEPENDENCE DAYS



M Muneer

It's Independence Day, an occasion when we feel extra proud of our achievements over the last 79 years, but especially those made in the economic domain over the last few decades. Even without the spur of August 15, India discovers a new state's every morning. First came the 'India Stack'. Then the startup stack. Then DPI stack. Now, apparently, what stands between India and deep-tech glory is a procurement stack. Some influential tech investors

are arguing that GoI should become the country's 'first customer' for deep-tech startups. Procurement rules, they argue, are antiquated. Tenders favour incumbents. Bureaucrats fear experimentation. If only ministries bought more from startups, Indian innovation will surely flourish.

It sounds persuasive. And comforting. Because it suggests that the problem lies somewhere inside government paperwork rather than inside the market place. But before turning every government department into a VC with purchase orders, perhaps we should ask: 'Why do deep-tech companies require government customers in the first place?'

The world's greatest tech companies didn't become successful because governments heroically purchased their products. They succeeded because they solved problems that paying customers wanted solved. Governments have certainly played important roles in funding research, and enabling strategic technologies. But making public procurement the centrepiece of commercialisation risks creating an ecosystem optimised not for innovation but for winning tenders.

India has an Olympic-level talent for turning entrepreneurial ambition into complacency. Imagine thousands of brilliant engineers spending less time perfecting quantum compu-

Go on, then, do your thing

ting algorithms and more time deciphering Annexure 14(b), uploading notarised affidavits, and attending mandatory pre-bid meetings.

Nothing kills disruptive thinking faster than discovering that your biggest competitive advantage is better understanding procurement manuals better

India should create corporations willing to buy from startups, and build customers who purchase winning technologies. It's demonstrably superior, not because a government circular encouraged them to

than your competitors. Governments are extraordinary institutions. But they are not particularly famous for spotting tomorrow's winning technologies.

If bureaucrats were naturally gifted at predicting tech winners, governments would have invented smartphones before Silicon Valley, streaming before Netflix, and GenAI before venture capital. Sure, the US Department of Defence funded Arpanet, the precursor to the internet. But innovation is fundamentally about making thousands of imperfect bets, expecting many failures and celebrating successes. Governments are structurally disinclined to do the exact opposite.

Civil servants are rewarded for avoiding mistakes, not for taking risks. CAG investigations failed purchases far more enthusiastically than missed opportunities. Parliamentary committees rarely summon officials to explain why they failed to back a startup that later became successful. They do summon officials who approved a purchase that failed. The safest procurement decision is almost always buying yesterday's technology from yesterday's vendor. Chang-

ing procurement rules does not change this psychology. It merely gives risk-averse new forms to express itself. The real bottleneck isn't GoI buying too little innovation, but India Inc skipping. Large Indian corporations proclaim themselves champions of innovation while expecting startups to demonstrate 5 yrs of profitability, 3 Fortune 500 references, ISO certifications from planets yet to be discovered, and proof that the product has succeeded everywhere else. Every company wants to be an early adopter — as long as someone else adopts first.

If India's manufacturing giants, pharma companies, banks, telecom firms, logistics players and industrial conglomerates became serious buyers of indigenous deep-tech, startups would spend far less time waiting outside ministry corridors. Corporate procurement departments resemble government pro-

urement departments, wearing better suits. The same executives who complain about bureaucratic inertia, frequently reject startup solutions because 'the vendor is too young'.

There's another danger in excessive dependence on public procurement. It systematically chokes entrepreneurial incentives. Instead of asking, 'How do I build a globally competitive technology?' founders begin asking, 'How do I satisfy this tender specification?' The first question creates world-class companies, the second, exemplary paperwork.

India has historically excelled where entrepreneurs pursued global markets, rather than domestic policy preferences. Software exports didn't become a global phenomenon because governments purchased millions of lines of code. Pharma companies didn't become international leaders because ministries ordered generic medicines first. Auto component manufacturers didn't conquer overseas markets by mastering tender documents.

They competed, improved, survived customers who had no patriotic obligation to buy from them. That discipline created excellence.

Deep-tech deserves the same discipline. Yes, government procurement should become faster, simpler and more innovation-friendly, particularly in strategic sectors, such as defence, semiconductors, energy, healthcare and space, where the state is naturally a dominant customer. Smarter procurement has an important role to play. But it cannot become the economic philosophy of deep-tech commercialisation. The larger ambition should be to create corporations willing to buy from startups. Reward executives who experiment. Encourage regulatory sandboxes. Improve access to patient capital. Strengthen university technology transfer. Reduce compliance friction. Make failure socially acceptable. Most importantly, build customers who purchase innovation because it is demonstrably superior, not because a government circular encouraged them to.

Countries become tech powers when millions of customers voluntarily choose to buy from startups. That is not because government circulars encouraged them to. Countries become tech powers when millions of customers voluntarily choose to buy from startups. That is not because government circulars encouraged them to.

Nothing kills disruptive thinking faster than discovering that your biggest competitive advantage is better understanding procurement manuals than your competitors

stack. It's called a market. And unlike procurement manuals, markets have a habit of rewarding only those that truly deserve to stand out and win.

The writer is co-founder, Medici Institute for Innovation



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Self is Ever Free

YOGI BALKRISHNA

Freedom is humanity's noblest aspiration. It restores dignity, unleashes creativity, and enables individuals, societies and nations to shape their own destinies. However, this significant occasion also raises a deeper question: Is political freedom the culmination of liberty or merely a beginning?

The sages of India discovered and taught that the limitation that makes us feel small and insignificant belongs to the body, mind and senses. Beneath these limited instruments shines the eternal nature, the Atman, Self, pure Consciousness.

However enormous in form, everything in the world carries threefold limitations: desh-kaal-vastu (time, place and space), time-wise, and object-wise. The ever-free Self is not limited by time, place or object. It is the silent presence because of which every thought is known and every experience illumined. It is the very substratum of all things and beings; all names and forms derive their being from this non-formal Consciousness.

In this vision, the Self alone is the real sovereign, and the sovereignty of the Self alone is limitless, complete and ever-free. The one who discovers this truth is a free person. This realisation does not make us withdraw from the world; rather, it enables us to engage with it and contribute through wisdom, creativity, compassion and fearlessness.



Two-Way Freedom

At the neighbourhood Independence Day parade, a politician is shouting into the mic: 'Remember, it is because of our brave freedom fighters that we are free citizens today.' A man in the crowd waving a Freedom Sale' flyer yells, 'Then why are we stuck in traffic for three hours watching you wave?'

The politician smiles. 'Because freedom means you can complain. Independence means we don't have to listen.'

Class Struggle

A teacher announces, 'Today you are free! No homework, no tests, no rules.' The students cheer wildly. Ten minutes later, a classmate complains, 'You've discovered why dictatorship exists.'

The teacher shouts, and then commands the class to sit, else... 'Congratulations,' he tells the covering students, 'You have discovered why dictatorships exist.'

Dependent Independence

A man tells his boss, 'I'm resigning to be independent.' The boss roars, 'Fine, but remember independence means no salary, no office, no coffee machine.' The man beams. 'Exactly! I'll be free!'

Two weeks later, he's back at the office, sheepishly asking: 'Can be independent with a salary?' Turns out, freedom tastes better with free coffee.

Chat Room

Balancing Assets And Liabilities

Apologies the news report. Banks to Reveal Loan Rates Every Month in RBI's Disclosure? Well, the (Aug 15), it is yet another step by the RBI towards 'principle-based' regulation. The measure will help in the better understanding of the loan rates and more transparent, benefiting both banks and loan seekers. Combined with competition among banks, this will ultimately provide a check against the latter. However, a few prerequisites will be supportive: (a) banks should have a dynamic system of rate determination by a team of operations staff as also specialists, (b) in branches, loan officials should 'patiently' explain the system to the loan seekers, and (c) bank regulators should be empowered to trade negotiators should be empowered to change course.

Rather than leaving the matter entirely to the bureaucracy, a more credible approach would be to appoint an independent committee of experts to review India's legacy positions and determine where continuity remains justified, and where it has become a liability.

The writer is distinguished visiting professor, ICRIER

Treat, Not Trick, Data Centre Water



Aditya Sinha

In 2002, Singapore's PM Goh Chok Tong drank a cup of NEWater, a brand of recycled water treated from sewage to demonstrate that it was safe, and of high drinking quality. NEWater, used water passed through microfiltration, reverse osmosis and ultraviolet disinfection, exceeds WHO drinking water standards.

Little of it, though, is drunk. Most goes to water fabrication plants, because semiconductor demand water far purer than humans do. The fab polish it further, until water stops being a beverage and becomes a solvent. Every chip in every data centre has been rinsed thousands of times in water of this kind.

A municipal corporation in one of India's metros has priced treated sewage at ₹7.50/l for a proposed perescale data centre. The response was a rally, a demand for a stay and a headline that

travelled: a city short of 30 ml a day (MLD) will hand 12 MLD to servers. The 30 MLD shortfall is possible water, or the 12 MLD is treated sewage. Not one litre of the second is drawn from the first. Central Pollution Control Board's inventory (March 2022) put urban India's sewage at 72,389 MLD, with barely 20,000 MLD treated. The rest flows to rivers and the sea. The scandal is not that treated water is going to a data centre, but that for decades, it has been going to the sea, unprotected. A paying buyer turns a disposal liability into revenue for the network that is 30 MLD short.

How much water do data centres want? Nation First Policy Research & Change Foundation's May 2025 report, Beyond Infrastructure: India's Data Centre Pathway to Digital Sovereignty, models the demand. Capacity grows from 1,562 MWh in 2024 to 8,318 MWh by 2030 in the high-growth case, and water use is capacity times 8,760 hrs, at 0.18 l per kWh and WUE (water usage effectiveness).

At a profligate WUE of 2.8 l per kWh, the 2030 figure is about 183 bn litres. India uses roughly 7 lakh bn litres a year, more than 4% of its agricultural water. The entire sector, at its hypothetical thirstiest, is 1/50th of 1%.

Practice is nowhere near 2.8. One global operator's 2025 disclosure reports a fleet WUE of 0.12.

Set this beside the Indians nobody picks. Environment (Protection) Amendment Rules of December 7, 2015, permit thermal power stations 2.5-3.2 m³ of water per MWh. A modern data centre touches about 120 lakhs per MWh of the electricity it draws. Central Ground Water Board says Punjab's groundwater extraction at over 100% of recharge, mostly for paddy on free power.

Critics demand 'shadow pricing' for data centres, the one industrial category that pays for its sewage. Applied even-handedly, the test puts paddy and thermal power at the head of the queue, and data centres where behind gold mines.

Deny a data centre water, though, and

heat must leave through dry chillers, drawing 10-65% more electricity. On a mostly rural grid, total water use rises. Protesters demand the thirder design and forbid the frugal one — evaporative cooling fed by treated effluent.

So, what should municipal councils do? In Andhra Pradesh, Gajjala wrote a reuse policy in 2018, and a national framework followed in 2022. Enforce them. Mandate treated water for every industry that can absorb it, construction, thermal, textiles, data centres.

Meter the offtake, require WUE disclosure at sanction, publish contracts. Then price the potable supply for households, too, at a lifeline bulk for the poor and rising tariffs after it, with treated water priced below potable so the differential, not the sermon, does the persuading. What is needed is a waste.

Data centre is the only physical object AI possesses. Chips inside are already washed, in recovered water. A city's municipal water supply can offer. The objection, in Singapore in 2002 as in our metros now, was never chemistry. Water can be treated. So can opinions, when supplied the right argument.

Here's your workload

The writer is a public policy professional

Snap Out of This Soft Personality



Deepak Mishra

India's trade diplomacy appears to suffer from a split personality. Its bilateral personality is in the fast lane — setting ambitious targets, accepting far-reaching commitments, and displaying a striking appetite for closing deals.

Between 2021 and mid-2026, India signed 12 bilateral and regional trade agreements. Agreement with the EU has been successfully concluded, while negotiations with the US are at an advanced stage.

India's other trade persona emerges at multilateral fora, where it remains in the slow lane — adopting a defensive posture, finding inventive ways to reject new proposals, and earning a reputation as one of the principal disruptors at WTO. More baffling still, India has maintained its defensive stance on issues that are difficult to justify on grounds of national interest.

Here are 3 areas where the economy has undergone a transformation, yet parts of the trade diplomacy remain trapped in an outdated anti-US, socialist mindset.

● **Goods or services?** Consider WTO's moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions. Introduced in 1998, when India's IT and BPO sectors were nascent, soft-

ware, films and music were sold on CDs and DVDs, generating customs revenue. Today, India is the 4th largest exporter of digitally delivered services, with an annual trade surplus of more than \$200 bn.

Yet, in March, and against the advice of Nasscom, India maintained that online software, films and music are not services but goods, and, therefore, it wants to retain the right to tax them.

● **Two steps forward...** Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA) seeks simpler, more transparent and more predictable procedures for foreign investors without requiring additional liberalisation of FDI regime. India, with nearly \$36 bn in outward FDI in 2025 and ranking among the top 20 exporters of foreign investment, opposes the agreement. At the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Yaounde, Cameroon, 129 countries supported incorporating IFDA into the WTO framework. India was the lone dissenter.

● **MSME question** Improving competitiveness of MSMEs is one of the GoI's top priorities. Yet, India's not part of WTO's MSME Informal Working Group, which has 106 members as of June, and accounts for around 90% of world exports.

These explanations, while an enthusiastic pursuit of bilateral deals, alongside a lackadaisical approach to multilateral commitments — has many explanations. Some see bilateral agreements as the only practical route to reduce dependence on China. Others argue that multilateralism no longer merits scarce negotiating time and political capital. A third view is that new initiatives face less resistance from domestic interest groups than long-running legacy issues, making neglect of the latter the path of least resistance.

These explanations, while convincing, India has stayed out of Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) even though China is not a member. Multilateral institutions may have weakened, but India needs to remain at the table as new forms of cooperation are debated.

India has had to make trade commitments on many of the legacy issues in bilateral agreements — and championed similar principles during its G20 presidency — while continuing to oppose them at the multilateral level. That leaves the uncomfortable fact that India's contradictory policy stance may hamper the product of bureaucratic inertia and procedural orthodoxy. For decades, India has challenged the

legitimacy of joint statement initiatives (JSIs) — the route through which initiatives like investment facilitation and MSME Informal Working Group emerged — on the grounds that plurilateral agreements are technically inconsistent with WTO's multilateral decision-making framework. But, in fact, have changed and India's economy has transformed, bureaucrats and many policymakers have found it difficult to change course.

India's split personality in trade diplomacy has come at a significant reputational cost. A recent commentary by Singapore's Institute of South Asian Studies (SISAS), the Asia University of Singapore, captured the problem satirically by asking AI to explain 'why India routinely says no to new proposals at the WTO' — as though India's position had become too baffling for humans to decipher.

So, what should GoI do? It should separate legacy positions from new negotiating priorities and subject the former to a simple test: do they still serve India's national interest in an economy that has changed beyond recognition? Where the answer is no, trade negotiators should be empowered to change course.

Rather than leaving the matter entirely to the bureaucracy, a more credible approach would be to appoint an independent committee of experts to review India's legacy positions and determine where continuity remains justified, and where it has become a liability.

The writer is distinguished visiting professor, ICRIER

This is no trade-off

UPI is a public good. Keep it free

The real cost of UPI is not what we spend on its infrastructure, but what we would spend without it



BEYOND IDEOLOGY
R JAGANNATHAN

With the passing of the Taxation and Other Laws (Amendment) Bill 2026, intended to enable the levy of a merchant discount rate (MDR) on UPI-based payments, opinion is divided on whether such payments should forever remain free or not.

The law is currently a mere enabler, and the assumption is that users will never have to pay anything for payments via the Unified Payments Interface or UPI. Some higher-value transactions may incur costs payable by merchants offering this option to users.

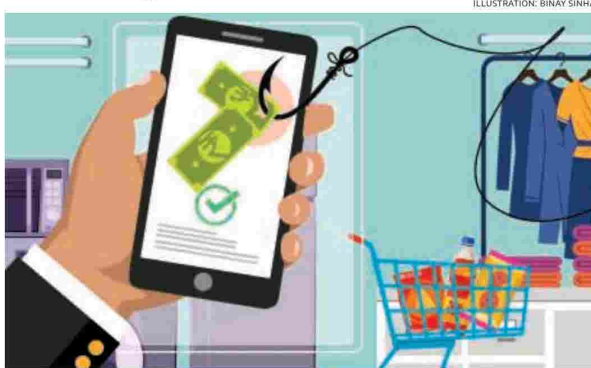
Those in favour of MDR suggest that ultimately someone has to pay for the expenses incurred in maintaining the UPI infrastructure, but others point out that this will in effect make UPI costlier for higher-value payments as merchants may ultimately pass this cost on to users.

MDR could drive some of these payments to cash, though the ease of using UPI makes such decisions difficult for any merchant. In the case of credit cards, some merchants do charge users an amount equivalent to their MDR costs, especially if their margins are thin. If there is a long-term cost to merchants from offering UPI options for higher-value transactions, they will find some way to pass it on to users.

It is worth seeing the argument from a perspective that does not limit itself to asking how UPI infrastructure costs ought to be funded. A better question to ask is: Are there broader benefits to the economy and society by absorbing these costs, or are these costs too high for the system to bear indefinitely?

The costs involved are not small. They are estimated to be between ₹10,000 crore and ₹20,000 crore annually, but precise costs are difficult to estimate because the infrastructure for UPI payments is often shared by a bank's broader payments systems. Some industry estimates put the cost at ₹40-45¢ for a single UPI transaction, especially if one adds the need to invest more in cybersecurity in the age of artificial intelligence-led frauds.

One has to consider the other side of the equation: The wider systemic



benefits of continuing to subsidise free UPI transactions. There is also the moral question: Why should a country that, almost without thought, offers free power to farmers, free bus rides to women, and gives gold for weddings bank at marginally subsidising people who are actually willing to pay digitally for the things they buy?

First, the real cost of UPI is not the money spent in maintaining the infrastructure, but the opportunity cost of not having it. What would we be spending as a country if UPI were not there? What if we had to use cash,

notes and coins to conduct those same transactions? Not only would cash demand spike, but the costs to enable those transactions would also rise. Currently, ₹10 and ₹20 notes cost around 95 paise to print, but higher value notes cost more, as they need more security features to prevent counterfeiting. The proposal to print currency notes on polymer will cost even more, though these notes could last longer. Coins of ₹5 and ₹10 cost even more to mint — at an estimated ₹3.6 and ₹5.5 per coin, respectively. If the central bank and government pay for all the printing

and minting of these currencies, why should UPI be any different, when it actually reduces costs on printing and coining?

Second, there is the issue of traceability of payments and money flows. While MDR will only cover higher value transactions, the very fact that fees are being charged for what was once free will make ordinary users wonder if they too should use more cash in transactions. From personal experience one knows that small merchants and service providers (taxi services, doctors, carpenters, plumbers and electricians)

like the idea of cash payments if they were made available. Making UPI payments fee-based for some transactions could enhance mental reservations against digital payments — which have largely been overcome — once more. Do we want to regress?

Third, UPI payments enable precise amounts to be transacted without loss to any party, buyer or seller. If your bill is ₹29.50, you don't have to forgo 50 paise because of the absence of change in your wallet. This is not an insignificant benefit for small value transactions, even though the current thinking is not about charging fees on such payments.

Fourth, the logic of the MDR fee is that it can help cross-subsidise smaller value fee transactions — which are at the heart of UPI acceptance among the wider population. But this argument is not strong enough to overcome the other benefits of keeping UPI free for all right now.

Fifth, banks already do many free digital transactions through Real-Time Gross Settlement (RTGS), National Electronic Fund Transfer (NEFT), Immediate Payment Service (IMPS) and credit and debit cards. The Reserve Bank of India charges no fees for RTGS, NEFT and IMPS. Why then impose the same on UPI, where the only big difference is the volume of transactions, not value?

The volumes are essentially because they replace cash in small value payments, and are friction-free at the retail end, bandwidth availability being the only constraint. The case for trying to impose charges on UPI transactions above a certain value — which must

be far fewer in number — is less than obvious, unless the idea is to benefit fintechs.

Sixth, keeping UPI free will ensure that payments technology remains in sovereign hands. The RuPay debit card dominates domestic payments precisely because it was given a free run to displace fee-charging foreign payment systems like Visa and Mastercard. Why give up this advantage in UPI? Seventh, the widespread use of UPI for even large-value transactions allows the government to overcome any temporary shortfall in the availability of higher-value notes at the local level. This happens during election time, when politicians draw and disperse large amounts of cash to woo voters, and local shortages occasionally develop. The very existence of zero-cost UPI enables normal transactions to be unaffected by temporary cash shortages. Printed during demonetisation, ₹2,000 notes have been withdrawn from circulation, and it is not inconceivable that printing of ₹500 notes will be suspended. The widespread use of UPI to discourage black money transactions, UPI is the logical way to fill this gap.

The conclusion is simple: Currently, the social and economic advantages of free UPI grossly outweigh the infrastructure costs. UPI is a public good, and hence would keep being free unless costs, for some unforeseen reason, suddenly start ballooning beyond tolerable limits at some future date. The argument for charging a fee on public goods is weak.

The writer is a senior journalist

A hot election spring ahead in Punjab



PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

It was not just the alacrity with which the denials came, it was their forthrightness. Hours after Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) chief Sukhbir Badal met Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini announced the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was not going to fight the Punjab Assembly elections (due February 2027, 17 seats) in alliance with the SAD. This was followed by a statement by the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) state chief, Kewal Singh Dhillon: The BJP will fight the 2027 Assembly elections on its own. Judging from this, the alliance has ended even before it could be forged. If the result of the municipal elections in Punjab held a few months ago is any guide, this means the BJP and the SAD will compete to be number three and four in most constituencies. Here's why.

The Moga declaration of 1996, which marked the unconditional alliance between the BJP and the SAD, underlined "Punjabiyat" rather than religious or caste identities — Sikh, Hindu, Muslim or Dalit — as the basis of the tieup. The partnership was to become one of Punjab's most significant political alliances, with both parties working together for more than two decades. The parties came together against a common rival: The Congress.

However, when the SAD walked out of the alliance in September 2020 on the issue of farm laws, both sides remembered the bad times, not the good ones. Together, they were a winning team even when they didn't agree with each other — which had been often the case. But separately, they lost every election.

There is a strong opinion within the BJP in Punjab that the party must now stand on its own two feet and drop the badly compromised SAD baggage. To buttress this, it advocates a line that could be construed as overcompensation in its outreach to the Sikhs. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his recent public address, listed the government's initiatives for the Sikh community. Bringing back Shri Guru Granth Sahibswarors from Afghanistan, enshrining the 300-year-old sacred footstep (Jore Sahib) of Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Sahib Kaur at Takht Sri Patna Sahib, the Hemkund Sahib ropeway, clearing foreign contribution under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act for the Golden Temple, and establishing December 26 as Veer Bal Diwas to honour the bravery and martyrdom of the Chaur Sahibzade. But there is also political signalling: Two candidates from Punjab De won the 2014 Lok Sabha election from Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot. Both are open and unapologetic in their support for Khalistan. Now Waris Punjab De has announced at least five candidates for the Assembly elections, including many who are in prison. Candidates from the Ainala, Moga, Kapurthala, Kot Kapura, Bassi Pathana and Gill constituencies will advocate the secessionist cause unimpeded by the Indian state. Voters are absorbing and processing this.

The Congress and AAP emigres in the BJP, thought to add to the party's base and provide intelligence, are not baggage-less. They've imported their factions and rivalries to their new party and created new ones, as the resignation of BJP leaders in Sangrur showed recently when they were replaced by Congress emigres. Conditions of extreme fluidity hang over Punjab as the weather cools but election fever hots up. Climate change has a whole new meaning for the state.

Old soldier who died, faded away

Forty years ago this week, Khalistan Commando Force assassins were closing in on Gen Vaidya. So callous was the security of the just-retired Army chief that all he was given was a solitary police gunman

General Douglas MacArthur immortalised the line "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away." This week, however, an Indian soldier, among the greatest and most decorated, personified this irony. Just that he did die to hostile fire, and was then allowed to fade away. It should raise some questions.

Some more facts. He was one among only six Indians to be awarded two Maha Vir Chakras (MVCs). His MVCs were earned in the most intense battlefields, 1965 and 1971. He rose to become India's 33rd Army chief. He retired on January 31, 1986, and yet died in the line of duty on August 10 later that same year as two assassins shot him at the wheel of his Maruti 800 in Pune.

The 40th anniversary of his assassination passed unnoticed. No commemoration, no memorials, not even a social media post from the ever-so-active Army handles. It's as if there was a "corporate" call to erase all memory of General Arun Shridhar Vaidya.

Vaidya commanded his 9 Cavalry (Deccan Horse) with elan in the Battle of Asal Uttar (Khem Karan), where the pride of Pakistani Army, its 1st Armoured Division, was decimated. He then followed this up as commander of 16 (Independent) Armoured Brigade in the withering tank battles of Basantar, and Chakara and Dehina, with even greater distinction.

Somewhat more importantly, it was under his watch that two of the most storied cavalry regiments, 17 (Poona) Horse and 4 (Hodson's) Horse, collected a Param Vir Chakra (2nd Lt. Arun Khetrपाल, posthumous, whose story featured in Hindi film *Jhoka*), two more MVCs besides Vaidya's, and three Vir Chakras (VrCs) for 4 (Hodson's) Horse squadron commanders, and two (both posthumous) for his engineering support group. Clearing mines under fire is as dangerous as fighting from inside a tank, if not more so.

If Basantar was the battle of all tank battles, Asal Uttar/Khem Karan is the most fateful and decisive battle in the subcontinent's warfare. Vaidya's regiment was at the forefront, though its Shermans were outgunned, outgunned and out-protected by the Pakistani Pattons. The regiment won two more Vir Chakras. Indira Gandhi's government cited this "battle experience" to make him the chief in 1983, superseding Lt Gen S K Sinha, although the decision was likely political. Sinha, a brilliant mind, was punished for his proximity with JP or Jayaprakash Narayan.

Soldiers, however senior, can't determine their destinies, and especially so in democracies. Punjab

deteriorated and although the Army had nothing to do with law and order there, the responsibility for clearing the Golden Temple fell on Vaidya's shoulders.

Operation Bluestar remains the most traumatic event in the Army's history, besides the debacle of 1962. Sikh militants drew up hit lists. Indira Gandhi was assassinated first. The generals who led Bluestar were next on the list. Vaidya, Gen Krishnaswamy Sundarji (western Army commander during Bluestar), his Chief of Staff Lt Gen Arun Singh and the division commander Major Gen K S "Bulbul" Bhatnagar were next on the list.

Of the Delhi Congress politicians held responsible for the massacre of Sikhs, Lalit Maken and Arjun Das were assassinated within months of the massacres. Two assassins from the "Khalistan Commando Force", Harjinder Singh "Jinda" and Sukhdev Singh "Sukha", were now looting banks, killing policemen, and hunting for the targeted generals.

A bank robbery in Bombay by Jinda-Sukha showed they were closing in on Vaidya. His security was left casually to the Pune Police. So callous was the security that all he was given was a solitary police gunman. Constable Ramchandra Kshirsagar was left dazed in the back seat of the tiny Maruti as the assassins pulled along on an Ind-Suzuki motorcycle and shot Vaidya in the head. Kshirsagar, dazed, tried to get out of the car, but his foot got caught in the door. Indira's greatest war hero was abandoned.

His wife Bhanu, sitting next to him, took four bullets but fortunately survived. Sukha and Jinda were caught subsequently, tried in Yervada jail and hanged on October 9, 1992. They pleaded "not guilty" because they argued Vaidya deserved to be killed. It cracked the story along with Maseeh Rahman for *India Today*.

The Jinda-Sukha trial took place during the worst months of terror in Punjab. All institutions had collapsed, and the "media capitulation was complete," as former Punjab chief secretary Ramesh Indar Singh writes in his magisterial *Turnmoil in Punjab* (HarperCollins India, 2022) wrote. How complete, he explains with the example of a 21-page letter from Jinda and Sukha given to all publications with orders to publish in full on July 26, 1990. The *UN/and/PTI*, he writes, circulated the full text. V N Narayanan, editor of *The Tribune*, visited by armed militants, published the entire text, across three pages.

There was shock and embarrassment within the Army. The rest were now fully protected. The need to keep the Army out of a Bluestar-type operations was

acknowledged. The National Security Guard, founded on October 16, 1984 found new priority. It also culminated in the founding of the lightly-armed Rashtriya Rifles for the Kashmir Valley on October 1, 1990. Yet, Lt Gen Brar — by then retired — faced an attempt on his life (on September 30, 2012) while walking in London's Mayfair. He fought down his attackers and featured in a *WalkTheTalk* with me at his home in Mumbai's highest security zone.

My first conversation with Vaidya came fortuitously on a fraught morning. The previous day (February 19, 1982) Naga rebels had ambushed a convoy of the 21st battalion of the Sikh Regiment and killed 20 soldiers, including a Major. There was still only one hopping flight between Calcutta and Imphal, via Gauhati.

Vaidya, then eastern Army commander, was on from Calcutta. I hopped in at Gauhati and was seated next to him. Both of us were drawn by the same "story" and headed for the ambush site, Namthil on the highway to Ukhrul. Trying to engage an unhappy general, I used some commiseration, even indignation at the loss of life.

Vaidya turned, deadpan, and said, you won't understand our profession. People die and sometimes the bodies are not found. In the same forests and mountains during World War II, thousands of bodies were not found, probably eaten by jackals. Soldiering is not for the faint-hearted.

Later, he featured in a cover story on India's defence modernisation that I wrote for *India Today* November 15, 1985 edition. The story contained interviews with all three chiefs. Two things endured from that conversation with Vaidya. The first, on the dilemma of taking on your own countrymen. He had clarity: "Any person who takes up arms against his country's lawfully elected government is a traitor. That is our definition of the word enemy."

On post-Bluestar deserts: "This was a case of tribal loyalties getting the better of national loyalties in some cases. Don't forget that of the 75 predominantly Sikh units I have, there was trouble in only 8... trouble only took place in those units where the propaganda and instigation was stronger and the command weaker."

Vaidya was warned multiple times of the threat to his life. He was philosophical: "I fought two wars and came out without a scratch, and if a bullet has my name on it, it will find me." That's what happened on August 10, 1986. Did our "system" fail him in making the assassins' tasks easy? And did it fail him yet again this week by not even taking note of the 40th anniversary of his supreme sacrifice? Should all old soldiers, even our greatest war heroes, be made to fade away into anonymity like Vaidya? It's a question also for the Army as an institution.

Postscript: The line MacArthur immortalised is originally drawn from a World War I British Army marching song. It's loaded with cynical humour. As if, who cares for us soldiers once we are gone. Vaidya deserved this fate least of all.

By special arrangement with ThePrint

Why founder-led brands are winning India



YES, BUT...
SANDEEP GOYAL

Ten years ago, if you wanted to sell toothpaste, you hired a celebrity. Today, if you want to sell toothpaste, you put the founder on Instagram. From Boat's Aman Gupta doing Shark Tank to Zepho's Aditi Palicha explaining 10-minute delivery on LinkedIn, from Mamaearth's Ghazal Alagh talking moon problems to Razorpay's Harshil Mathur breaking down Unified Payments Interface (UPI) — the founder has

become the brand. Today, founder-led brands are perfect for this. We are a high-context, high-trust society. We buy from people, not from corporations. The kirana shop worked because we knew the shopkeeper. Founder-led brands are just digital kiranas.

Interestingly, founder-led brands follow a very different marketing formula. Boat didn't start with "earbuds with good bass". It started with "two guys who quit jobs to build an Indian audio brand". Mamaearth didn't start with "toxin-free". It started with "a mom who couldn't find safe products". The product is the proof. The product is the hook. Story > Product. The fact is, India spends ₹100 crore on Indian Premier League ads. The new-brand founder does 100 AMAs (As Me Anything), 50 podcast episodes and 200 replies to comments. Aman Gupta's meme page has more engagement than most fast-

moving consumer goods (FMCG) brands. Harshil Mathur's thread on "how UPI works" gets 2 million views. That's media you can't buy. Access > Advertising.

Celebrities borrow attention. Founders build community. When Zepto had a delivery issue, Aditi went on X and fixed it publicly. When Boat launched, Aman replied to customer complaints at 2 am. With such attention and proximity, consumers don't feel like customers. They feel like early investors in a person. Community > Celebrity. The results are hard to ignore. Boat went from a bootstrap brand to India's #1 audio company. The fact was always Aman. Mamaearth built on Ghazal and Varun's "new parents" story and went public in 2023.

Zepto had 19- and 21-year-old founders. The "young, scrappy, 10-minute" narrative did more than

any ad. Razorpay, Zerodha, Groww — fintech founders who became educators — first, chief executive officers second.

However, this model has a single point of failure: The human. Founder fatigue is real. You can't scale a person. A founder can only do so many podcasts, and handle so many crises. The moment they go silent, the brand feels dead. Second problem arises when personal becomes corporate. One divorce, one social media post, one controversy, and the entire brand valuation drops. When a founder is the brand, human resource issues become public relations issues.

are true:

- The founder actually believes it. You cannot fake three years of content. If you're doing it for LinkedIn likes, stop.
- The category is low-trust. Skin-

care, food, fintech, education. Where consumers are scared of being cheated. In cement or business-to-business Software-as-a-Service, it matters less.

Can a founder take the heat? Because you will get hate. You will get trolls. You will be asked about layoffs at 11 pm on Instagram Live. If you're a large FMCG or bank, don't fire your chief marketing officer and hire a TikTokTroll. But do put a human face on policy. Do have leaders who can explain, not just founders who can't.

India has always bought from people. The banyan, the doctor, the tuition teacher. We trust faces. Founder-led brands are just that principle, scaled with the internet. But the brands that will last 20 years are not the ones with the loudest founder, but the ones where the founder shuts up, builds a great product, and lets the community speak.

The writer is chairman of Rediffusion

Not everything memorable can be brought home

Beyond the famous happiness index lies a quieter Bhutan, where kindness, patience and imperfection shape everyday life



CULT FRICTION
SANDIP ROY

The Wi-Fi password at the hotel was "happiness." But of course, What else would it be in Bhutan, the country that gave us the idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH)?

I was invited to visit Bhutan earlier this month as part of the Bhutan Echoes, an annual literature and arts festival. Though Paro is barely an hour's flight from Kolkata, my exposure to Bhutan was limited to Druk marmalade and orange squash. Bhutan existed on the peripheries of my imagination as a mysterious Shangri-La where men wore skirts, and placid takin, a strange animal that looks like a hybrid between a sheep and a musk ox, roamed the slopes. And of course everything came with a side of Gross National Happiness which promised good governance and sustainable development alongside environmental conservation and cultural preservation.

To be honest, the idea of Gross National Happiness made me a bit wary. It sounded too picture-postcard perfect. The well-known Bhutanese writer Kunzang Choden had told me once that it was tiring to have people coming to Bhutan looking for the happiest country. "I think this has been to our advantage because it gets people to come here," she said. "But it's also to our disadvantage because they think there is nothing more for Bhutan that everyone is so happy there. But happiness is such a relative term."

In fact, Bhutan is grappling these days with a brain drain crisis as more and more young people leave the country for places like Australia and Canada.

According to a 2025 article in *Newsweek Asia*, an estimated 66,000 Bhutanese now live abroad. For a country of barely 765,000 people, that's a sizeable chunk—almost 1 in 10. "We cannot ask civil servants not to resign or stop people from leaving the country," Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay told the Bhutan parliament in 2025. "If (income) is the sole reason for leaving, then we need to explore ways to create jobs in the country that offer earnings comparable to those abroad."

All this to say I was not sure what to expect when I landed in Bhutan. I thought it might be like an eco-bubble where the well-heeled tourist could enjoy a few days of peace and quiet before returning to their frenetic lives in Mumbai and New York and London. I expected a paradise curated for tourists like me.

What I didn't expect was the quiet. As soon as we stepped out of Paro Airport, as we drove past the rushing river, green hills and prayer flags, the quiet surrounded me like a warm hug. I don't know about Gross National Happiness but there was certainly plenty of Gross National Peace and Quiet. Except at night, a Bhutanese friend grumbled, that's when all the street dogs howl.

Slowly the little roadside stores selling strings of *churpi* cheese and oranges gave way to Thimphu with apartment buildings lining the highway into town. It looked like a modern city, neon lights and car dealerships, not a quaint tourism brochure town. But there was not a horn to be heard. Or a traffic light to be seen. My driver said one traffic light had been installed but it had proven so unpopular that the government eventually got rid of it. Instead there are white-gloved traffic police gracefully guiding traffic along.

At one point we got stuck in a little traffic jam. No one honked. No one tried to nose their way into the first little opening. My driver cheerily waved at the car to our right, telling it to go on ahead. In my hometown Kolkata (or for



The Bhutanese are amiable to perfect strangers.

that matter any other metro in India), the whole interaction would have been beeping, hooting and shouting. My driver shrugged and said, "But would it make anyone get wherever they were going any faster?"

I had never been to a country where people were more amiable to perfect strangers. This was not just about the hotel staff, that was their job. One day I sat waiting for a bowl of ramen at a Japanese restaurant. An older lady asked if

she could sit at my table while she waited for a table.

Within minutes she had struck up a conversation, given me farmers' market advice, asked for the literary festival schedule and inquired after my book. At one point, she leaned over and said, "You should have that ramen before it gets cold." I will probably never meet her again but I will remember her friendliness.

When I told Sonam, my driver, that I

wanted to visit the Memorial *chorten* and light a butter lamp for my mother, he nodded. He not only accompanied me, he chose a lamp and recited the prayers. "Go around three times," he said. "Now close your eyes and pray."

In Paro, I wanted to buy some local cheese with which to make *ema datshi*. It was the middle of the week and the weekend farmer's market was not on. The taxi driver drove me to a little hole-in-the-wall general store, asked the aunty there if there was some cheese, and chose the best packet for me. The solicitedness was genuine. People made time for other people, drivers made space for other cars in a way I was not used to. The rupee and the ngultrum have a 1:1 exchange rate, but in many ways this felt really like a foreign country.

This was not just about taxi drivers and guides catering to a tourist economy. It extended all the way up to the royals. The Queen Mother is the patron of the literary festival. She came to the opening dinner hosted by the Indian ambassador. We were gently briefed on royal etiquette. One must stand when she stands. One does not take selfies with her. But no one told me that she would circle the room and greet almost every single person there.

She didn't just inaugurate the literary festival, she attended sessions, asked questions and kept telling everyone to sit down. "You can relax now, Elvis has left the building," she joked as she got into her car and headed out.

Another night, the Prime Minister hosted a dinner. The Queen Mother was in attendance as well. Suddenly there was a stir. The King had shown up too. The real surprise came later. The King did not stay for dinner but before he left, he came to every table and chatted with every guest, asking them what they did, their impressions of Bhutan, and invited them to visit again. An Indian guest at my table shook her head and said, "Can you imagine an Indian politician doing that? Even a municipal

commissioner?" I could not.

In Bhutan, people I met, important or not so important, just went about their daily lives without much ado or fuss. They were everything lightly, whether royalty or enlightenment. As the Ven. Lungan Gyato, a Buddhist scholar, said at a session during the literary meet, before enlightenment, one needed to chop wood and carry water. And after enlightenment one needed to chop wood and carry water.

It was by no means perfect but somehow at peace with its imperfections. Kunzang Choden gave me a novel, *Dawa*, that she had written about one of the scruffy street dogs of Thimphu. Dawa, the stray dog, looks at the moon and "realised that the moon was flawless while he himself was the personification of everything flawed and blemished, an orphan with a dirty-looking coat." But instead of being brokenhearted, he decides to call himself "Dawa Koto, or the Crooked Moon, the fusion of the perfect with the imperfect." That was the magic of the place. I came back from Bhutan with far more than I had intended—fresh cheese, large green chillies, small dark potatoes, zesty chilli paste, yellow chanterelle mushrooms and a bottle of Raven distillery-free vodka. But transporting the essence of Bhutan back is not easy. Fresh mushrooms go bad. Cheese has to be refrigerated. The tree tomatoes get squishy. And the bottle of vodka leaked all through the flight, leaving me with a sodden bag and barely four pegs. At first I was annoyed and then I thought perhaps there was a lesson in there.

Not everything memorable can be packaged, sealed and brought back. Some things are just to be experienced and then let go. Like a wish borne on a butter lamp.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.

Sandip Roy (@sandipr) is a writer, journalist and radio host.

For the love of the last laugh

Wendy Doniger's new memoir is a record, not a reflection, and has the quality of a gossip column for academic celebrities

Deepa S. Reddy

There is this story that the scholar Wendy Doniger recounts in her new memoir, *For the Love of Stories: Confessions of an Accidental Feminist*. She and Sanskritist Robert P. Goldman had an old enmity: he "loathed me and made my life in that department hell," she writes of her time at the University of California at Berkeley. Some four decades later, Doniger finds her retribution. Now she is well-ensconced at the University of Chicago in a triple-departmental appointment with the Divinity School, and the departments of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, and Social Thought. When she is invited to review Goldman's single-volume translation of the *Ramayana* (the full, seven-volume set had been published some years earlier), she makes "a number of points and jokes at Bob's expense"—which prompt Goldman to write what she calls a "furious, humorless, self-incriminating response." The *New York Review* publishes both pieces, and titles the latter "Cousin Bob and Cousin Wendy," because the two authors are in fact related by marriage. Doniger has outed this fact in her review, and the exchange is like a petty family feud turned amusingly public. Putting the whole affair into her memoir, Doniger claims the last laugh.

For the Love of Stories asks us to find interest in such common backstories of a distinguished academic life. Doniger's work has been dedicated largely to the study of Puranic texts and has resulted in the publication of over two dozen books and translations on gender and power, evil, dharma, desire, sex and eroticism in Hindu mythology.

A "proto-feminist" who responded to the unfairness of her own environments and fought battles for herself, she is unfailingly anti-authoritarian. The academic milieu in which she finds herself is male-dominated, given to staid, exclusive forms of scholarship. So, she gravitates naturally to the marginalised and the



Wendy Doniger giving the Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture in 2015.

ignored in her studies and finds appeal in Puranic language over high Sanskrit (at a time when the former was barely valued by established Sanskritists). Her memoir chronicles her crossing of such sound barriers and becoming "the first woman" several times in a professional area that would make it easier for generations of women scholars, myself included, to function within the United States academy.

The world she describes is both spread wide (across the US and Europe), and incredibly small. Her book rattles off lists of "all the people I knew," which makes it a good source for what we as graduate students used to call "star gazing": attending conferences and listening to "the big names" talk, for the intellectualism and sophistication we imagined them to have was inspiring and the hallway talk entertaining. I soon found in Doniger's lists a sort of Venn diagram marking out common colleagues and acquaintances; suddenly, the memoir took on the quality of

gossip column for academic celebrities. Tabloid fascinations aside, however, the overriding experience of reading Doniger's memoirs soon became one of culture shock. Her body of work deals with a great many sacred texts and deeply revered hymns and story systems, all of which are culturally and civilisationally precious, and very much part of living Indian traditions to this day.

To study such materials requires, at the very least, a love of Sanskrit and of Hindu mythological and philosophical imaginaries, combined with a cultivated cultural attentiveness to what they have represented and continue to mean in their local contexts. But there are almost no glimpses of this process in Doniger's memoir though she professes a love of Sanskrit and story. Instead, we are presented multiple tales of the academic pettiness, alignments, politically inflected strategising, and very problematic personal entanglements that undergird knowledge produc-

tion in the Western academy.

Take how women language scholars were known jocularly as "pillow dictionaries" back in the day in Berkeley, for their utility to their husbands' research (and the husbands were usually in far more secure faculty positions). It was common everywhere for men to openly date and marry their students. Doniger remarks of course on the structural inappropriateness of such behaviours, yet she seems unconcerned that a vast and authoritative scholarship on Hinduism in general was being systematically produced via extraneous commitments and liaisons that were never strictly intellectual or professional—her own included.

"It's best to translate the *Ramasutra* with someone you have slept with," she writes plainly of her "partnership" with the Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, reducing the text's complex commentary on social conduct and the pursuit of pleasure to just sex. Any idealised notion of scholarship or intellectualism in the tradition of the great Indian commentators, for whom personal disciplines were likely not things apart from scholastic inquiry, crumbles in the face of such revelations. There is a bluntness to Doniger's writings and a cavalier tell-all randomness on which she seems to thrive. Full birth dates of colleagues and others appear for no apparent reason, along with the dates of when many have died. The book is peppered by the phases of Doniger's career but populated by "all of Wendy's favourite things": dogs, horses, places, graduate students, moments, men. They are an odd jumble of intimacies and one collects over a lifetime: at once telling, affecting, and strange. Doniger presents a fascinating list of acknowledgements, even to those who may not want them. She names the historian Thomas Trautmann as the anonymous reviewer of the manuscript that would become her book on evil in Hindu mythology—in spite of Trautmann denying it and clearly not wanting to be named.

Ironically, such nonchalance may well be behind her work's popular appeal—that and the fact that she has three Penguin Classics to her name: *The Rig Veda*, *The Laws of Manu*, and *Hindu Myths*. It is easy to simplify "Hinduism" in a single broad stroke for its problematic attitudes towards women and lower castes without regard for regional, class, historical and cultural variation with internal questioning represented only by a handful of corner cases such as those of Ekalavya or Vali. It is easier still to flatten Siva's profound asceticism into just moral "chastity" or to read "desire" in the "*Kamadadhana*" epi-

sode as always "lost," when these ideas are not so easily pinned to gender or sexuality.

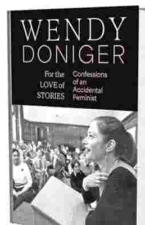
Doniger has come under fire from Harvard Sanskritist Michael Witzel for taking such liberties in her translation of the *Rig Veda*, but she explains the decisions away as the compulsions of publishing with Penguin for non-specialist readers. Then she has her revenge against Witzel in much the same way she did with Goldman, via another cleverly snarky piece of text written as a blurb for his book.

The flip side of popular appeal is of course offence. It is this latter response to Doniger's work that led to the pulping of her *Her Hinduism: An Alternate History* by Penguin India in 2014. The book is positioned as a corrective to Hinduist history-telling, one in a series of works which feel obligated to settle Indian debates over history, and only the latest of Doniger's anti-authoritarian stances. Here, Doniger takes it upon herself to "bring to the Indian public the parts of Hinduism that were in danger of being suppressed by Hindu nationalists" and "defending the right of a non-Hindu to write about Hinduism." After all, as she has explained elsewhere, Hinduist supporters are largely engineers and IT professionals, heirs to 19th century Protestant missionary interpretations of Hinduism, who therefore reject aspects of their own faith in self-loathing and now need to be guided back to the pre-colonial truth of their roots by scholars, including non-Hindu ones.

Doniger's memoir is a record, not a reflection, neither on the presumptions that have prompted the critical responses to her work nor on her implication that her Hindu critics are merely duped and mesmerised by the rising tide of Hinduism. Again, she has the last laugh: the pulped book had a fine commercial run, even in India. Filling it with "good stories and jokes" gets Doniger famous. It is what allows her to also get away with the other careless slippages which characterise her academic work.

Perhaps such stories give us another way to read Doniger: less as a resource in the long and difficult processes of post-colonial self-making or in learning to parse ancient Sanskrit texts, and more as entertainment. If indeed the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan famously said, jokes and repartee are both and what we should read Doniger for. Then maybe we'll be able to share in all her last laughs.

Deepa S. Reddy is a cultural anthropologist with the University of Houston-Clear Lake. She is working on a project to document Paducherry's temples and ritual life for the Centre for Shaiva Studies, Paducherry.



For the Love of Stories: Confessions of an Accidental Feminist: By Wendy Doniger, Speaking Tiger, 384 pages, ₹899.

Abhishek Khaitan

SPIRIT MAKER

The managing director of Radico Khaitan on reviving a debt-ridden distillery by creating new brands, betting on premium Indian spirits, and taking the company global

Illustration by Priya Kuriyan

Amin Ali

In 1996, when Abhishek Khaitan joined Rampur Distillery & Chemical Co. Ltd, his family's liquor business, it had "its back against the wall".

The company had a turnover of ₹70-80 crore, ₹50 crore debt and mounting losses. Founded in 1943, it was one of the country's oldest distilleries with no brands under its own banner, bottling spirits for other brands, and even those contracts had just come to an end. It was a time when liquor giants such as Pernod and Diageo were entering the market and growing, while Rampur Distillery acted and sounded "like a local player".

Twenty-eight years later, that company is Radico Khaitan, the fourth largest liquor company in India by volume and in FY26, it crossed ₹6,000 crore in net revenue. Its Rampur Indian Single Malt sits in duty-free counters from Dubai to Heathrow and its Jaisalmer gin can be found on shelves in Tesco in the UK. Market capitalisation, which stood at ₹52 crore in December 1999, is around ₹60,000 crore today. The "penny stock" Abhishek, now managing director, inherited has become an investors' favourite.

The company's portfolio includes vodka, whisky, Indian single malts and rum and it will soon enter the tequila category. It ships to around 100 countries, has over 1,500 employees, and opened its second distillery in Sitapur in 2023.

Behind this journey, says Delhi-based Abhishek, was a conviction that once sounded foolish: for an Indian company to create products the world would pay a premium for.

Radico Khaitan is the fourth largest liquor company in India by volume and in FY26, it crossed ₹6,000 crore in net revenue

Radico's roots go back to 1943, when the Rampur Distillery began producing alcohol in Uttar Pradesh. Abhishek's grandfather, G.N. Khaitan, bought the loss-making unit from Vishnu Dalmia in 1972. For over two decades the company survived as a bulk supplier of spirits to Shaw Wallace, and in 1995, when the wider Khaitan family business was divided among four brothers, Abhishek's father, Lalit, inherited this liquor unit.

Abhishek joined the following year, at age 22, after graduating from BMS College of Engineering in Bengaluru, a city where he had spent as much time studying the pub culture as he had industrial production. He describes himself as "more of a marketing and finance guy who happened to pursue engineering" and do well in class. What he walked into in Rampur was a management crisis—even the marketing and operations team left within his first year.

There was no way forward. "All the time was spent answering collection calls from bankers and investors." He told his board to make an attempt to revive the company. "It can't get worse than this," he remembers saying to his core management team. Abhishek, now 33, knew they needed a good product of their own to revive the company. But there was no capital or team to speak of. He went to 10 bottling units and asked if they'd bottle a new product he wanted to introduce. All of them wanted a minimum guarantee, or a fixed volume with an upfront payment for the order. He was in no position to commit to that. The Indian liquor trade at the time ran on a distribution monopoly rather than consumer pull. Abhishek wanted to build a brand people asked for by name, not one that was simply pushed on to shelves.

While he had ideas and knew he needed to launch a product, he also had to build a team and keep the company running. He took a gamble and hired around 100 people, almost all in their early 20s, partly because their salary expectations were lower and partly because he wanted fresh ideas and a willingness to do things differently.

In 1997, the company changed its name from Rampur Distillery & Chemical Co. Ltd to Radico Khaitan. Abhishek recalls a three-day boardroom presentation to convince the family that the old name simply could not compete against the multinational giants entering India.

On 8 August 1998, he introduced SPM Whisky. It was, by Abhishek's account, among the first Indian whiskies blended

with scotch, still IMFL (Indian made foreign liquor) but priced slightly higher than regular Indian whisky to give the mass Indian consumer a taste of the aspiration usually attached to imported scotch. SPM sold a million cases in its first year.

Between 1998 and 2006, Radico used that momentum to build scale rather than just one hit brand. It launched Old Admiral Brandy, now one of the largest selling brandies in the world by volume, according to Drinks International; Contessa Select Rum; Whytehall whisky in partnership with Bacardi (which the latter bought out completely in 2004); and extensions of SPM. Company volumes went from roughly a million cases to 10 million during the time.

While the numbers were looking good, debts were still high and profits low. The company's next inflection point came from an evening at a bar in Las Vegas, sometime around 2004. Abhishek noticed people ordering bottles of Grey Goose, drawn as much to the packaging as the liquid inside.

Vodka's share of India's spirits market was around 2%, against 28% globally, and every vodka sold in India at the time was cheap. He saw an opening and decided to work on an Indian vodka that was smartly packaged and available at an attractive price.

Magic Moments Vodka was launched in 2006. It remains Radico's biggest bet vindicated. The brand now accounts for roughly 60% of India's vodka market, has expanded to around a dozen flavours, and closed FY26 with sales nearing ₹1,500

crore and 8.6 million cases sold, according to the company's latest earnings presentation. It was, as Abhishek says, the real turning point of his career. "SPM was my starting point. But my turning point would be Magic Moments. That is where the premiumisation came."

Two years later, in 2008, they produced Morpheus, an XO (extra old) brandy, priced at nearly double that of the market leader brandy at that time. Morpheus now holds over 60% of India's premium brandy market and crossed 1.3 million cases in FY26.

While brands were being introduced and business was growing, they were still not profitable. "Till about 2016, I thought of selling my company at least three times," he says. The worst stretches, by his account, were in the period from 2008-16. Radico's net debt peaked at ₹947 crore in 2016.

One near-sale went as far as detailed due diligence with a foreign suitor. When that fell through, Abhishek made up his mind that Radico would stay an Indian company, competing with rather than being absorbed by multinationals that dominated the category. He asserts it is difficult for Indian brands to stand up to foreign liquor majors. "They have the legacy and the capital to pump in. There are very few Indian companies that stay in and build a brand in this category. We are one of them," he says.

The turnaround for Radico came in 2016 with the launch of Rampur Indian Single Malt. The company had been ageing magic whisky at its Rampur distillery for

Unwinds by
Listening to music

Favorite drink
Magic Moment's Jamun shot

Role model
My parents, my core strength

decades, largely for its own blends, without bottling it as a standalone product. The idea, once it was raised internally, seemed obvious in hindsight. "If Glenfiddich is bottled in Glenfiddich and Bawentia in Bawentia, Rampur malt should be bottled and sold as Rampur," says Abhishek.

Rampur launched at ₹8,500 a bottle in an Indian single malt market where Amrut, the only other credible player, was priced at ₹3,500-4,000. "Everyone thought it was a crazy idea," Abhishek recalls. Rampur has since picked up recognition from leading alcohol platforms, been named among the world's admired whiskies, and its Chairman's Reserve expression has sold for as much as ₹5 lakh a bottle at duty-free auction. Rampur is sold in around 50 countries and 35 travel-retail markets, and its bottles feature on India's leading airline's business and first-class menus, the only Indian single malt to hold that placement.

In 2018 came Jaisalmer Indian Craft Gin, built on a piece of history. Abhishek and his team came across while researching the category. The gin and tonic was effectively invented in colonial India, when quinine-laced tonic water carried to fight malaria was mixed with gin shipped from Britain. Jaisalmer learned into that Indian origin story, using 11 botanicals—of which seven are Indian—and naming the brand after the Rajasthan desert town that supplies its coriander and fenugreek.

The portfolio has kept expanding since—Sangan World Malt Whisky, blending Rampur spirit with Scottish and New World malts; Kohinoor, an ultra-pre-

Till 2016, I thought of selling my company three times.... No one knows what it took to get here.

mium dark rum aged in a mix of casks; Royal Ranthambore, a blended-malt scotch whisky and most recently, The Spirit of Kashmir, a saffron-infused luxury vodka. Together, their luxury portfolio delivered sales value of ₹475 crore in FY26.

The turnaround shows in the numbers. Net sales have grown from ₹2,399 crore in FY21 to ₹6,050 crore in FY26, a compound annual growth rate above 20%. Net debt has been brought down to ₹244 crore as of March, and the company expects to be net-debt free by the first half of FY27. Abhishek says wryly, "No one knows what it took to get here."

His father, Lalit, remains chairman. He says his wife, Deepshikha Khaitan, vice-chairman and joint managing director of Cera Sanitaryware, is his biggest strength. "I had no office hours. I was working all the time. She stood by me," he says. Their son, Shrivraj, 24, has recently joined Radico while their daughter, Devika, 20, is studying in the US.

Asked what he indulges in after three decades of this, Khaitan smiles and stresses, "My brands are the most important thing to me."

His friends joke that he should buy a private jet to which he replies the real achievement for him is to "keep proving that an Indian liquor company can stand on the same shelf" as the fabled global Scotch and cognac houses that once would not call an Indian whisky a whisky at all.

Amin Ali is a New Delhi-based journalist.



Economy

SATURDAY, AUGUST 15, 2026

IN THE NEWS

EXPORTS TO FTA PARTNERS GAIN MOMENTUM IN Q1



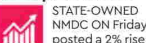
INDIA'S EXPORTS TO free trade agreement (FTA) partner countries witnessed strong growth in the first quarter of 2026-27, with outbound shipments to Singapore and Sri Lanka more than doubling, as per the commerce ministry data.

PM INTERNSHIP SCHEME SEEKS TO BRIDGE SKILLS: FM



THE PRIME MINISTER Internship Scheme (PMIS) has been designed to help bridge the gap between industry expectations and the skills of candidates who apply for jobs, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Friday as she interacted with the candidates in the national capital.

NMDC Q1 profit rises marginally to ₹2,005 crore



STATE-OWNED NMDC On Friday posted a 2% rise in consolidated net profit to ₹2,005.71 crore in the June quarter, supported by a growth in revenues from iron ore sales. The company had clocked a net profit of ₹1,967.46 crore in the same quarter a year ago, according to a regulatory filing.

BIS revising national flag specifications

THE BUREAU OF Indian Standards (BIS) is revising the quality specifications for the national flag to permit larger flag sizes and update colour measurement norms, a senior BIS official said on Friday.

Coal demand to hit 1.6 bn tonne by 2030: Official



INDIA'S COAL DEMAND is likely to touch 1.6 billion tonnes per annum by 2030, a top government official said on Friday, underlining the need for transparent and market-driven pricing for the commodity. The setting up of the 'coal exchange', a government-established platform designed to work as an independent marketplace will be of help, AGENCIES

WASHINGTON STOPS SHORT OF PUNITIVE STEPS, EYES TRADE LEVERAGE

India, EU and others aided Chinese exports: US report

Experts find holes in US analysis

MUKESH JAGOTA
New Delhi, August 14

THE US HAS admitted that its efforts to restrict imports from China with higher tariffs during President Donald Trump's first term failed as trade shifted and has put 40 countries, including India on notice with allegations of facilitating transshipments of Chinese products to its markets.

It placed India in the group of Tier 1 countries—comprising also Canada, the European Union, Israel, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, and Taiwan—where “illegal transshipment risk is embedded within broad legitimate trade flows.”

While a report—“The Great Transshipment Scam”—released by White House stops short of recommending immediate punitive measures, it lays the groundwork for potential trade enforcement actions or leverage in future bilateral trade talks.

The report rests on the fact that higher tariffs have brought down imports from China but led to higher imports from other geographies. Based on this, it assumes that Chinese goods are either

DISPUTED ALLEGATIONS

■ The US flags India among 40 countries at risk of Chinese transshipment

■ It says higher China tariffs shifted imports to third countries rather than eliminating Chinese supply

■ About \$67 billion of China-linked goods were routed through Mexico, India and Vietnam in 2025

■ GTRI says the report lacks shipment-level evidence and overlooks India's substantial manufacturing capacity



■ US could deploy AI-driven customs checks, penalties and tariff actions in future trade negotiations

being shipped through other countries after re-labelling or slight modification or light assembly. Trade experts, however, said substantial Indian manufacturing capacity exists in the product groups listed in the report.

The US report suggests strengthening transshipment enforcement and using Artificial Intelligence to support US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) ability to distinguish legitimate nearshoring and foreign investment from illegal pass-through trade, identify high-risk shipments, and convert analytical findings into interdiction, duty collection, penalties, and exclusion.

Quoting US government

agency's estimates, it says that \$67 billion in US-bound goods were transshipped from China through the top hubs—Mexico, India, and Vietnam—in 2025, producing an estimated \$28 billion in lost tariff revenue.

The savings in tariffs enable financing the capital equipment, logistics infrastructure, light assembly plants, repackaging operations, and “screwdriver factories” needed to support the scam across Southeast Asia, Mexico, India, and Eastern Europe. The two products—pumps and compressors—identified in the case of India are originating from Chennai, Pune and Gujarat.

The report suffers from

many weaknesses and India should ask the US to disclose the country, product and shipment level basis of its allegations, including India's share of the \$67 billion estimate, Founder of Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) Ajay Srivastava said.

According to GTRI, in FY26, India exported liquid pumps worth \$1.61 billion globally, including \$414.5 million to the US, while importing \$326.4 million from China.

India also exported air pumps and gas compressors worth \$1.48 billion globally, including \$335.4 million to the US, while importing \$1.63 billion from China.

Professional services need regulatory overhaul: NITI

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, August 14

INDIA NEEDS TO strengthen its professional services ecosystem through regulatory reforms, continuous upskilling and greater global mobility of professionals as it approaches its demographic peak, NITI Aayog said in a report.

The report, India's Services Sector: Insights on Regulatory Regime in Professional Services, said professional services can provide a “high-skilled, high-value avenue for employment, entrepreneurship, and innovation” and help India expand its footprint in global services trade. It proposed a four-pronged strategy focused on continuous professional development, adoption of best regulatory practices, elevating professional services within the services value chain.

The report said these measures could strengthen the workforce, improve regulation and secure a stronger position for Indian professionals in global markets. A key recommendation is to develop a structured continuing professional development framework.

CAD widens in Q1; \$8 bn drawn down from reserves

Position improves from July with robust capital inflows

MODERATE DEFICIT

Balance of payments (\$ bn)

■ April-June 2025

■ April-June 2026



SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, August 14

INDIA'S BALANCE OF Payments (BoP) slipped into an \$8.1-billion deficit in the April-June quarter, with both current and capital account positions worsening, data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday showed. In contrast, the corresponding quarter in the previous year saw accession of \$4.5 billion to the foreign exchange reserves on a BoP basis.

The BoP was in a surplus of \$2.9 billion in June, against a deficit of \$0.4 billion a year ago. However, concerns aren't high, as capital accounts have lately shown much strength, partly aided by the special FCR window for non-resident Indians. Forex reserves rose to a four-month high of \$707 billion as of August 7.

The current account deficit (CAD) widened slightly to \$3.1 billion in the April-June quarter, as the war-driven spike in global energy prices led to a sharp rise in the merchandise trade deficit. In July, the goods trade deficit stood at \$31.98 billion, the highest since January (\$34.8 billion).

The current account deficit was in a deficit of \$6.2 billion, against a surplus of \$1.2 billion a year ago. In the March quarter, India's current account surplus was 0.7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The RBI did not express CAD as a share of GDP for the June quarter, as the GDP data for that

The goods trade deficit increased to \$85.7 billion in the first quarter of 2026-27, sharply up from \$68.9 billion a year ago. Services trade surplus and remittances, on the other hand, rose in April-June, which limited the increase in CAD. Services trade surplus rose to \$52.2 billion in April-June from \$47.9 billion a year ago. Net transfers, which include remittances, rose 34% year-on-year to \$41.4 billion in the first quarter.

The rise in remittances was “contrary to expectations,” said Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at Bank of Baroda. “Clearly the expat population were remitting more money to their relatives in India.”

In June, the current account was in a deficit of \$6.2 billion, against a surplus of \$1.2 billion a year ago. In the March quarter, India's current account surplus was 0.7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The RBI did not express CAD as a share of GDP for the June quarter, as the GDP data for that

quarter is yet to be released. Over the last three months, the central bank has been giving BoP data on a monthly basis, increasing the periodicity of data release from the quarterly pattern followed for years.

The capital account slipped into a deficit of \$5 billion in April-June from a surplus of \$7.4 billion a year ago. The capital account position worsened primarily because of a jump in Foreign Portfolio Investment (FPI) outflows. Net foreign portfolio investment (FPI) outflows rose to \$9.6 billion in April-June from net inflows of \$1.6 billion a year ago. In June, net FPI inflows rose to \$2.5 billion from \$2.4 billion a year ago.

While FPI flows turned negative in April-June, net foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows jumped to \$7.8 billion from \$4.8 billion a year ago, which kept the capital account deficit in check. In June, net FDI inflows slowed to \$1.3 billion from \$2.3 billion a year ago.

Budget spend on track, but railway line doubling lags

MANU KAUSHIK
New Delhi, August 14

A RAILWAYS PANEL has flagged a major execution gap in the doubling of existing rail lines with only 57.3 km completed up to December 2025 against a target of 2,600 km for FY26.

This weak execution is out of sync with spending on doubling projects: 73.9% of the revised budget allocation was utilised by December 2025 against just 22% of the physical target achieved.

According to the report, the national transporter spent ₹21,457 crore on doubling projects by December 2025. Even though the committee acknowledged that doubling projects are long-gestation assets involving land acquisition, statutory clearances and complex execution, it stated that there's a need to narrow the gap between expenditure and physical achievement.

Typically, doubling tracks involves adding a second track alongside an existing single-track railway line. It allows trains to operate in both directions

EXECUTION GAP

■ Railways completed 573 km of doubling by Dec 2025, just 22% of the FY26 target of 2,600 km

■ Spending hit ₹21,457 cr, up 73.9% of the revised allocation despite limited physical progress

■ Doubling allocation jumps 30% to ₹37,750 cr in FY27, while overall rail capex rises 10.5% to ₹29.3 lakh cr



with fewer crossing-related delays and increasing the capacity of congested routes.

Further, the panel has raised a broader concern over the financial returns from this infrastructure push. It noted that railways' operating ratio has remained above 98% since FY23, and the ministry is estimating the ratio at 98.82% for FY26 and 98.4% for FY27.

■ Panel flags a widening spend-execution mismatch, urging faster completion to curb cost overruns

■ Operating ratio has stayed above 98% since FY23, with FY27 estimated at 98.4%

■ Doubling allocation jumps 30% to ₹37,750 cr in FY27, while overall rail capex rises 10.5% to ₹29.3 lakh cr



The operating ratio measures how much the railways spend to earn its operating revenue. A lower ratio indicates better efficiency. To improve its operating performance, the panel asked the government to boost freight revenue through better utilisation of dedicated freight corridors.

Productivity: The engine of manufacturing growth



CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE

FOR THE PAST decade, India's manufacturing story has been about scale—bigger factories, higher investments, and expanded output. This capacity creation has been real and consequential. Yet the next phase of industrial expansion cannot rely on size alone. It must be powered by productivity—the value added from every unit of capital, labour, energy, materials and services. Only then can our manufacturing ambitions truly support the Viksit Bharat mission by 2047.

Trends in total factor productivity (TFP) tell a cautionary tale. In simple terms, TFP

captures how much output an economy squeezes from its capital, labour, energy, materials and services—growth from working smarter, not just from adding more of everything. ASI-based estimates show that TFP in manufacturing grew at 2.3% in the 1980s, slipped into negative territory in the 1990s, recovered to 2.1% in the 2000s, and has moderated slightly since 2012. The cycle is clear: productivity gains rise and fall, but they have never been placed on a sustained upward path.

Productivity cannot be left to chance—it must be deliberately cultivated through policy, industry action, and institutional support. Seven priorities stand out as critical levers to embed productivity as the cornerstone of manufacturing growth.

Closing innovation gap
India spends just 0.64% of

SCALE IS NOT ENOUGH

■ India's next phase of industrial expansion cannot rely on size alone; it must be driven by sustained gains in productivity

■ Productivity can't be left to chance. It must be deliberately cultivated through consistent, targeted policy

■ India spends just 0.64% of GDP on research & development, well below the levels seen in China and the US



■ Most MSMEs lack reliable mechanisms to benchmark their performance against global peers

GDP on R&D, far below China, the US or South Korea. Private industry contributes barely a third of this, compared to three-quarters in leading economies. The Anusandhan National Research Foundation and the ₹1 lakh crore R&D initiative provide a strong framework, but industry must step up. A practical target could be 1.5% of GDP by 2030, with private firms contributing half.

Integrating with global value chains
A 1% rise in GVC participation lifts per-capita income by more than 1%. India's backward linkages have strengthened since 2019, aided by Production Linked Incentive schemes that have attracted ₹2 lakh crore in investment, generated ₹19 lakh crore in output, and created 13 lakh jobs. GVC integration must become a central pillar of industrial strategy if manufacturing is to reach 25% of GDP by 2035 and create 140 million jobs. The lesson from East Asia is clear: countries that embedded themselves in global production networks saw rapid industrial upgrading.

Fixing the missing middle
Micro-enterprises dominate Udyam registrations, while medium-sized firms—the

engines of productivity, exports and formal employment—remain sparse. Credit constraints, regulatory thresholds and limited market access hold them back. Policies must enable small firms to scale into globally competitive medium-sized enterprises.

Investing in human capital
Productivity depends on skills. Expanding access to high-quality vocational and technical education is essential. Industry should lead in creating apprenticeships aligned with the National Skills Qualification Framework.

Aligning physical and digital infrastructure
Infrastructure has improved with the PM Gati Shakti plan and central capital expenditure. Logistics costs now have a scientific baseline at 7.97% of GDP. On the digital side, UPI transac-

tions reached ₹261 lakh crore in FY25, while GST registrations crossed 15.1 million. Sustaining this requires addressing cross-subsidisation of industrial power tariffs and leveraging the National Critical Mineral Mission to secure inputs.

Keeping reform momentum
The GST rationalisation of 2025 simplified rates and corrected inverted duty structures. The Jan Vishwas Act decentralised procedural provisions, promoting trust-based compliance. Alongside the Single Window System, IBC and labour codes, these reforms reduce friction. Deepening them will ensure productivity gains are fully realised.

Benchmarking performance
Most MSMEs lack reliable mechanisms to compare themselves with sectoral or global

peers. A national productivity benchmarking platform could change this, allowing firms to measure labour and energy productivity, machine utilisation and quality standards against global frontiers.

To conclude, India's ambitious economic targets cannot be achieved by inputs alone. Capital and labour expand the baseline of production, but productivity compounds growth. The government has laid strong foundations. However, it needs to continue work on issues such as power, land and other factors of production. Industry must match that vision with efficiency and continuous productivity improvement. Together, they can make Indian manufacturing larger, more competitive, and a defining partner in India's journey to becoming a developed nation by 2047.

(The writer is director general, CII)

Opinion

SATURDAY, AUGUST 15, 2026

Building the middle

India must now turn manufacturing successes into deeper domestic industrial ecosystems

AS INDIA MARKS its 80th Independence Day, the country can legitimately take satisfaction in the transformation of parts of its manufacturing landscape. The most striking example is smartphones. From being overwhelmingly import-dependent a little over a decade ago, India has become the world's second-largest mobile-phone manufacturer, with smartphones emerging as its top exported commodity in 2025. The production-linked incentive (PLI) programme deserves considerable credit for this turnaround. More broadly, the 14 PLI schemes had attracted investments of over ₹2.16 lakh crore, generated production and sales exceeding ₹20.4 lakh crore, and exports of over ₹8.3 lakh crore by December 2025. Electronics has been the standout, but automobiles, pharmaceuticals, and other sectors have also benefited. The lesson is important: carefully designed government support can help overcome initial disadvantages and create scale.

Yet Independence Day is also an appropriate occasion to ask what economic self-reliance should mean in its next phase. Attracting a semiconductor fab, battery gigafactory, electronics plant, or renewable-energy project is an achievement, but it is only the beginning of the manufacturing story. Every large factory needs an ecosystem around it — companies producing machinery, tooling, cables, gears, motors, cooling systems, precision components, sensors, and specialised materials. It is here that India still has a considerable distance to travel. The micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) ministry's dashboard illustrates the broader structural imbalance. Of nearly 89.5 million enterprises registered under Udyam and Udyam Assist at the end of July, 88.9 million were micro enterprises. There were only about 540,000 small enterprises and 41,641 medium ones. The figures cover services and trading as well as manufacturing, and therefore is not just a manufacturing census. But they capture the central problem: India has an enormous entrepreneurial base, yet too few businesses make the journey from micro to small, and from small to medium scale.

That matters because the depth of this industrial middle will determine how much value India captures from its manufacturing boom. MSMEs already account for 35.4% of manufacturing output and 48.58% of exports, according to the Economic Survey 2025-26. But the challenge is not simply to have more MSMEs; it is to enable more of them to acquire the technology, capital, skills, and quality standards necessary to become suppliers to increasingly sophisticated factories. The smartphone experience itself points to the unfinished task. Domestic value addition in electronics has risen substantially but is still estimated at just 18-20%.

The impediments are familiar but formidable. Smaller manufacturers struggle with the cost and availability of credit, technology acquisition, skilled manpower, certification, and access to large customers and global supply chains. Scale itself becomes a barrier: without orders they cannot justify investing in sophisticated machinery, but without that investment they cannot win large orders. Government initiatives on credit guarantees, technology centres, skilling, and cluster development help, as does the decision to raise the MSME classification thresholds so that companies can grow without prematurely losing benefits. But policy must increasingly focus on helping firms graduate, rather than merely increasing the number qualifying as MSMEs. At 80, India has demonstrated that it can become a serious manufacturing location. The next milestone must be harder and more ambitious: turning factories into ecosystems and small suppliers into globally competitive manufacturers. *Atmanirbhar* should not mean producing everything at home. It should mean possessing enough technological and industrial depth to compete rather than depend. India has built some impressive manufacturing peaks. Its next task is to fill in the middle.

Maths' AI crisis has a lesson for the rest of us

MATHS CAN MEAN different things to different people. It's simple sums for children or sophisticated models for hedge fund managers. For mathematicians, it is an act of discovery. Many spend years trying to find new truths or "proofs" work that underpin everything from cryptography and computing to finance and engineering.

Now AI is taking over some of that exploration, helping solve longstanding problems like the so-called Jacobian conjecture, and the field's top minds find themselves deeply uncertain about whether that is ultimately good or bad. The answer could go either way, depending on whether mathematicians can quickly establish new standards for dealing with AI. With promising developments on that front already underway, the field could create a valuable blueprint for other forms of knowledge work.

An online post went viral recently when its writer, a PhD student in pure mathematics named Kirvin Hampton, confessed to having a "spiritual crisis" over the threat of AI taking away the most meaningful part of his work. While bots discovered new proofs, he warned that mathematicians were becoming mere spectators.

Keith Carne, a retired Cambridge mathematician, says his field is particularly susceptible to AI because the technology can cross-reference so many potential connections. Fields Medal winner Terence Tao, one of the world's best-known mathematicians, says AI could shift maths from "proof scarcity" to a state of "proof abundance". Professional mathematicians publish a vast number of papers each year, often containing new proofs or step-by-step arguments showing how a rule is true. But the most important breakthroughs do something more, unlocking new ways of thinking and laying paths for other mathematicians and use cases to follow.

Thousands of years after Euclid proved there are infinitely many prime numbers, number theory has become crucial to the cryptography systems that underpin much of today's digital economy. Work pioneered by Ingrid Daubechies on tiny oscillations called wavelets in the late '80s helped lay the blueprints for modern image compression and how smart phones store photos.

Most mathematicians don't seek a final use case but instead a quest driven by human curiosity to map out the hidden patterns of the universe, as with Fermat's Last Theorem, a centuries-old puzzle pursued largely for the intellectual challenge itself. Pure maths might find real-world applications decades after a mathematician dies, but it doesn't have to. Still, the discipline has long had a "publish or perish" culture, with papers acting as a kind of currency that buys you credibility among other academics, even though the deeper goal is an increase in collective understanding — an abstract concept that is seemingly impossible to value.

It might take a few hours to produce a proof with AI, but it can take years to absorb the results into human knowledge. In that sense, the bigger risk isn't so much that AI replaces mathematicians, but that universities stop supporting the slow, human work that helps them grasp those truths. Much the same dilemma hangs over fields like writing, where AI generates endless prose while the skill of deciding what is worth saying in the first place becomes scarcer.

Institutions have historically paid people based on the things AI is making cheap, from publication counts in academia to billable hours and documents in law. The silver lining to maths' spiritual crisis may be that it forces humans to realise they've been measuring value the wrong way all along. How do you reward judgement and taste, or smart questions that open new avenues of inquiry? In maths, that could mean giving more credit and funding to teaching, explaining other people's results or building tools like shared databases and mathematical libraries that help other mathematicians advance — not just publishing endless papers.

As machines make clever outputs ever more abundant, humans should be putting a higher price on knowing which questions are really worth asking.



PAMY OLSON
Bloomberg

I-DAY PLEDGE

PRODUCTIVITY, SOCIAL PROGRESS, AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE ARE ONE SYSTEM; NEED TO ADDRESS THEM TOGETHER

The freedom we need to create

VANDE MATARAM WILL be sung from the ramps of the Red Fort this morning, a hundred and fifty years after it was written. It was once sung by a generation that could not have and could not sing these words in public and yet found in a few lines the conviction that the country was theirs to improve. Seventy-ninety years after they succeeded, the Republic they left behind remains the most audacious political wager of the last century, and it has not been lost. Among the five thousand guests seated at the Red Fort today will be street vendors, sanitation workers, metro staff, and hospital orderlies, in enclosures named after India's great lakes rather than after rank. It is a small gesture, and among the truest the Republic will make on this day.

Yet the country extending that welcome does so into a world its founders would not recognise, and which even those of us who came of age after 1991 are only beginning to make sense of. The open trading order that carried India's rise has given way to managed interdependence, in which states and firms still depend on cross-border flows of technology, energy, capital and food while increasingly treating those flows as instruments of leverage. Tariffs have returned as a first-order instrument of statecraft, average American duties having climbed to levels last seen around 1910, and the world now finds itself amid a technology boom accompanied by a governance recession, rich in capital and capability yet unable to coordinate a response to any risk it holds in common.

This generation is being asked to fight for a freedom of a different kind, not from external rule, but from the constraints we have built or tolerated ourselves. It is a freedom that will be declared by nobody and can only be constructed, and it stands

AMIT KAPOOR

Chair, Institute for Competitiveness
X: @kauritija

on three foundations, the growth that pays for everything, the human development that gives growth its purpose, and the environment that sets the terms on which both are possible. On the first, the measure that matters is not the size of the economy, but what each worker produces, and at 5,964 dollars of output per worker against 25,030 in China, India's future will be shaped less by how fast it grows than by how productively it learns to grow.

Nothing reflected the significance of that more plainly this year than the free fall of the rupee. A currency that touched an all-time low near 97 to the dollar in May ought to have been a gift to exporters, and yet merchandise exports grew by 0.08%, because a depreciation cannot conjure an industrial base where manufacturing contributes only 13% of value added. The rest of the foundation also needs strengthening, with credit to the private sector at around 50% of GDP, research and development at 0.65% of national income, vocational training reaching 2.4% of our 15- to 24-year-olds, and barely half our working-age population in work at all. These are not separate failures but single interlocking ones, since a weakness in any of them limits what strength in the rest can deliver.

This generation is being asked to fight for a freedom not from external rule, but from the constraints we have built or tolerated ourselves

Nineteen Olympiad medallists will sit on the ramps this morning. They are at the summit of a system that loses a great many of its climbers well before the top. It is therefore imperative to reflect today on India's human capital continuum or the long passage that runs from early childhood learning through schooling and skilling into work. Our difficulty is not an absence of progress along it but the uneven transmission of progress from one stage to the next, with learning thinning as children rise through the grades and only 8.25% of graduates holding roles that match their qualification. Our coveted demographic dividend is not paid out on population size but it needs to be earned through capability and absorption.

Our wider measures tell the same story. India's Social Progress Index score of 58.79 this year placed 109th among 171 countries, and the trajectory matters more than the rank, since the score rose by 8.49 points between 2011 and 2021 and by barely 1.5 points in the four years since. Access has widened while outcomes have slowed, women remain outside the workforce in numbers not growing, economy can afford, and the air and water of our cities quietly reduce how much work a person is able to

do. Social progress is not the reward that arrives after growth but the mechanism by which growth becomes a life.

All of this now rests on a country whose weather has stopped behaving. Assam is under water as the flag goes up this morning, with about a hundred dead, many in relief camps and over 400 villages submerged. Other states in the country pass between drought and deluge within a single season. Heat alone is expected to take more than 5% of South Asia's working hours by 2030, most of them Indian and most of them belonging to the workers our industrial ambitions depend upon. We withdraw two-thirds of our renewable freshwater each year and consume 1.11 global hectares a person against a biocapacity of 0.33. These are not merely technical climate terms but lived realities which affect our fundamental existence and could lead to the next mass extinction of humanity.

So, the freedom to be built this Independence Day is of a different kind. It requires four transformations, from demographic scale to productive human capability, from digital reach to digital productivity, from pockets of innovation to an industrial ecosystem that can scale, and from linear growth to a circular and climate-consistent economy. None of these can be won on its own, because productivity, social progress, and climate resilience are one system with each one having both negative and positive spillovers to the other. A country that treats them separately will keep solving one at the expense of another. That is the inward turn this year asks for, less a matter of new schemes than of resilience, of institutions that hold when the weather and the world turn on once.

Co-authored with Meenakshi Ajith, researcher, Institute for Competitiveness

Cybersecurity 'ostrich' has a problem



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

Author, corporate adviser, and independent director on corporate boards X: ssmmbhai

WE HAVE BECOME remarkably comfortable with the language of digital transformation. Yet when this digital architecture fails, institutional responses too often retreat into silence, containment, or limited disclosure. CERT in recorded 29.44 lakh cybersecurity incidents in 2025, higher than the previous years.

The pattern is visible across sectors. AIIMS's 2022 ransomware attack disrupted critical hospital systems, while the C-Edge ransomware incident disrupted payment services in many small banks. boAT faced a reported breach involving data of 7.5 million customers, WazirX suffered a cyberattack in which about \$235 million in digital assets were stolen, and BSNL faced reports of sensitive customer and network data being exposed.

AI and cyber have become staples of corporate, regulatory, and bureaucratic conversations, as well as the conference circuit, even as many institutions are yet to scratch the surface of their own resilience capabilities. In the cyber era, authority without understanding is itself a risk.

The recent incident involving one of India's leading listed banks is instructive. The bank said an employee's email account had been compromised, resulting in unauthorised access to certain data, while its core banking systems were neither accessed nor affected. Not surprisingly, cybersecurity researchers and media reports pointed to nearly 1 TB of data allegedly circulating on the dark web, including claims involving customer information, identification documents, loan papers, and internal audit records. The episode offers lessons for stakeholders across sectors.

First, capability. Did the institution possess the competence to secure what it collected and retained? Were sensitive data sets properly segmented? Did

management act on vulnerabilities identified by audits? Did the board receive an honest assessment of cyber risk, or another reassuring dashboard of controls and compliance?

Cyber resilience rests on capability, architecture, culture, and governance. Business scale without corresponding capability simply creates a larger damage-radius. Identity documents, photos, account-opening records, loan files, financial relationships, and audit information can become a toolkit for impersonation, fraud, and social engineering.

Second, disclosure and institutional response. Every serious data incident inevitably raises a more uncomfortable question than how the breach occurred: what did the institution do once it knew?

The institution may not know the extent of the compromise. Management, finding the full facts inconvenient, may prefer stoic silence to control the narrative. Or the organisation may simply lack the forensic capability to establish quickly what happened. These circumstances can coexist. None should be a standing justification for opacity. In today's digital environment, cyber expertise does not arrive with age, designation, or institutional rank. Every external voice pointing to a gap cannot be dismissed as anti-institutional. Some may be offering an early warning that the institution itself missed.

The 'ostrich' mentality has little place in the cyber era. Institutions must overcome biases, and the comforting assumption that appointing a consulting firm amounts to having cyber capability. When

Cyber breaches expose failures of capability, disclosure, governance, and regulatory accountability; after digital scale India's next test is institutional depth

cyberwork is repeatedly subcontracted, as one sees in market practice, accountability can become so diffused that the institution itself loses sight of who actually understands and owns the risk. The consumer bears the consequences long after the incident disappears from the headlines.

This is where India's emerging data-protection regime becomes important. The DPDP Rules require affected individuals to be notified without delay and the Data Protection Board to be informed without delay, with detailed information to follow within 72 hours or such longer period as may be permitted. The RBI requires unusual cyber incidents at banks to be reported within a certain time and has emphasised root-cause analysis and forensic investigation. CERT-In separately requires specified incidents, including data breaches and leaks, to be reported within six hours. The question for regulators, therefore, cannot stop at whether an incident was reported.

Third, management and board accountability. The questions must extend beyond what happened to why it was possible. When was suspicious activity detected? When did management conclude that personal data could be involved? What evidence supported that conclusion? What did the board ask? Were earlier audit findings acted upon? Which controls failed, and who was accountable when institutions are willing to hear uncomfortable warnings, boards are capable of asking uncomfortable questions, regulators apply the same standards without regard to ownership, and every serious breach leaves the system stronger than it found it.

This is why boards have never rehearsed the first six, 24 and 72 hours of a major breach, on what basis does it believe it is prepared for one? The exercise should test the board, CEO, CISO, tech, legal, compliance, com-

munications teams, and critical vendors.

Fourth, regulatory accountability and parity. For listed companies, a cyber incident can affect business continuity, valuation, reputation, and investor confidence, making appropriate stock-exchange disclosure part of governance. For regulators, the uncomfortable question is of parity: would the regulator have been equally restrained had precisely the same failure occurred at a privately-owned financial institution? And if supervisory restraint leaves known vulnerabilities insufficiently addressed, are we not allowing institutional risk to become embedded rather than resolved?

Regulatory fairness cannot depend upon ownership of the entity affected. Privacy regulation cannot become an elaborate compliance architecture sitting above a culture of selective disclosure. The deeper issue extends well beyond privacy.

Industrialisation, financialisation, and digitalisation now operate through interconnected systems. Financial data, identity infrastructure, industrial supply chains, digital platforms, IP, and critical infrastructure reinforce one another. In the digital era, true independence means having the capability to understand, secure, and recover the systems on which economic and social life depends, and retain freedom of action when those systems are increasingly interconnected.

For an India that has built extraordinary digital scale, the next test is institutional depth. We will know where we have built genuine cyber resilience when institutions are willing to hear uncomfortable warnings, boards are capable of asking uncomfortable questions, regulators apply the same standards without regard to ownership, and every serious breach leaves the system stronger than it found it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Disinvestment model

Apropos of 'Build the momentum' (FE, August 14), the successful stake sale in LIC marks an important landmark in India's disinvestment programme. It should serve as a model for disinvestment exercises. Detailed preparation, transparent pricing, strong investors confidence, and effective communication are essential to conduct such transactions seamlessly. The

government should also focus on protecting the interests of small investors and employees while maximising value for taxpayers. Any disinvestment exercise shouldn't just be viewed as a means of raising revenue. It should be part of a broader strategy to promote competition, improve corporate governance, and encourage private participation in sectors where government participation is not essential.

—Bal Govind, Noida

Actual test for LIC

The LIC stake sale is welcome, but disinvestment should not become a convenient way of meeting fiscal targets. The real test is whether such sales improve efficiency, widen ownership, and release public capital for infrastructure and social priorities. The government should set clear timelines for strategic sales, ensure transparent valuation, and avoid last-minute transac-

tions that may weaken investor confidence. LIC must remain guided primarily by policyholders' interests rather than the government's revenue requirements. A predictable disinvestment calendar, credible bidding process, and transparent monitoring will help. Proceeds should preferably support productive capital expenditure.

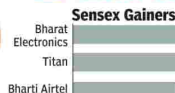
—A Mylamsi, Coimbatore

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

Equities End Two-Week Winning Streak Amid War

Indices retreated this week as lingering uncertainty in West Asia and elevated crude oil prices tempered risk appetite for stocks. Sensex lost 0.6% to close at 78,000 points and Nifty 50 fell 0.8% to close at 24,366.

Sensex
-0.6%



THE TIMES OF INDIA, BENGALURU | SATURDAY, AUGUST 15, 2026

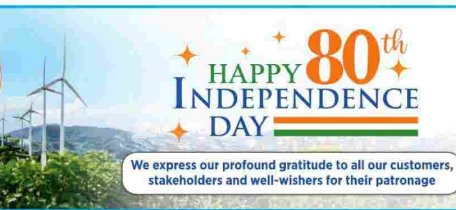
Laggards



\$44.2bn

Were India's goods exports in July, rising 19.5%, their fastest pace of growth in four years. Imports stood at \$76.2bn, taking the trade deficit to \$32bn during the month.

Source: BSE, Reuters, screener.in



Wholesale price inflation eases to 9.8% in July

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Driven by softer energy prices, wholesale price index (WPI) based factory gate inflation moderated to 9.8% in July from a 27-month high of 9.9% in June, official data showed. In June, inflation, WPI stood at 9.8% in July last year.

This is third consecutive month when wholesale inflation has remained over 9%, as manufactured products and primary articles saw price acceleration during the month. Decleration in crude (27%) and mineral oil (32.4%) prices helped soften inflation in fuel and power segment to 20% from 27.4% in June.

Manufactured products, which have a weight of 63.1% in the WPI series, saw prices accelerate to 8.3% from 7.5%. This was led by price rise in industries such as food products, textiles, wearing apparel, leather, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, rubber, electrical equipment and non-metallic products. In primary articles, non-food articles (17.7%) and minerals (13.3%) saw sharp price acceleration.

Wholesale inflation mirrors the trend seen in retail inflation as prices remained broadly contained. Meanwhile, inflation in the output producer price index (PPI) also decelerated slightly to 8.9% in July from 9.6% in June. Starting June, govt has started giving PPI data, covering the output and input manufacturing prices.

Oil prices, Iran tensions drag markets lower

Mumbai: Market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended lower on Friday as elevated oil prices and the prolonged US-Iran impasse weighed on investor sentiment.

The 30-share BSE Sensex dropped 70.71 points, or 0.09%, to settle at 78,009.25. During the day, it fell 355.39 points, or 0.50%, to 77,654.37. The 50-share NSE Nifty dipped 29.85 points, or 0.12%, to close at 24,366. From the Sensex pack, Asian Paints, InterGlobe Aviation, NTPC, Power Grid, State Bank of India and HCLTech were among the major laggards. Bharti Airtel, Adani Ports, ICICI Bank and Titan were among the gainers. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, advanced 0.17% to \$87.15 a barrel.

"Despite softer US inflation and record closes on Wall Street, elevated crude oil prices and the absence of any diplomatic breakthrough continued to cap risk appetite," PNMudi R. CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth-tech firm, said.

Svatntra Microfin files papers for ₹3k cr IPO

Mumbai: Ananya Birla-led Svatntra Microfin, which lends to low-income women, plans a Rs 3,000-crore IPO, split equally between a fresh issue and PE-backed OFS by Advent and M&P. Its pre-IPO valuation is about Rs 5,500 crore, TNN.

SAT grants partial relief to ZEEL

Mumbai: Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT) on Friday granted partial relief to Zee Entertainment Enterprises (ZEEL) to issue convertible warrants worth nearly Rs 3,150 crore to a promoter group entity. It also allowed ZEEL another week to complete the deal that was to expire on Friday. On July 31, markets regulator Sebi had banned ZEEL from dealing in securities for two months. TNN.

With \$52.3bn raised, FCNR(B) scheme to close a month early

Aug 31 Last Day; ECB & OFCB Facilities To Continue Till Dec 31

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: RBI has decided to close the special FCNR(B) scheme a month early on Aug 31 after banks nipped up \$52.3 billion in deposits by Aug 13. The central bank's decision follows a strong response to the facility, which was designed to bring foreign currency into India's banking system at a time when dollar liquidity was a concern.

RBI introduced the special USD-INR swap facility on June 8, 2026, covering FCNR(B) deposits, overseas foreign currency borrowings (OFCBs) and external commercial borrowings (ECBs). By Aug 13, banks had reported total inflows of

WHY THE SCHEME GOT STRONG RESPONSE

► RBI swap facility reduced much of the currency risk for banks, converting dollar deposits into rupees at attractive terms

► Priority-sector and reserve-rule waivers boosted appeal for foreign banks, which otherwise struggle to meet priority-sector lending targets due to fewer branches in India

\$56.9 billion under the three components. FCNR(B) deposits accounted for \$52.3 billion, while OFCBs and ECBs brought in \$2.8 billion and \$1.7 billion, respectively. Banks can swap the dollars raised with RBI until Sept 1. The facilities for ECBs and OFCBs will continue until Dec 31, as originally planned.

Under the scheme, foreign banks have in many cases extended financing many ti-

mes the amount of the initial deposit made by wealthy customers. Bankers said the challenges in deploying the proceeds in fixed-return long-term assets might have prompted the early closure.

CS Setty, SBI chairman, said during an analysts' meet that SBI had mobilised about \$6 billion of FCNR(B) deposits, alongside about \$1 billion of OFCBs and \$300 million of ECBs. That put to-

tal funding raised through the programme at roughly \$7.3 billion, most of it through the bank's foreign office. Setty had earlier indicated that SBI could raise around \$10 billion under the scheme. The proceeds would be used to retire bulk deposits of up to Rs 1 lakh crore.

At the heart of the arrangement is RBI's swap. Banks bring in dollars and RBI provides rupees in exchange. When the swap matures, the transaction is reversed, with the bank returning the rupees and receiving its dollars back. In economic terms, RBI absorbs much of the currency risk for the duration of the deposit, making the arrangement a form of state-provided currency insurance.

Claude downloads surge 30x, Gemini doubles

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New Delhi: India's AI-appare is getting more competitive. While ChatGPT continues to dominate user engagement and spending, Gemini is gaining ground and Claude is emerging as a fast-growing challenger, according to data from market intelligence firm Sensor Tower.

Claude recorded the sharpest growth among major GenAI apps during the June quarter. Its downloads in India surged over 30-fold y-o-y to 8.5 million in Q2 2026, while consumer spending jumped nearly 19-fold to about Rs 62.2 crore. The rapid acceleration is significant, given Claude's relatively small presence in India until recently.

"Claude stands out with

more consistent momentum, with downloads and monthly active users accelerating since early 2026, making it an increasingly notable player despite its smaller user base," said Eve Chen, insights analyst at Sensor Tower.

ChatGPT, however, remains far ahead on the app store during Q2, up Rs 112.8 crore during Q2, up

36% from a year earlier. Grok generated about Rs 20.4 crore, followed by Perplexity at Rs 5.8 crore and Gemini at Rs 1.8 crore.

Google's Gemini is emerging as the stronger challenger on engagement. Downloads more than doubled to 18.1 million, while its share of time spent across GenAI apps climbed sharply to 18.7% from 4.9% a year earlier.

Zetwerk ₹2.6k cr IPO: 32% promoter stake pledged

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Bengaluru: Nearly a third of the shares held by Zetwerk's founders and promoter group have been pledged against borrowings, with part of the arrangement set to remain in place even after the manufacturing company's proposed IPO.

According to Zetwerk's updated draft prospectus, around 10.2 crore shares, or 32.18% of the combined holding of the promoters and promoter group, were pledged as security for borrowings. The Rs 2,600 crore IPO would represent about 6.6% of Zetwerk's total pre-IPO equity on a fully diluted basis.

In simple terms, the shares have been pledged as collateral to lenders. The promoters continue to own the shares, but if the borrowing terms are breached and lenders enforce the security, the shares could be taken over and sold, potentially reducing the promoters' stake in the company.

Zetwerk has flagged this as a risk for investors. The company said enforcement of the security could dilute the promoters' shareholding and potentially affect its business and share price.

Founders Amrit Acharya and Srirath Ramakrishnan directly hold shares representing about 1.8% of Zetwerk that are pledged against borrowings. Another 4.8% is held by members of

Part of promoters' pledged shareholding will continue after IPO under borrowing arrangements

the promoter group and Crete Innovation, a company controlled by the founders. The pledges were created in Sept last year in favour of Catalyst Trusteeship, acting as trustee for the lenders. The pledge is now being partially unwound as Zetwerk prepares for its listing.

Some shares have already

been released to meet the minimum promoter holding requirement after the IPO. The trustee has also agreed to release shares held by Acharya, Ramakrishnan and Creovate that are proposed to be sold through the IPO's offer-for-sale component. Other shares will be released so they can be locked in for the period mandated under Sebi rules.

The arrangement, however, will not disappear entirely after the listing. Zetwerk's prospectus says some promoter-group shares remaining after accounting for the IPO sale and mandatory lock-in will continue to be pledged. Ahead of the IPO, Ramakrishnan owns 8.3% of Zetwerk on a fully diluted basis, while Acharya owns 7.5%. The promoter and promoter group together hold 20.7% of the company.

Zetwerk's IPO comprises a fresh issue of up to Rs 2,600 crore and an offer-for-sale of up to 9.6 crore shares by founders, investors and other shareholders.

Physics Wallah cuts losses as revenue jumps 24%

New Delhi: Edtech major Physics Wallah on Friday reported a narrowing of its consolidated net loss to Rs 77.57 crore for the June quarter, supported by growth across its online and offline learning verticals.

The company had posted a net loss of Rs 120.5 crore in the corresponding period of the previous fiscal year, according to a regulatory filing. Consolidated revenue from operations during the first quarter of the current fiscal year rose 24.4% to Rs 1,053.9 crore, compared with Rs 847.1 crore in the year-ago period. On a quarter-on-quarter basis, revenue grew

14.7% from Rs 918.8 crore in the Jan-March 2026 period, while the net loss widened from Rs 74.9 crore in the preceding quarter.

Total expenses for the June quarter stood at Rs 1,247 crore, up from Rs 1,054.2 crore in the same quarter last year. Employee benefit expenses remained the largest cost driver, accounting for Rs 328.3 crore.

"Despite the change in the NEET examination cycles, we delivered healthy revenue growth along with an improvement in profitability. While doing this, we continued to expand our learner base across online, offline, K-12 and other new categories, reflecting a funnel that is getting deeper and wider," Physics Wallah founder and CEO

Alakh Pandey said. "Our focus remains on scaling up this tech-enabled online education platform while maintaining disciplined capital allocation," Pandey said. In terms of segmental performance, the company's online coaching and book sales division contributed Rs 548.8 crore to revenue.

The offline segment, including classroom-based coaching and hostel services, recorded revenue of Rs 489.9 crore. The company, which listed on the stock exchanges in Nov 2025, disclosed that it utilised Rs 257.2 crore of the net IPO proceeds during the quarter. The funds were used for capital expenditure on new centres, marketing initiatives and funding inorganic growth. AGENCIES

FMCG cos see recovery in consumption growth

Witness Stronger Volumes Amid Cost Pressure

Rupali Mukherjee @timesofindia.com

New Delhi: The consumer goods sector is seeing signs of a firmer consumption recovery with volume growth becoming more visible across companies, even as cost pressures remain. This comes as the West Asia conflict has pushed up crude-linked inputs, packaging and freight costs for FMCG companies, raising concerns that the disruption could eventually weigh on demand.

Major companies including Nestlé and Marico reported double-digit volume growth in June quarter, while HUL, Tata Consumer and Dabur also saw underlying volume momentum. After several quarters, in which growth was largely driven by inflation-led price increases, companies have reported a stronger consumer uptake, analysts and companies told.

Most of the quarter was marked by average 8-10% raw material cost hike, led by crude-linked inputs like packaging and edible oils with a rise in palm oil prices, which led to a pressure on margins. Most players resorted to selective price hikes and grammage cuts to offset cost escalation in June.

"During the quarter, consumer demand remained strong, with industry navigating geo-

Consumer demand remained strong, with the industry navigating geo-political crisis and increased raw material costs by improving efficiency and limiting price increases to around 3-5%

Rural demand grew 170 basis points ahead of urban demand in first quarter

Volume growth strengthens across FMCG cos despite crude-linked cost pressures, with rural demand continuing to outperform urban markets

political crisis and increased raw material costs by improving efficiency and limiting price hikes to around 3-5%. Also, urban consumption has nearly caught up with rural demand now. The industry is hopeful that festive season could be a growth driver for urban demand for the rest of the year," Mayank Shah, chief marketing officer, Parle Products, said.

Rural India continues to be a bright spot in the consumption landscape, outper-

forming urban markets for the eighth consecutive quarter. The gap between the two has narrowed with urban demand being driven by a strong performance of modern trade, quick commerce and premium products.

"As per syndicated data, rural demand grew 170 basis points ahead of urban demand in the first quarter, with growth of 6.2% in rural versus 4.6% in urban markets. We believe this reflects a healthy broadening of India's consumption story across urban and rural India," Dabur India global CEO Mohit Malhotra earlier said.

Pricing intervention could be higher over the next few quarters in home and personal care than food and beverages (F&B), given the former's greater exposure to crude/palm derivatives, LPG, polymers and packaging, according to analysts from Equirius. During the quarter, food companies have generally relied on more measured price increases, shrinkflation and productivity measures. "The latter part of FY27 could see price hikes/grammage cuts getting reversed (could coincide with the festive/wedding seasons) as input costs stabilise at lower levels," Systematic said in a note.



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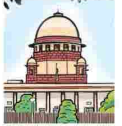


A thought for today
Bring it on. Dissent is central to any democracy.
HARRY BELAFONTE

Freedom In Campuses

Bar Council's reputation can't really recover

The dressing down Supreme Court handed to Bar Council of India on Friday was on point. BCI had it coming. And it knew so, given the regulatory body for legal education retracted, within hours on Thursday, its letter – that threatened to debar Nalsar law graduates of 2026, for opposing their university's invitation to CJI, C.J., on Friday, said the letter was "absolutely uncalled for". It stopped BCI or state bar councils from taking coercive action against students or faculty. But, fact is, BCI cannot really repair the dent to its reputation.



How did it come to this? Bar Council has no *locus standi* to even take this position. As SC said, "If students are protesting peacefully, who is BCI to take action?" Just days ago, Allahabad HC had reinstated, on Aug 5, an assistant professor in Bareilly, who had – unbelievably – been sacked by his govt-aided college on July 22, for participating in the Jantar Mantar protest. HC said no due process was followed, and that the college authority must pass a "reasoned order, in accordance with law and principles of natural justice."

That a higher education institute needed to be told this is a sad reality. Worse, this is not a rarity anymore. Even prestigious institutions have penalised students and faculty for political views. Authorities don't have to agree with professors or students, nor should faculty or the student body be expected to toe the management's line. Yet, authorities, such as BCI or university managements, are far too often tempted to misuse power by threatening to damage careers and future of youngsters and professors. Contrast this with how Harvard dealt with on-campus protests. The university even threatened with a funds freeze by Trump, not only allowed protests on campus, but also refused to ban face masks for protesters. It's not that Harvard managements, or even all of its faculty, agreed with protesting students. The university was upholding, under great pressure, free speech. Here's an Independence Day wish: may India's many uncles running institutions – BCI tops the list now – relearn basic principles of democracy.

Pulling A Fast One

What's superfast? Per railways, 55kmph!

What is fast, and what is superfast, is a matter of opinion. Walter Arnold of Kent got the world's first speeding ticket in 1896 for driving his Benz at 13kmph. To the cop who chased him for 8km on a bicycle, Arnold must have seemed reckless indeed. But to us, Indian Railways' designation of 55kmph as "superfast" speed only seems silly. In this age of Chinese maglevs, German InterCity Express trains, Japanese Shinkansens, and French TGVs, 300kmph is fast, 55kmph is glacial.



But Railways' superfast is fast in a different sense. It's about revenue, not speed. Tickets on "superfast" trains come with a surcharge. That's why India has over 1,000 superfast trains now. All it takes is a few pen strokes. Tweak the timetable slightly for an average speed of 55kmph. And don't worry about punctuality, because a train that is 15 minutes late is considered on time. And as CAG just pointed out, Railways has been tagging superfast charges on slower trains as well.

But the worst is that this 55kmph average speed criterion is 33 years old. The word "superfast" entered Indian Railways' lexicon in the 1960s to distinguish trains with a top speed of 100kmph from other "express" trains. The surcharge came in 1973, but it was arbitrary because "superfast" was undefined. Finally, after a long consumer campaign, the 55kmph criterion was announced in 1993. By levying a surcharge for what's essentially autotrickshaw speed, Railways is pulling a fast one.

What Football Can Teach CEOs

Be really serious about investing in people

The idea that business has a lot to learn from football isn't new. Businesses, like football teams, have to manage their employees, get the best out of them, and succeed in a very competitive marketplace. In *Edge: Leadership Secrets From Football's Top Thinkers* author Ben Lyttleton provides surprising insights into the minds of successful football managers and their teams that hold out valuable lessons for the corporate world.

The author begins with a football team that epitomises local identity – Spain's Athletic Bilbao. Steeped in the Basque identity of the region where it comes from, the club enjoys an unbreakable bond with the local community. The club takes it as its moral duty to invest in local youth, where football is seen not just as a sport, but a system to develop and prepare youngsters for life. And the result of this investment? Athletic Bilbao is one among the only three teams never to have been relegated from the Spanish top division – the other two being Real Madrid and Barcelona.

Putting players first, giving them the right environment to develop as human beings, and building social capital are themes that keep popping up throughout the book. Per the author's interviews with managers and trainers, these are also the key ingredients for companies to build successful and resilient businesses and brands.

Specifically, social connectiveness emerges as a crucial metric of performance. Swedish club Östersunds FK worked this out throughout, culture, and theatre. The whole club, including players, support staff, junior team etc, were engaged in cultural projects such as performing a modern dance interpretation of Swan Lake at the

local theatre. This not only created harmony among players, but also built team spirit and eliminated blame culture. The club's performance dramatically improved, and it was promoted to the Swedish first division.

Businesses are taking note. For example, Ilex, an American company, created an environment that allowed people from different areas of the business to regularly meet each other, fostering connectiveness and cohesion, leading to higher productivity. Thomas Tuchel – current England head coach – has long been rated as a top manager. He worked miracles at German club Mainz, and took Borussia Dortmund to a new level, managing gifted players like Ousmane Dembele. His secret to success: extreme adaptability and habitual rule-breaking. Tuchel is willing to try anything – even changing his team's formation six times during a game. His philosophy: if you don't adapt and break rules, someone else will break them for you, which will be much more painful.

The author sees this attitude as congruent with Netflix, which broke the rule of late fees for video rentals, by creating a subscription-only model. France's just-retired and much-celebrated head coach Didier Deschamps, embodies a leadership model companies would do well to follow. His mantra: listen like a true leader. "Being a leader is about having time for others," says Deschamps. People are the most valuable resource football clubs and companies have. People give them the winning edge. So to sum up, companies, like good football clubs, should invest in people, help them find their true potential, and train them early to cope with stress. Question is: how many companies do that?

mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



LIFE IS CHESS



MAKE RIGHT MOVES

The India Our Young Deserve

● Where they have a genuine role in designing the future they will inherit ● And the baggage of the past is no longer weighing them down ● Where balance sheets are not be all end all ● And they enjoy fuller lives, with room for joy and curiosity ● And still a sense of belonging to anchor them

Manu S Pillai



In 1967, the filmmaker SNS Sastry interviewed a bunch of 20-year-olds born around the time of India's independence. It was a wide spectrum. One fashionable chap sang a Beatles song and longed for a career in the movies. Another, a daily wage earner, lived in a world so different that he couldn't name the country's prime minister. Some kids were optimists: "I am better off than my father in every respect." Others were cynical: "What is my future in this country?" A particularly wise young man observed: "Our achievement [after two decades of independence] is that we have a hopeful tomorrow. Our failure is that our today is precarious."

India has always thrown up such contradictions. Yet, if one were to interview today's Gen Z, the responses would appear more dire. For decades we have trumpeted India's "demographic dividend". Those who constitute said dividend, however, confront a world in unprecedented flux. Nothing is predictable: not jobs, not technology, not even the weather.

Of course, experts with facts and figures can (accurately) argue that the country has made great strides. Only that nations and people aren't just statistical computations. It is small consolation to tell a student without internet access that her grandmother would have been grateful for a pencil.

In this age of anxiety, how do we about building an India for our young, then? To start with, the establishment that dominates this country must act with grace. Age delivers experience and wisdom. But admittedly, it also tends to be jaded, set in its ways, sanctimonious, and reluctant to recognise fresher opinions. While those with experience and achievement can light the way, they must be careful not to act as a gerontocracy that inadvertently gets in the way of change. Millennials, together with the Gen Z, represent some 600 million of the future belongs to them, they deserve room to be active participants in drawing up tomorrow's architecture.

But any design for the future must address a question: to what end? There is a way of painting

success as a balance sheet: jobs, industry, GDP. This matters but cannot be the totality of our ambition as a society. An India in 2067 where children are still in a desperate, depressive rat-race for seats in 20 more ITIs, is not a country that is shining. Having swanky corporate offices where men and women slog overtime and acquire stress-related diseases is not progress.

What one must aspire for is fuller lives, with room for pleasure, for joy, for curiosity, and for dreams. There is, after all, a great distance between merely existing and a dignified, happy existence.



INDEPENDENCE DAY

To squander energies on accumulated baggage is to reduce our march into the future to a pitiful hobble.

Much of this is linked to the interviewee in that 1967 film put it, "People lived all sorts of things... but essentially they live for something they have an emotional commitment with, something they belong to." Too often this sentiment is reduced to jingoism. Far too readily we in the present have allowed nationalism free rein. The consequences are appearing across the globe, and they are ugly.

If tomorrow's Indians are to be spared this error, we must own our mistakes and offer a larger, more capacious vision of the world. It would be an irony if alongside the advent of AI and ever more astonishing technology, we also have burning communities.

Importantly, empowering the future comes with its inbuilt risks and tensions. New thought, for instance, might sit uneasily within the existing order. It can seem threatening even. Innovation too cannot always be incubated in approved spaces, conforming to *sarkari* rules and proprieties. Change is messy. Yet if we embrace and move with it, the process can be less grating.

We hold the tools for this already. Our Constitution possesses a dynamism and agility that allows it to remain relevant across generations. Our establishment and citizenry have both let it down on occasion. Yet, if we truly act in accordance with its spirit, the future too will feel reassured about vesting faith in this far-sighted national document. It can, in its own way, offer an anchor.

Ultimately, though, building an India for the young is about pursuing a worthy today, here and now. That wise fellow in the 1967 documentary saw in his present a certain fragility but looked to the future with hope.

In our time, the challenge is more forbidding: the present is thorny, but so is, increasingly, the future. We cannot be sure what the years will bring. But it is entirely within our powers to square and correct the missteps of our own time. Fashioning an India for the next generation, then, becomes a simpler, more practical affair: make the correct choices, fight the right battles, and stand up for what matters – today.

Pillai is the author of *Gods, Guns and Missionaries: The Making of the Modern Hindu Identity*

Two Divorces Later, I Still Believe In Love

Even if every breakup hurts like the first, and even if neighbourhood aunties treat a divorcee like she's from another planet, one love for life is not everyone's truth. Some have two, three or more

Mila Supinskaya



Comedian Jay Hickman famously opened one of his shows exclaiming: "I was happily married four times!" The audience laughed in astonishment, but I'd sign under every word. I loved having a husband and as much as I was eventually relieved to be divorced.

For many people, my two divorce certificates are "two too many". For them, the question of whether a second divorce is easier than the first, feels as distant as space travel. But if *Martian Chronicles* can exist, so can this remote exploration. Even if you are never going to experience anything of the sort. Unless you are in Ukraine. There, divorce rate was measured to be around 68% in 2020, and it's said to have increased in wartime. You can't surprise anyone with a separation if over half of all families end up splitting up.

Even a generation of Eastern European grandmothers carries a history of 2-3 marriages. Although back in the day, they sometimes had to tell curious neighbours that their husband had tragically passed away. A "devastated widow" used to get more sympathy than a runaway wife...until the awkward time the "dead" husband visited his hometown. If a generation sees their elders making-breaking-remaking family ties, they are also likely to embrace multiple love stories. Your friend is divorcing? That's only natural, they say.

But in other places, divorce is unheard of, even considered contagious. Some people suddenly stop answering your calls, as if the sole sound of your divorced voice could put their own marriage at risk. Until the very last court hearing, well-wishers hope for a miraculous patch-up, because "you know what" is the worst failure that can happen in anyone's life. Even if you don't share these beliefs, you eventually start doubting yourself.

Would you rather show up at a family court together with friendly banter? So much of it that the officer confuses you rather than lovesbirds who want to solemnise their union rather than end it? Or would you prefer to glance at your unwanted spouse from the farthest corner of the courtroom, with a mix of hostility and disregard, as if they were a lizard atop your dining table?

Consider all options carefully. The second will keep you from falling into a pit of regret, unlike the first where you will end up thinking, maybe this was indeed the person for me and I ruined it forever.

But let's now address the question of whether the



second divorce feels more comfortable than the first, directly. You've been there once, gone through the process, you have practice ignoring the judgmental nods of neighbourhood aunties.

When you already have one shiny "divorcee" tag, you will grab the second one without second thoughts, right? It's just a repeat act, no? Well, not really.

If you once let go of a loved one and deeply regretted it, you'll hold on to the next *Jaan* with the tight grip of a frightened baby languor clinging to its mother's

fur. You might forgive all the insane mood swings and hazardous levels of toxicity, just to not risk feeling that regret again. This is a great decision system if your second relationship is worth saving. But if not, it can trap you in the wrong place for years.

You still remember looking at your partner with blind admiration, as your brain turned into a soup of hormones on the third date. You two were sitting into a shared kebab platter, and everything that came out of their mouth touched the innermost corners of your heart. Their receding hairline seemed a sign of wisdom and maturity. Then, after 10 years of "love" thrashing you like a cat in a washing machine, the same person can't squeeze a drop of affection from your heart. That's why you put a shaky signature on the final document in a family court.

Of course, you stop believing in love. You accept your fate. You will never have feelings for anyone ever again. You start enjoying your single days. A cozy table for one, an easy sandwich of your choice, quiet times to reflect and dream. It's a beautiful phase.

And that's when a new love hits you like a bullet in the back! It strikes not a naive younger you, but someone who has learned that open communication and honesty are critical, who knows that the real miracle is effort and genuine care, which you're going to value and protect like a diamond solitaire. Letting yourself love again may seem difficult at first, but when the grand entry of a new love actually happens, you'll have all the experience needed to not mess it up this time... hopefully.

Fact is that one-love-for-life is not everyone's truth. Some have two or three. That's the experience your soul might need in this world or the lesson your ex learns through you. The most important union is that with yourself. Be kind and gentle to your own heart, even if life brought you yet another divorce petition.

Of Life And Love

STORIES OF THE WAY WE ARE

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred space

It is nonviolence only when we love those that hate us. I know how difficult it is to follow this grand law of love. But are not all great and good things difficult to do?

MK Gandhi

Sage Vasisht, Ram And A Cinematic Experience

John Hierl

Imagine you are at the movies with a friend but not enjoying the show as much as you had anticipated and want to leave. Your friend, however, wants their money's worth, and you end up staying. On the way home, you might regret having wasted your money. We may call such a situation the dilemma of staying or leaving. Different things we expect will bring us happiness, we become deluded in the long term because the results we gain are gone too soon. However, even a visit to the movies can serve as a metaphor for spiritual growth. In *Yog Vasisht*, Ram is instructed by Sage Vasisht in the science of Self-realisation. One of its main messages may be summed up as 'svapnavartam idam jagat' – the world is but a dream. It is easy to understand

the movie as a projected dream: after all, when you go home, you are no longer witnessing it. But what about yourself? Are you a dream? Sage Vasisht would say the movie projector is your ego, *jiva*, playing out its past karmas on the screen, which represents maya. The friend is your body-mind living out an illusion due to ego attachment.

Yog Vasisht teaches: That the body only exists because of the mind. It is because of the mind that a *jiva* takes birth. *Rag-desh*, you likes and dislikes, act as a compass to the ongoing authoring of your life-story in the form of experiences. In everyday choices, whichever the mind prefers is based on your personal narrative of past karma. In the movie hall metaphor, you are following the

mind because you don't want to have wasted your money. But what happens is that because of the mind, you don't enjoy the show – it has turned itself into an enemy. To gain *mukti*, Sage Vasisht says the mind must be relinquished.

How may a seeker on the way to liberation dissolve the mind? By becoming identified with the *Atman*. As a witness, it is always within you and wherever you are, because *Brahm* is everywhere. It is independent and remains unaffected by the mind-body duality and relative space-time.

As the *Yog Vasisht* teaches: "Know that the *chidakash*, space of consciousness, is more void than the other two: *chittakash*, space of the mind, and *akash*, ordinary physical space (III.17.10)." To understand this shloka, think of the cinema hall: it

appears in *akash*, and you are the aware ego as the movie-viewer – *chittakash*. Consciousness is the substratum for both. Sage Vasisht instructs Ram that it is void because consciousness is beyond space-time. We cannot ever come to understand *Brahm* through the mind.

Only *Brahm* exists. *Yog Vasisht* says that the view of our lives as "movie" is to be understood as that of *mithya*: neither real nor unreal. We might think that our lives are real, but all is only an illusory dream. Nothing different exists from consciousness. This world is only a dream. The main message of *Vasisht* to Ram is two simple words: "Wake up!" Next time you find yourself in a movie hall, ask yourself: what in life you want to truly identify with. The right choice will gain you *mukti*.

thehindubusinessline.

SATURDAY • AUGUST 15, 2026

Lending transparency

Disclosures on loan rates to benefit small borrowers

Interest rates on loans and advances on similar products tend to vary greatly across banks, NBFCs and other financial institutions. While part of the variation can be explained by factors such as the differences in sources of funds, risk-profile of the borrowers and the benchmarks used, many lenders misuse the absence of clear guidelines to charge usurious rates.



While banking is a competitive space, customer choice becomes effective only when information is freely available. To this end, the Reserve Bank of India has sought to create a harmonised set of standards for determining interest rates across lenders, including commercial banks, regional rural banks, cooperative banks, all-India financial institutions and NBFCs. A consultation paper on this issue is open for comments. Its wide scope is aimed at ensuring that small borrowers who are not serviced by commercial banks are not cheated. A major suggestion in the paper pertains to asking all regulated lenders to put an upper limit on the annual percentage rate (which includes interest rate, charges and fees) they will charge small borrowers who take loans below ₹50,000, and micro finance loans. RBI must also ask all lenders to display this upper limit prominently on all their banking portals and offices. A proposal stating that the total interest, charges and fees on short-term agricultural loans should not exceed the principal amount will protect small farmers.

The paper makes another welcome suggestion — setting out clear disclosures for calculating marginal cost-based lending rate and asking specified lenders to display the same at the beginning of each month on all platforms. RBI has proposed that MCLR should be the moving average of the costs of domestic deposits and borrowings in the previous three months. But the consultation paper seeks to exempt banks with deposits under ₹1,000 crore and all NBFCs from having to compute MCLR. Instead, they are being allowed to arrive at the MCLR based on their internal policy, requiring the methodology alone to be made public. This exemption goes against the intent to stop mispricing loans, and protecting small borrowers. Similarly, the guidelines provided for arriving at the spread above the benchmark rate charged by lenders could have been more elaborate.

The paper seems to veer towards micro-management. For instance, suggesting that interest rates should be charged every month is not necessary for all types of loans. The lender can determine this, based on the loan category, borrower's profile and preference. Similarly, lenders can be left to determine the interval at which they will reset the benchmark for floating rate loan. They may want to waive interest, in collaboration with vendors. A stipulation that the interest rate cannot be below the benchmark rate, impedes such discount schemes. A balance needs to be struck between transparency and freedom to take competitive business decisions.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Trump wants to keep the easy-money machine running
Japan's yen has slid back towards 160 to the dollar, despite last month's extraordinary US-Japanese intervention. Traders are betting that its role as a cheap funding pipeline for global finance will continue. Earlier this month the Trump administration stepped in to help Tokyo stabilise its currency. "Japan's been very good to us, with the exception, of course, of Pearl Harbor," Donald Trump explained. More help is likely to be on its way. But this is less a rescue of the yen than an attempt by Scott Bessent, the US treasury secretary, to preserve a cash spigot that benefits the US. Japan's ultra-cheap money has become a global funding utility: bankers borrow yen, sell them for dollars and buy higher-returning US assets, notably tech shares. (LONDON, AUGUST 12)

GLOBAL TIMES

Missile tests: China needs no one's permission

Yet another political farce of "a thief crying 'stop thief'" has taken the stage. On Tuesday local time, the US rallied 40 countries to concoct a so-called joint statement on "notifications of ballistic missile launches" targeting China as well as a separate statement. Pointing directly at China's lawful ballistic missile test conducted over the open waters of the Pacific Ocean last month, the statement claimed that China's actions were "incompatible with the responsibilities" and "undermined global stability and security." Meanwhile, in stark contrast, the document painted the US — the country with the highest military spending and the most wars waged in the world — as a "positive role model". (BEIJING, AUGUST 12)

Digital governance is transformative

FINE LINE. Technology works when it empowers citizens with information and finances, without acting as surveillance tools

AMITABH RANJAN
SARVJEET KAUR CHATRATH

Since long, India tried the old-school fixes to bring about transparency and curb corruption: vigilance committees, laws, audits, RTI filings. All useful, nonetheless slow. All still plagued with loopholes which let clerks sit on files and middle-persons siphon-off subsidies. Paper trails vanish, and human systems leak despite the best intentions.

One innovative concept, GeM (Government e-Marketplace), has revolutionised the huge government procurement machinery, historically riddled with malpractices. It has digitised the entire lifecycle — vendor registration, bidding, contract award, payments, performance tracking — and made every step auditable. The by-product is MSMEs, start-ups and women-led businesses, who never had the wherewithal to play the dirty game, benefitting hugely. And it turns out that transparency is a market-access tool also, and not just an anti-corruption one.

The tax system has also been revolutionised. A fragmented, inspector-driven, paper-heavy regime has been replaced by GSTN with digital invoicing and data-driven compliances. Add to that PM Gati Shakti's GIS-based master plan, where roads, railways, ports and transmission lines finally show up on one map instead of in twelve ministries' separate spreadsheets transparency between departments that used to barely talk to each other.

A decade back, when the Prime Minister announced from the Red Fort that one's mobile would be one's bank, very few might have believed it at that time. And witness the mighty UPI now. People are actually using mobiles as their banks. The volume has crossed 23 billion transactions and ₹29 trillion per month. It has quietly become one of the most transparent instruments simply by making transactions traceable; pulling cash out of the shadows. And this is the by-product of convenience.

The JAM trinity has almost solved a teething problem — the ghost beneficiary. Duplicate pension claims, fake ration cards, and subsidies siphoned off before they even reached the intended beneficiary. Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) now puts money straight into a beneficiary's account; no middle-person required. The savings



BIG EFFORT. No democracy apart from India has built digital public infra at such a scale

resulting from weeding out duplicate and fake beneficiaries have been estimated at ₹5 lakh crores in the last decade. It is the hard cash that used to vanish earlier into thin air.

DATA AS A PUBLIC GOOD

No democracy apart from India has attempted to build digital public infrastructure (DPI) at such a scale, so rapidly and for so huge a population. Maturity, however, does not come with scale. A peep outward would be in order.

South Korea, a perennial UN-ranker in digital government, has pushed AI and predictive analytics deep into service delivery, coupled with regular investment in cyber resilience and citizen engagement.

The very crux of digital governance is to ensure, humans no longer override the system quietly. Nothing works, however, if the algorithms making these calls are black boxes

With the platform like X-Road, Estonia, a small East European nation, has been able to bridge the trust gap between government and citizens. Citizens can see when and which agency accessed their data on X-Road in addition to the platform digitising services, generating a two-way transparency; government knows the citizens, citizens monitor the government. Estonians retain trust in the system, thanks to this reciprocity, and not due to the tech itself.

For Singapore, digital governance is a full-blown infrastructure, not an IT upgrade only. It is foundational, with huge investment in cybersecurity from day one and institutional coordination tied together.

The interoperability between systems, real algorithmic accountability, independent audits and grievance redressal that does not end in a call centre queue, are the challenges to be countered head-on; the count of digital rails alone is not enough. A silver lining is that the government is prioritising putting data in public domain, be it on agriculture, health, education, finance, or demographics. No more waiting

endlessly to find out what is actually going on after filing the request; the dataset is already here. Yet, enhancing trust in the system is not a cakewalk; so much remains to be done.

Every one of these systems runs on personal data — loads of it. And this is a double-edged sword. Personal data in irresponsible hands turns into a surveillance system.

Services delivered at speed is what people crave for, but they also want corruption eliminated speedily, alongside freedom and real privacy from the state's prying eyes. Ensured by independent regulatory supervision, the PDPP (Digital Personal Data Protection) framework is not a cosmetic initiative. It is the line between a state that is merely better at watching and the one that is accountable. Get this wrong, and transparency starts being something citizens fear instead of something they trust.

THE AGE OF OMNIPOTENT AI

The Prime Minister has called AI 'All Inclusive', which now seems to be the one-stop solution for all ills, capable of detecting fraudulent welfare claims in real time, flagging anomalies in procurement before they become scandals and forecasting where corruption is likely to surface next. In a country where land disputes choke the judicial ecosystem, blockchain can make land records genuinely tamper-proof. Satellite imagery now verifies whether a public project is still stuck in file or has seen the light of the day.

The very crux of digital governance is to ensure, humans no longer override the system quietly. Nothing works, however, if the algorithms making these calls are black boxes — becoming the new opaque discretion; unaccountable and unexplainable. The recent incident of Claude getting unauthorised access to systems of three organisations during internal cybersecurity testing, unfolds a more capricious AI posing serious threat dimensions.

The 20th century's most transformative governance innovation was the Right to Information. The defining governance idea of the 21st century is DPI, a framework designed so intelligently that citizens need not ask for information because transparency is woven into the system itself.

Technology got India this far. But only institutional discipline will ensure the dream of Viksit Bharat becomes a reality.

Ranjan is Registrar, Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi, and Chatrath is Management Lead at the Canberra Business School. Views are personal

What FCRA overhaul means for NGO sector

Designated Authority model brings order where there was ambiguity, but concentrates enormous power in a single body

Archana Tewary
Aishwarya Maria Manjorao

For over a decade, India's Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (FCRA) has been the gatekeeper for foreign funding flowing into the country's vast non-profit sector, governing roughly 16,000 registered associations and annual inflows of approximately ₹22,000 crore. Already tightened in 2016, 2018, and 2020, the regime now faces its most sweeping transformation yet: the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026, introduced in Lok Sabha on March 19, 2026, and the accompanying Amendment Rules, 2026, notified on June 22, 2026, together redraw the regulatory map for every organisation that receives (or hopes to receive) foreign contributions.

The headline change is bold: the Bill scraps Section 15, a bare-bones provision that left asset management largely to improvisation, and replaces it with an entire new Chapter IIIA (Sections 16A through 16L). The government itself acknowledges that the old framework's gaps led to "administrative uncertainty and scope for misuse." Enter the "Designated Authority," a government-notified body that takes custody of foreign contributions and assets whenever a registration is cancelled, surrendered, or lapses. Assets vest provisionally at first,

giving the organisation a window to secure a fresh certificate; fail to do so, and the vesting becomes permanent, with assets transferable to government agencies or sold off into the Consolidated Fund of India. One carve-out: places of worship must have their religious character preserved.

Under the old regime, an expired registration existed in a legal twilight, neither alive nor formally dead. A new Section 14B ends this ambiguity by spelling out three triggers for "cessation": failure to apply for renewal, refusal of renewal, or non-renewal before expiry. Once cessation kicks in, the Designated Authority steps in. Section 12 now also ties prior permission to a specific purpose or amount, with hard timelines for utilisation.

'REASONABLE ACTIVITY'

The current Section 35 carries imprisonment of up to five years, often criticised as disproportionate for procedural failures. The Bill brings this down to one year but widens the net by criminalising the utilisation of foreign contributions in contravention, not just their acceptance. The broader concept of "key functionary" replaces the narrower "director, manager, secretary, or other officer," meaning anyone with control over an entity's affairs can be personally liable. And no FCRA investigation can now be launched without the Central Government's prior



NEW NGO. The entry gate is narrower

approval. Gone are the days of broad, open-ended registrations. Every association must now lock in a specific purpose and geographical area, selecting from a detailed Schedule of approved activities spanning religious, cultural, economic, educational, and social categories. Already registered? You have one year to declare your purposes and operating geographies, or risk losing your registration. Associations with foreign national key functionaries are now presumptively ineligible, a significant restriction for internationally networked organisations. A "reasonable activity" test requires utilisation of at least ₹10 lakh in the preceding two financial years, a benchmark that could catch out smaller organisations. The 75 per cent utilisation hurdle, backed by mandatory field inquiries before each subsequent instalment, turns disbursement into a performance audit.

Even before these amendments, the

FCRA compliance journey was no walk in the park. Registration refusals and renewal rejections have pushed associations into High Court litigation as recently as 2026, with the Bombay High Court quashing an MHA refusal for lack of procedural fairness.

The 2026 reforms pile further obligations onto this already exacting framework. For 16,000 existing registrants, the one-year declaration window could force genuine operational restructuring. The ₹10 lakh floor will separate active players from paper entities but may also inadvertently catch grassroots organisations on modest budgets.

For newcomers, the entry gate is narrower: a prescribed menu of purposes, the presumptive bar on foreign-national key functionaries, and a cessation mechanism where a missed renewal deadline triggers the Designated Authority to take provisional charge of all assets. The Designated Authority model brings order where there was ambiguity, but concentrates enormous discretionary power in a single body. The lower penalty ceiling is welcome, but the investigation-approval requirement is a double-edged sword: a shield against harassment for some, a potential lever for selective enforcement for others.

The 2026 amendments leave no room for complacency.

The writers are with JSA Advocates & Solicitors

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

Catalysing AI

With reference to 'US' AI infrastructure bet and lessons for India' (August 14), the AI-led American growth story is inspirational and worth emulating. India has been attracting reasonably good global investments in AI, especially in the last one year. But there is an enormous untapped potential. In order to attract massive global investments in AI infrastructure, the availability of

dedicated hyper-scale clean power with near zero downtime and enough water for cooling systems is an imperative. Further, regulatory certainty around data transfers, copyright and AI governance should be assured for the big tech companies to commit investments, apart from facilitating green channels for import of high performance compute infrastructure. **Kosaraju Chandramouli** Hyderabad

Hydrocarbon exploration

This refers to 'Exploring options' (August 14). Our indifferent hydrocarbon record is shaped by limited exploration, inadequate technology and tough economics of deep-water drilling. Today 3D seismic imaging, AI analyses, advanced drilling and better reservoir modelling can probe geological structures far accurately than earlier. While technology can improve the probability of discovery and reduce exploration risk, commercial viability

ultimately depends on reservoir size, quality, depth and development costs. **R Narayanan** Navi Mumbai

Rural credit access

With reference to 'Rural credit needs to be reimagined' (August 14), rural households today depend on diverse livelihoods. Yet credit systems often remain designed around conventional agricultural cycles. Banks should develop flexible

products based on household cash flows rather than treating every borrower as a cultivator. Small loans, working-capital facilities and emergency credit should be available with simple documentation and reasonable repayment schedules. Better use of digital records can improve credit assessment while reducing dependence on informal lenders. Financial literacy and local advisory services are also important. **Pon. Arun Kumar** Trichur, TN

Washout of parliamentary session undermines democracy

THE founding fathers of our Republic, reposed faith in the UK's Westminster system, on whose pattern much of our governance apparatus had been designed. In this system, the executive is part of and responsible to the legislature. This is also called the parliamentary form of government because, in theory, parliament is supreme: the government must enjoy its confidence to be in office. In practice, however, our political masters have reduced parliament to a theatre, where (naturally) theatrics eclipse meaningful dialogue. Today, it is mostly in the news for shouting and sloganeering rather than any oratory debates. The words that occur frequently in news reports about proceedings of session are 'din', 'pandemonium', 'shouting', and

'commotion'. The latest monsoon session has no exception. The presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah was minimal. Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla announced on Thursday, "Adjourned sine die," thus ending a tempestuous session marked by shouting, sloganeering, ruckus, and allegations and counter-allegations. There was little debate on any important subject, except on the new law on paper leaks. Such is the intensity and toxicity of political rivalry in the political arena that Opposition leaders didn't even attend the customary end-of-session tea meeting hosted by the Speaker.

On his part, Birla did not make the usual valedictory address, mentioning the performance and pro-

ductivity during the session. The situation in Rajya Sabha was hardly any better. Unsurprisingly, pieces of legislation of momentous importance were passed within minutes, without much debate. The Registration of Births & Deaths (Amendment) Bill, 2026, was cleared in just four minutes, the Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises Development (Amendment) Bill and the Taxation & Other Laws (Amendment) Bill in three minutes, the Tribunals Reforms Bill in 12 minutes, and the Mines & Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill in five minutes. These and the other Bills that were passed will have a humongous impact on people's lives, yet they were rushed through. While the government is largely responsible for parliamentary dys-

function, the Opposition will also have to share some blame. Opposition leaders were persistent in their demand for Shah's statement on the crackdown on protesting students in the Capital on July 20. When Shah agreed to participate in a debate on the subject, the Opposition upped the ante, now asking for his resignation. Acrimony between the treasury and Opposition benches has reached its zenith; now they shout at each other not just in the House but also outside the Parliament building, turning democratic disagreement into an increasingly bitter spectacle. Such conduct undermines the dignity of Parliament and weakens public faith in democratic institutions. This is neither acceptable nor sustainable. The government, being accountable

to Parliament, must demonstrate greater tolerance towards criticism and ensure adequate opportunities for debate. At the same time, the Opposition must recognise that disruption cannot become a substitute for scrutiny and decisions for reasoned debate. Both sides have a constitutional responsibility to preserve parliamentary decorum and keep the larger public interest above partisan calculations, the government's responsibility being greater than that of the Opposition. If this culture of confrontation continues, Parliament risks losing its relevance as the principal arena of democratic deliberations. What India needs is not louder voices, but stronger arguments, genuine dialogue, and a renewed commitment to parliamentary democracy.

LETTERS

1-Day is a responsibility

THE 1857 rebellion against British East India Company, also known as Sepoy mutiny and India's first war of independence mark a significant milestone in the struggle for freedom. It was just the kind of boost to up the ante. As the country gears up for its 80th Independence Day on Saturday, every citizen should draw inspiration from what the freedom fighters did and how they achieved their goals with unflinching dedication and fierce determination. Independence Day is a duty, a responsibility to convert India into a country that others look up to.

Dr Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

Strive for peace and universal brotherhood

THE 1857 Independence Day also marks 150 years of our national song "Vande Mataram." Our constitution has given us fundamental rights and as proud Indians, we should protect and uphold our fundamental rights. "Freedom is my birthright and I shall have it," thundered Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Freedom and responsibility always go hand in hand. Freedom without responsibility leads to chaos and confusion. Freedom means living without any fear and feeling secure in our country. One should be free from hatred, vices and prejudices. Freedom as a right comes with great responsibility. This Independence Day, let us spread the message of love, harmony, fraternity and universal brotherhood.

Parimala G Tadasi, Hyderabad-50

Indian youth should take the lead

DESPITE achieving sustainable development in the last 79 years, hunger, health problems and illiteracy continue to be India's curse. According to global poverty studies, 44 Indians are being lifted out of poverty every minute, while poverty has come down from 56 per cent to 28 per cent. According to the World Bank, those who do not have the minimum financial resources, education, dignity, health security, safe drinking water, environmental cleanliness, and job opportunities are being identified as poor. Corruption is rampant. Human values are becoming orphaned. Even paper leaks are causing imputation among the youth. Bribery is unleashing its venomous rage. Development is progressing at a snail's pace. Poverty should be understood as a multifaceted symptom that afflicts society. The main causes of poverty include overpopulation, declining agricultural production, under-utilisation of resources, rising prices, unemployment, lack of skills among youth, exploitation of labour, caste-regional conflicts, and demographic politics. Politics has become corrupt, human relations are chattering money and the goddess of justice is blindfolded, while public money is flowing into the pockets of the corrupt. A large youth population is unique to India. They should grow up to be responsible, skilled, educated and virtuous in the service of the nation. On this 80th Independence Day let us all feel the wheels of the chariot of progress.

Prof Burra Madhusudhan Reddy, Karimnagar

Honour the national flag, respect the tricolour

IT is deeply distressing to see our national tricolour lying discarded on streets after Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations. Equally disappointing is the sight of people failing to show due respect while the national anthem is being played. These national symbols represent the sacrifices, courage, and unwavering spirit of countless freedom fighters, who laid down their lives for our country's independence. Respecting the tricolour and the national anthem is not merely a ceremonial obligation—it is an expression of gratitude for the freedom we enjoy today. As responsible citizens, we must ensure that these symbols of our nation are always treated with the dignity and reverence they deserve.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

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RAISE YOUR VOICE

Do you have any civic issues? Are any roads in your locality damaged? Do you have any complaints against govt departments? Are any private companies taking you for a ride regarding sales and service? The Hans India will publish your complaints, concerns and grievances in these columns on every Wednesday. Mail the details along with relevant photographs if any, to hanspeoplesvoice@gmail.com. -Editor

BENGALURU ONLINE

BJP leaders attack Min over flag-hoisting exemption request

BENGALURU: Minister Zameer Ahmed Khan's request for exemption from the Vijayanagara district in-chARGE role and the Independence Day flag-hoisting responsibility has triggered strong criticism from BJP leaders. The letter he wrote to Chief Minister D K Shivakumar seeking the exemption has become a major point of political controversy. Opposition leaders have described the statement that there is no time for the flag-hoisting ceremony on Independence Day as an act of treason and asked whether any further proof is required. On 14 August in Bengaluru, BJP leaders brought up the matter in the House and directed their criticism at the government. Opposition leader R Ashoka stated that by claiming lack of time for the flag-hoisting on Independence Day, Zameer Ahmed has committed treason and questioned whether additional evidence is needed.

In a post on X, R Ashoka wrote that the true character of the Karnataka Congress government has again been revealed openly. He noted that district in-charge Minister Zameer Ahmed Khan has officially written to the Chief Minister saying he has no time to hoist the national flag on the sacred Independence Day on 15 August in Vijayanagara district and therefore seeks exemption.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Parliament turned into a meme, while accountability took a back seat

THEY CAME TO WIN GEN Z, BUT LOST PARLIAMENT INSTEAD



FOR the past month, two words, accountability and Gen Z, have become the buzzwords for all political parties. Each one of them is under the mistaken impression that their acts and theatrics will make Gen Z their new vote bank. In the race for the vote bank, the country has lost about Rs 200 crore of public money and a full session of the monsoon session of Parliament. What we saw was turning Parliament into a meme and a shameful act by the Congress party leaders, who are in their sixties, holding soft toys, shouting slogans like "56-inch ka chota bander, Jaldi aao Sadan ke Andar." (The little monkey of 56 inches, come inside the House soon).

It was a lawmakers' drama all through. Though disruption in Parliament is normal, it never became a habit and was never blocked for the entire session, not even during the Bofors scam. The opposition used to charge the government with corruption and furnished documents demanding a reply and resignation in one voice. But in the present case, it is insults and innuendos.

What started as a demand for accountability and education reforms ended with the team's opposition hitting rock bottom and reforms taking a back seat. It was really shocking to see how the Congress spokesperson not only defended such low political discourse, but also remarked, "The country has

a non-biological PM." Such language is highly condemnable.

In the last 12 years, we have seen how the language used by parliamentarians and legislators has hit a new low both in the state assemblies and in Parliament. In Andhra Pradesh during 2019-2024, all kinds of innuendoes were used, and in the Telangana Assembly between 2014 and 2023, and even now, irrespective of party, the language continues to be unsavoury.

It pains me to see the parliamentarians, who are elected representatives of the people who should speak and act on their behalf, have forgotten their basic responsibility and have given up accountability. The opposition, which had made so much noise leading to washout of monsoon session it appears were more interested in blocking some important bills like FRCA, delimitation bill, women's reservation bill etc as it had realised that following the victory of BJP in West Bengal and the developments that followed like "backstabbing" of DMK by Congress party and cracks in Shiv Sena Udhav Thackeray group as well as softening of stand by Sharad Pawar's party, the government would be able to push through all the bills. This real intent was accepted by the Congress party after Parliament adjourned sine die when the opposition parties said they had successfully stalled these bills.

NET reforms were just a cover fire, while the real game plan was to stall these bills, and if the present mood is any indication, the opposition would continue with the same strategy during the



Parliament is meant for debate, scrutiny and accountability, not political theatre. Yet in the race to woo Gen Z, our lawmakers turned a serious issue into slogans, protests, and theatrics, wasting public money and precious legislative time. Young India does not need political drama. It deserves responsible leaders who work for people

winter session as well. The Constitution of India has given us Parliament to discuss, debate, and frame new laws and policies, not to turn Parliament into a joke. There was no dearth of scams in the past, from the Dana chori (fodder scam) of RJG chief Laloo Prasad Yadav, the 2 G scam, and coal scam during the previous regimes, but never was this kind of disruption and drama seen.

The government too has been slow in its reaction in reaching out to agitating students at Jantar Mantar and started its back-channel efforts in Parliament towards the end of the session but failed to achieve the desired results as the opposition, led by LoP Rahul Gandhi, said they want one-liner reply on who ordered opening of fire during the rally that turned violent at Jantar Mantar on July 20 and said that they do not want to hear the speech of Home Minister.

I have never seen Parliament functioning with one-

liners. They were reluctant to put the government on the mat through discussion because they knew they would be facing an embarrassing situation. There was police brutality in Kerala and the students in Jharkhand are on protest following the leak of the JSPSC question paper. The state government used force and registered cases against students under Section 108 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita, which pertains to attempted murder. The opposition parties that made so much noise over the Jantar Mantar rally have been silent on this issue. Neither Rahul Gandhi nor other leaders have condemned it. Congress party says one cannot compare the Jharkhand issue with Jantar Mantar, as the police there were restrained and no pellet guns were used. They were only lathi-charged, the party claimed. It further said that 98 per cent of the students' demands have been accepted.

But when a similar explanation was given by the Union Government regarding the Jantar Mantar incident, the opposition said the home minister should answer, and the PM must stand. While the students demanded a CBI probe, the Congress alleged that it was the BJP that demanded a CBI probe. The grand old party also says that it was the BJP that planted anti-social elements at the Jantar Mantar rally.

To top all the fiasco, the LoP on Thursday enacted a stage show during which he tried to explain India's foreign policy by hugging Sandip Deekshit, son of former Delhi chief minister Sheila Dixit, who made a sexist remark against the Italian prime Minister Meloni. I don't understand what was wrong with the PM giving a packet of Indian made chocolates to the Italian PM, who is of his daughter's age. Italy is famous for chocolates, and perhaps Modi wanted to tell the people of Italy that we are no less in manufacturing melodies. As Rahul hugged Deekshit, he joked back, asking the LoP if he was hugging him while imagining he was Meloni. Gandhi replied that he had not "reached that stage yet." It may draw laughter and claps from the Congress cheerleaders, but such jokes are in bad taste and not in tune with Indian culture. If the opposition really feels that the foreign policy of India is faulty, why not debate in the Parliament, corner the government, tear it to pieces, and suggest how it should be. MPs are elected to run the country in a proper manner, not to settle personal scores or give vent to

their frustrations. The fundamental purpose of having a Parliament and Assemblies is to ensure that government is exercised with the consent, scrutiny, and participation of the people through their elected representatives. Their role is not street politics. Legislate and bring policies and laws after discussion. That is the primary job of law-making bodies like Parliament or Assembly.

The government is responsible to Parliament, and Ministers must answer questions from MPs, explain the reasons behind the decisions, and defend their policies. That is where the question hour, the zero hour, and short discussions play a vital role. But of late, all these are being thrown to the winds, and theatrics, protests outside the Parliament in the name of freedom of speech, and the right to protest are taking place.

It is time the Parliament brings in a bill saying that no salary or pension would be paid to the MPs if they disrupt the proceedings and stall the Parliament from functioning. The MPs need to be accountable to the people and have no right to waste taxpayers' money. But the political parties remember people only on the eve of elections. Rest of the time, they work to push their political agenda. This situation needs to change. It is time to give up the slogan of Gen Z first and foremost because it is an American word and the pronunciation itself is wrong. If they learn to be with the people and work for the people, the young voters will stand by them. Hope the political parties are listening.

(The author is former Chief Editor of The Hans India)

Eighty years of Independence, yet women are chained and smirked

Dr HYMA MOORTY

WITH the dawn of August, it seems like the air itself has turned ecstatic and jubilant. Commemorating the 80th Independence Day, one is witnessing waves of national pride sweeping all over the country, including children waving the national flag with vigorous enthusiasm. Forgotten patriotic songs reverberate across localities in every city, district and village. We remember the great sacrifices of martyrs who laid down their lives during the freedom struggle for our bright tomorrow.

We proudly speak of the progress and development achieved in these 80 years. A lot should have changed in these eight decades. Long enough for a nation to transform itself. Yet what has not changed even is the treatment of women, who constitute 50 per cent of our population. Even in free India, they are abused, insulted, and manhandled in private and in public. They are still treated as second-class citizens. Political independence freed a nation from colonial rule, but it did not automatically dismantle deep-seated social mindsets. Abuse against women continues because traditional power structures, discriminatory customs and economic inequalities take longer to change than do laws on paper.

We forget that the country's progress will remain incomplete without the strength and support of its women, who are still chained by male chauvinism and by the shameless smirks of the society.

Too often in the society that we are living in, women are taken for granted. In public they comment on her clothes, physique and age and if she protests, the rebuke will be "beheni itna serious mat lo." When an audience shouts something vulgar at a woman, the politician still stands there as a mute spectator. In that silence is their answer-It's okay. We won't lose votes by defending her.

When the leader smirks after a woman is 'abused', the message to the whole crowd is, 'do it again, it involves no cost'.

At home, it is a mere 'adjust kar lo'. Even in 2026, that line remains actively in use. The worst part is that even women sometimes stay quiet because of the fear of "what will people say".

Abuse won't stop till there is a cost. Social cost, political cost, legal cost. Right now, the

cost is only paid by women. We can't change every politician's smirk. But we can refuse to laugh with them. And we can raise boys who do say "stop". More qualified, more efficient, more talented but that smirk is all over.

As for her, she is supposed to "ghar sambhalo phir". It breaks one, doesn't it? Because you know your worth. The world knows it too. But they still look down. It is not about reforms or reservations but the biased mindset. Family atmosphere needs overhauling. Families often raise boys and girls driven by the thought that men hold more power and deserve control. Many people treat verbal, emotional or physical ill-treatment as a normal part of family life rather than a crime. Reservation can get a seat. Reform can make a law. But no law can stop a man from smirking when a woman is abused in public. No quota can stop a father from say-

ing, "beta shaadi ke baad job dekhna". No bills can stop uncles at a function asking, "kab tak padhegi, umar nikal jayegi". The victim—the woman fears the social stigma of separation. They often stay in abusive situations because they lack strong protective shelters or family backing.

The change must start where we all start, at home. Boys watch their fathers—if dad interrupts mom, son learns to interrupt women. If dad says 'stop' when someone abuses a woman, son learns that too. When mothers teach sons 'beta her degree is bigger than yours, please call for her, not 'adjust karlo'. Shame the smirk. Right now, people laugh with the politician. What if the audience goes silent? What if the audience simply walked out? Learn to call talent by name not gender. "She is a good doctor" not "a good lady doctor".

The position of women has not changed in 5000 years. Draupadi's dignity was reduced to a spectacle; the powerful were silent; Dharma, was debated, but no one stood up. Dignity even today is made a spectacle. Women are blamed. Power is used to humiliate and assassinate her character in the form of videos and trolling.

Are we still waiting for Krishna to appear, while we ourselves become the silent sabha. Weapons have changed and so have the stage and the language. But the insult is the same; it eventually sends across a message, "You don't matter".

The Statesman

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Question of Justice

The end of Gautam Adani's criminal prosecution in the United States is a legal victory for the Indian billionaire, but it is not quite the exoneration that the headlines might suggest. Nor is it merely another episode in the long political argument over Adani. The more consequential issue is what the dismissal says about the exercise of prosecutorial power in a case that had acquired unusual political and financial significance.

The charges actually brought against Adani, his nephew Sagor Adani and former Adani Green Energy chief executive Vneet Jaan were securities and wire-fraud offences. The separate count alleging conspiracy to violate the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the US anti-bribery law, did not charge the three men. Neither did the obstruction-of-justice count. Those counts concern other defendants and remain to be dealt with. That distinction matters because the case was widely understood in India as an American bribery prosecution of Adani himself. The underlying allegations may have centred on an alleged bribery scheme, but the criminal counts on which Adani actually would have stood trial - had there been a trial - concerned alleged deception of investors and financial institutions. The dismissal therefore should not be presented as a court finding that the bribery allegations were disproved.

Nor was there a trial in which evidence was tested and witnesses examined. The charges against Adani have been dismissed with prejudice, meaning they cannot simply be revived, but the judge has explicitly distinguished prosecutorial discretion from a judicial determination of the merits.

More troubling is the manner in which the prosecution was abandoned. Judge Nicholas Garofali approved the Justice Department's request but sharply criticised the process, describing it as highly unusual and questioning why a senior department official appeared to have negotiated the dismissal with Adani's lawyers without meaningful consultation with the prosecutors and investigators who had pursued the case.

That criticism should concern anyone who believes that the strength of the rule of law lies not merely in the eventual verdict but in the consistency of the process. The judge also examined whether Adani's pledge to invest \$10 billion in the United States had influenced the decision. He concluded that it had not, but recognised that the circumstances could affect public perceptions of equal justice. For India, the political consequences are likely to be sharper than the immediate legal ones. Adani's critics will see the episode as evidence of the extraordinary proximity between wealth, political power and access to institutions. His defenders will point to a case that ended without a trial or conviction and argue that continuing to treat him as guilty after the dismissal itself undermines due process. Both sides should resist that temptation. The appropriate conclusion is narrower and more uncomfortable: Adani has escaped criminal prosecution in the United States, but the dismissal establishes neither his guilt nor his innocence on the underlying allegations. What remains unresolved is not merely a question about one businessman, but whether powerful institutions can exercise prosecutorial discretion in a manner that commands public confidence.

Space links

The next battle in mobile telecommunications may not be fought over more cell towers. It may be fought above them. That possibility has acquired new urgency after SpaceX's first public earnings call that it intends to turn Starlink Mobile into a fuller mobile service capable of competing directly for customers of America's established wireless companies. The company plans a new generation of satellites and has acquired substantial spectrum for the purpose. What is being presented as an American telecom battle could, however, become a much larger contest over who controls the next layer of global connectivity.

The technology is not unique to SpaceX. AST SpaceMobile is building satellites designed to connect ordinary smartphones directly to space, and three more of its BlueBird satellites were launched on August 5. It has partnerships with dozens of mobile operators across several continents. Amazon Leo has separately proposed a constellation of as many as 5,105 satellites for direct-to-device voice, messaging and data, with deployment planned from 2028. Lynk Global is already testing direct-to-device services with mobile operators in countries including the Philippines and New Caledonia.

The significance is that satellite connectivity is moving from being a specialist service for remote areas towards becoming an additional layer of the ordinary mobile network. A country no longer needs to depend entirely on terrestrial infrastructure to connect people in mountains, deserts, oceans or disaster zones. But it also means that communications infrastructure increasingly lies beyond the physical territory of the countries whose citizens use it. India shows why this matters. It is not merely a potential market for foreign satellite operators. Indian companies are developing competing satellite capabilities, while Vodafone Idea has partnered with AST SpaceMobile for direct-to-device connectivity.

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has been working on the framework for authorising satellite communication networks and assigning spectrum; its 2026 consultations have involved Starlink, OneWeb, Jio, Airtel, Vodafone Idea, AST SpaceMobile and others. Nor is this a regulatory vacuum. The International Telecommunication Union's Radio Regulations provide the international framework for the use of radio-frequency spectrum and satellite orbits. But the ITU does not hand a company permission to provide mobile service in India. National authorities remain crucial: in India, the Department of Telecommunications operates under the Telecommunications Act, 2023, while TRAI advises on spectrum and regulatory frameworks. That distinction will become increasingly important as satellites cross borders while licences, spectrum rights, security requirements and national laws do not.

The question, then, is bigger than whether Starlink can take customers from Airtel, Verizon or T-Mobile. It is whether nations will allow a handful of global technology companies to become the owners of an increasingly indispensable layer of communications infrastructure - or insist that space-based connectivity remain integrated with national telecom systems and public-interest safeguards. The terrestrial mobile revolution gave countries control over networks built on their soil. The satellite revolution could force them to negotiate what that control means when the network is in the sky.

The soul of democracy

Philosophers from Aristotle to Rousseau warned that democracy falters when procedure overshadows principle, when the mechanics of voting are preserved but the spirit of fairness is lost. The Weimar Republic collapsed not because its constitution was flawed but because its spirit was abandoned. Conversely, post-war Japan and Germany demonstrated that democratic culture could be cultivated even in societies with no prior tradition of it

What defines a great democracy is not the act of voting alone but the integrity of the institutions that safeguard the vote. Ballots matter only when supported by impartial systems, genuine accountability, and the confidence of citizens that their choice will be respected. Democracies flourish when institutions remain strong, and they falter when those institutions are weakened or silenced.

Philosophers from Plato to Rousseau reminded us that democracy is not merely a mechanical exercise but a moral covenant, sustained only when fairness and trust are preserved. Dr B.R. Ambedkar, speaking in the Constituent Assembly on 26 November 1949, gave this covenant its most urgent expression. He warned against three dangers: the use of extra-constitutional methods, the tendency toward hero worship, and the neglect of social democracy. These warnings remain as relevant today as they were at the birth of the Republic.

India's journey illustrates this paradox. At independence, the merger of princely states and the crafting of a Constitution promised equality and justice. These beginnings were delicate, yet they carried the vision of building a nation where institutions would safeguard liberty. The early decades were marked by optimism, the belief that a young democracy could mature into greatness if its institutions remained impartial and its citizens engaged.

But democracy is never static; it waxes and wanes depending on whether institutions and citizens rise to the challenge. Over the decades, moments of stress have tested these foundations: the suspension of liberties during the Emergency, the debates around Article 370, the shifting tides of electoral majorities, and the continuing struggle to balance diversity with uniformity in questions such as the Uniform Civil Code.

The electoral process remains the most visible test. Ideally, winning or losing depends on the majority vote cast without fear, prejudice, or favour. But when the system is subverted or manipulated, elections risk



becoming hollow exercises, their outcomes anticipated even before the first ballot is cast. In such circumstances, victory risks losing its meaning, governance acquired without the full trust of the people.

Philosophers from Aristotle to Rousseau warned that democracy falters when procedure overshadows principle, when the mechanics of voting are preserved but the spirit of fairness is lost. The Weimar Republic collapsed not because its constitution was flawed but because its spirit was abandoned. Conversely, post-war Japan and Germany demonstrated that democratic culture could be cultivated even in societies with no prior tradition of it, provided institutions were robust and civic education was sustained.

Equally important is the disposition of the voter. A democracy is only as strong as the maturity of its citizens. Without civic education, choices are often shaped by short-term thinking. Promises of relief or populist incentives can create dependency, reducing accountability. When citizens settle for temporary comfort rather than demanding structural reform, democracy weakens. The ballot risks becoming a transaction rather than a mandate for governance.

John Stuart Mill emphasised that democracy requires informed participation, not mere numbers; literacy alone is insufficient unless it is accompanied by values of tolerance, accountability, and respect for institutions. Ambedkar's reminder that "however good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it happen to be a bad lot" captures this truth with prophetic force. Yet the causes of fragility lie not only in institutions but also in society. Regional parties often remain confined to local aspirations, unable to rise to a national vision. Coalition politics can enrich diversity, but it can also fragment coherence. When regionalism dominates, the larger democratic project risks being reduced to bargaining for immediate gains rather than building a shared future.

Federalism is not merely an administrative convenience; it is a democratic imperative in a plural society. When regional aspirations are suppressed rather than negotiated, the democratic fabric frays. When they are accommodated through dialogue and constitutional mechanisms, democracy is strengthened. Psychological influences further

complicate the picture. Fear, prejudice, and herd mentality often override rational choice. Voters can be swayed by emotional appeals, identity politics, or promises of instant relief. This weakens democracy because decisions are made under influence rather than informed judgment.

In societies where civic education and awareness campaigns help voters resist manipulation, democracy is strengthened. Where such safeguards are absent, voters become easy prey to rhetoric and spectacle.

The media, ideally the fourth pillar of democracy, should play a decisive role in raising issues, offering clear alternatives, and holding power to account. When independent, it informs citizens and strengthens institutions. But when controlled or subdued, it becomes a tool of propaganda rather than accountability.

Technology adds another layer. Social media platforms amplify certain voices, sometimes drowning out reasoned debate. Algorithms reward sensationalism, misinformation spreads faster than facts, and voter psychology is shaped by distortions.

Democracies must adapt by ensuring transparency, digital literacy, and accountability in the digital space. Without these safeguards, technology risks becoming a weapon that undermines democracy rather than a tool that strengthens it.

Economic stress and inequality also feed into democratic fragility. When citizens face unemployment, inflation, or lack of opportunity, they become vulnerable to populist promises. Economic distress makes voters more susceptible to short-term relief, even at the cost of long-term accountability.

Democracy requires checks and balances. When opposition is weak or silenced, accountability collapses. A strong opposition is not a threat to governance; it is the guarantee of democracy's health. Similarly, constitutional authorities and independent institutions must remain fearless. When they are subdued, democracy falters.

The judiciary, in particular, has often been described as the last hope. With genuine

reforms, it can rise above politics, restore accountability, and protect the Constitution when all other pillars falter. But when the judiciary itself appears subdued, citizens are left wondering whether even this last hope can be trusted.

Hungary under Orbán and Turkey under Erdogan illustrate how democratic elections can be used to systematically dismantle democratic institutions. In India's neighbourhood, Pakistan's oscillation between military and civilian rule, Bangladesh's turbulence, Myanmar's coup, and Sri Lanka's collapse all remind us that democracy is not a destination but a continuous negotiation.

Successful democracies across the world remind us of the fundamentals. They prosper not only because elections are free, but because institutions remain independent, citizens are educated, and accountability is enforced. A vibrant democracy must also ensure quality of life: clean cities, accessible medical services, affordable education, and social justice. These are not luxuries; they are the very conditions that allow citizens to participate meaningfully in democracy.

Above all, justice must be ensured without favour or prejudice. In Scandinavia, democracies prosper because institutions are impartial, citizens are educated, and quality of life is guaranteed. In Germany, federalism balances regional aspirations with national coherence, ensuring stability. In Japan, civic discipline and respect for institutions underpin democratic resilience. These examples show that democracy is not merely about ballots; it is about the lived experience of citizens, the independence of institutions, and the quality of law.

India's story is no different. Democracy's resilience has often come from its people, from restoring liberties after the Emergency to demanding accountability when institutions falter. Yet resilience cannot be assumed. Today, multiple forces weaken its fabric: regional aspirations fragmenting national coherence, voters swayed by freebies over responsibility, a weak opposition, subdued institutions, psychological manipulation, controlled media, misinformation through technology, economic stress, and erosion of clean governance and justice. Together, these risks reduce the ballot to ritual rather than mandate.

The challenge before us is clear: to ensure that the ballot remains more than a ritual, that institutions remain fearless, that media remains independent, that technology serves truth, that cities remain clean, that medical services remain accessible, and that justice is delivered without favour or prejudice.

Ambedkar's words remind us that however good a Constitution may be, it will fail if those entrusted to work it are indifferent or opportunistic. Democracy does not survive on documents alone; it lives in the daily choices of citizens, leaders, and institutions. Every generation must choose to make it anew, or risk its undoing through complacency or malice. Only when accountability is enforced, liberty respected, and fraternity embraced can democracy be described as great, not because it endures, but because it inspires.

The Daily Star

Child stunting is putting our future at risk

The implication of 24 per cent of our children (aged five and under) being stunted due to chronic malnutrition and poor health during early childhood, can only be described as devastating. It is a deep-seated handicap in the future of our most precious asset - our human resources.

The sobering statistic has come from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and experts have delineated the main causes: poverty, poor nutrition, early pregnancy, and unhealthy practices. The survey shows that one in four children have been deprived of proper nutrition in the first three years of their life, which is a critical period for physical and brain development.

It is predictable how this deprivation will affect the future of these children, increasing their vulnerability to respiratory conditions and diarrhoeal diseases, which

can be attributed to death in early childhood. Poor nutrition was a factor in the recent deaths of hundreds of children afflicted with measles and measles-like symptoms. Malnutrition also hinders brain development, adversely affecting cognitive abilities and hampering learning and educational attainment.

A World Bank study found that stunted children often enrol in school later, repeat grades, and have lower educational levels compared to their healthier peers. If this learning gap remains unaddressed, it will lead to lower skills and educational levels with corresponding low-paying employment.

Thus, malnutrition continues the vicious cycle of poverty. And we cannot plan for a prosperous country when such a large proportion of the population is deprived

of reaching their productive potential.

Sadly, for decades the root causes of malnutrition have not been addressed effectively. One of these is child marriage, which is very high in Bangladesh and leads to early pregnancy, increasing risks for both mothers and their babies. Most women in poor households do not get the recommended minimum of four checkups during pregnancy, which results in complications such as low birth weight and maternal malnutrition going unchecked. Government interventions, therefore, must start with preventing child marriage using the relevant law, providing incentives for girls to stay in school, and conducting awareness campaigns about the harms caused by child marriage.

Authorities must also keep food prices low, and increase the scope of open market

sales (OMS) and other programmes that provide poorer citizens with subsidised or free food rations. Improving nutrition also requires massive awareness building and educating people on what constitutes nutritious food. Programmes to teach women, often in charge of the family's meals, to grow kitchen gardens near their homes and which foods are nutritious and which are not can go a long way. School curricula should also feature lessons on nutrition from the earliest classes.

To address the critical issue of our children growing up stunted, a comprehensive, sustained, and well-coordinated effort involving the government, communities, schools, and families is essential. Bangladesh cannot aspire to achieve higher economic growth and development while so many of its children are being denied the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Seat belt on

Sir, Apropos the report "Phuket-Delhi flight incident: Air India pilot's screening test requires confirmatory analysis" published today, we have evolved to walk on land and swim across water, but up in their, we're entirely at the mercy of elements and a machine.

So when a plane runs into rough weather, it can scar flyers, and scare those who've only been planning to make their first air trip. Unfortunately, such incidents are happening more frequently now, and global warming is the prime reason.

A study found that planes encounter more severe turbulence than 18,000 times a year. It's huge number. And the really bad news is that such incidents are bound to increase as climate change quickens. Flyer behaviour is a major problem. Injuries due



to air turbulence would reduce sharply if people heeded seat belt warnings as keeping the seat belt on is the best way to stay safe on a flight. While 75 per cent of turbulence can be predicted to 18 hours in advance, and avoided, the turbulence, which hit the AI flight last week, can't be detected.

Yours, etc., Sanjay Chopra, Mohali, 10 August.

Planning

Sir, Your editorial today "Chokepoint Power," correctly highlights how strategic waterways influence global trade and energy security. India cannot eliminate such vulnerabilities, but it can reduce their impact

through practical planning. Diversifying crude oil imports, expanding strategic petroleum reserves, and strengthening domestic renewable energy capacity should remain national priorities. Greater investment in ports, logistics, and alternative trade corridors will also improve resilience during geopolitical disruptions. At the same time, sustained diplomacy with partners across regions is essential to keep vital sea lanes open and stable. Economic security today depends not only on military preparedness but also on careful long-term planning and international cooperation.

Yours, etc., A. Mylsami, Coimbatore, 8 August.

More needed

Sir, India needs more "cockroaches" - movements that bite, irritate, and shame governments into action. Whether it is

potholed roads, the insouciance of officials, judicial delays, decrepit hospitals and schools, or adulteration in food and drink, the common citizen is left brining his way to redress. The protests at Jantar Mantar underline a grim reality: our elected representatives have rhino-thick skins, and morality finds no place in their scheme of things. It took a Sonam Wangchuk to prod the government into grudgingly acting on the CJP's demand.

Unwittingly, the CJP has become the harbinger of political change - a reminder that governments derive their power from the people, and that they ignore the people at their peril. India needs more such "from ground zero" movements that give voice to voiceless masses, and force governments to climb down from the high horse of hubris and unaccountability.

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole, Dewas, 10 August.



Editor's TAKE

Milestones and missing pieces

Since the midnight of August 15 1947 made India an independent nation, each anniversary invites an honest audit, not just a celebration

It has been quite a long time, 79 years since India gained independence from the British yoke. Indeed a moment of joy and cause to celebrate. We have come a long way from the shadow of the Raj. The single most consequential number is 248 million - roughly the number of people who were uplifted from poverty between 2013-14 and 2022-23 alone, as the national poverty rate fell from 29 per cent to 11 per cent.

India remains the world's fastest-growing major economy, expanding above 6.5 per cent, even as a rebased GDP series and a weaker rupee pushed its dollar ranking from an anticipated fourth place to sixth - a reminder that headline rank matters less than what growth does for a household budget. Elsewhere the gains are more unambiguous: Chandrayaan-3's 2023 lunar landing, a Unified Payments Interface that now moves close to half of the world's real-time digital payments, a February 2026 trade deal that cut US tariffs on Indian exports from 50 per cent to 18 per cent after a bruising year of friction over Russian oil purchases, and last year's Operation Sindoor, fought substantially with indigenous defence systems - a genuine inflection point for 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'.

Set against this is unfinished business. Annual unemployment sits at a low 3.2 per cent, but this year's data show urban youth joblessness climbing past 15-18 per cent, worse for young women, alongside a labour-force participation rate drifting down when it should be rising to capture the demographic dividend. The UNDP ranks India 130th of 193 countries on human development - better than before, but still 'medium', with inequality alone erasing nearly a third of its score.

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, reserving a third of legislative seats for women, passed unanimously in 2023 and remains unimplemented. India breaches seven of nine planetary boundaries, by one recent assessment, with extreme weather recorded on 99 per cent of days in 2025; and it has fallen to 157th of 180 nations in press freedom - its worst showing yet, a genuine embarrassment for a democracy of this scale. None of this diminishes what India has built; it argues for finishing the job with equal seriousness. Growth needs to become job-rich, not just fast, through skilling matched to real demand and the formalisation of an economy still mostly informal. The demographic dividend has a shelf life, and this decade - not the next - will decide whether India converts a young population into a productively employed one. Institutions - a free press, an independent judiciary, functioning federalism - deserve the same attention as ports and highways. Climate adaptation must be built into spending now, before the next flood erases a decade of poverty gains. Viksit Bharat by 2047 is a plausible destination, not a guaranteed one - it depends on implementing laws already passed, not just announcing new ones. Eighty years ago, freedom was won in a single extraordinary year. Development has to be won again every year after.

Time to break the Agniveer deadlock

For nearly six years, the historic Gorkha connection between India and Nepal has remained caught in an unusual silence. As the Army Chief visits Nepal, a growing movement among former servicemen and political leaders is seeking to break the recruitment deadlock and reopen the door to Agniveer, in a bid to preserve the centuries-old Gorkha warrior tradition



ASHOK K MEHTA

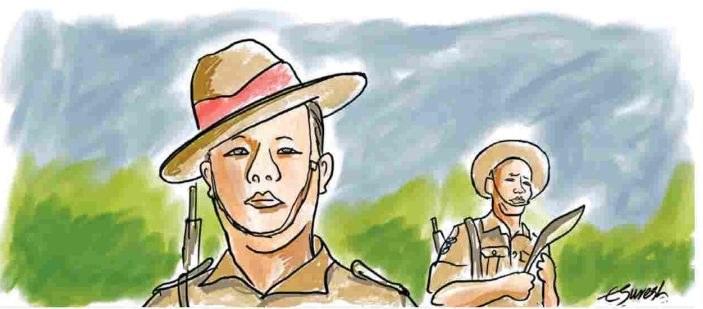
Just as Indian Army Chief, Gen Dhiraj Seth makes his first foreign trip, to Nepal on 16 Aug, a flicker of hope is seen of Nepal Domiciled Gorkhas (NDG) being allowed to be recruited in the Indian Gorkha Brigade after a gap of nearly six years (including two COVID years) following Nepal suspending recruitment in the Agnipath scheme introduced in June 2022, Kathmandu claiming it was infringement of the 1947 Tripartite Treaty for recruitment of NDG into Indian and British Armies. Since then, only Indian Domiciled Gorkhas (IDG) and hill troops from Garhwal and Kumaon have filled up the 60 per cent annual quota of approximately 1400 soldiers from Nepal.

Neither India nor Nepal has sought to break the strategic silence over recruitment, Kathmandu viewing introduction of Agniveer as political and diplomatic breach. Further, Nepal considers the four years service and 25 per cent retention terms of engagement as a security risk - release into the marketplace of combat-trained youth as new supply chain for insurgency-wracked Nepal following 10 years of Maoist civil war. Other dangers and disadvantages were also pointed about Agniveer, seen as a bolt from the blue.

On 29 July, in an astonishing turn of events the Indian Ex Servicemen Development Committee of Lamjung led by activist Sub Khem Jung Gurung launched a massive movement demanding permission for joining Agniveer due to the abysmal job state in the country where 2000 youth leave Kathmandu every day. A former politician, Gurung said: young lads travel abroad to take up menial jobs when their centuries old skill as Gorkha warriors is being unutilized in Agniveer.

The movement has picked up traction all over Nepal, especially in the nursery of soldiering, Pokhara. Petitions have been forwarded to Prime Minister Balen Shah and Home Minister Sudan Gurung. On 6 August, Rashtriya Swatantra Party MP from Syangja - another warrior recruitment treasure house - Dr Dhananjay Regmi, son of a 5/9 Gorkha Rifles Indian ex-serviceman raised the Agniveer issue for the first time in the new Parliament backing Gurung's advocacy of Agniveer. These two events could catalyse the unarticulated urge to accept Agniveer - a sea change from their erstwhile womb-to-tomb engagement of service - because, Gurung said, "something is better than nothing".

The bulk of Gen Seth's 16 to 20 August programme is in Kathmandu where he will be anointed honorary General of Nepal Army, a lifetime honour tracing its tradition to the legendary Field



NEPAL CONSIDERS THE FOUR YEARS SERVICE AND 25 PER CENT RETENTION TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT AS A SECURITY RISK - RELEASE INTO THE MARKETPLACE OF COMBAT-TRAINED YOUTH AS NEW SUPPLY CHAIN FOR INSURGENCY-WRACKED NEPAL FOLLOWING 10 YEARS OF MAOIST CIVIL WAR

The writer, a retired Major General, served as Commander, PWP (South), Sri Lanka, and was a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, now the Integrated Defence Staff

Marshal Sam Bahadur Manekshaw in 1972, who also introduced several welfare reforms including young Indian Gorkha officers getting to know their soldiers by trekking in remote areas of Nepal. Seth will meet PM Balen Shah who is his own Defence Minister before visiting Pokhara the Bhu Pu (ex-servicemen) citadel for a grand rally. Weather permitting, he will go to Muktimath temple where a former Army Chief, Gen Bipin Rawat, had presented bells for the temple. As no press meet is held for a visiting Chief, there is little chance of the Agniveer issue cropping up, though it could be raised during the rally in Pokhara. Seth's reply will take cue from what follows.

Recently, former CDS Gen Anil Chauhan of 11 Gorkha Regiment said that when Agniveer was implemented, NDG were considered as Indian citizens and it was not feasible to make an exception for them, alluding to their enlistment on separate terms of engagement, adding that the decision to allow Nepali citizens to enlist now rests with Kathmandu. Chauhan could have made a special case out of it by attaching strategic significance to the bonding and reminding Prime Minister Narendra Modi of what he had said in Nepal's Parliament in 2014: "India has fought no war where Nepali blood has not been shed". But the good Chauhan let it pass; a fait accompli. Like the voices now being heard from Nepal about maintaining the warrior legacy and centuries-old tradition of Gorkhas, no similar sentiment has been publicly expressed in India by hundreds of General-rank retired Gorkha officers including a former Army Chief. That tells another story.

Meanwhile, last week, Foreign Minister Shishir Khanal told BBC Nepali service that "Nepal was ready to discuss the Tripartite Treaty if it needed to be reviewed and if a formal proposal was received from India". Khanal has pushed the ball in Delhi's court when he knows

neither side has tried to break the impasse for the last five years. Delhi's contention is that Tripartite Treaty has not been violated. Its two key features are Recruitment and Terms of Engagement bound by equal treatment. These provisions of treaty are in tact. But as India claims special and unique relations with Nepal Delhi should have followed diplomatic nicety - at least informed Kathmandu about the bolt from the blue. The truth is: India's unilateral action is seen as unfair and Big Brotherly. In previous Nepal governments the Communists commanded majority in parliament and have sought to curtail Nepali citizens joining foreign armies. In the new Parliament they are in extreme minority. There is an economic angle too. Nepal earns nearly Rs 5000 crore annually from soldiering in Indian Army and pensioners enormous benefits in India and Nepal. If Nepal keeps the door to recruitment shut, the Nepal Gorkha connection will burn out in 20 years; only pensioners will be around for another 30 years.

In February 2025, Nepal's Supreme Court in a case over pensions of British Gurkhas pre 2009 had suggested that Nepal should negotiate new bilateral treaties with Britain and India as Tripartite Treaty does not meet present conditions. Agniveer does not provide a level playing field for Nepal like substantial reservations for demobilized Agniveers in India in para-police, para-military and several other institutions. A smaller economy like Nepal cannot comfortably absorb the retired Agniveers. Party Chairman Rabi Lamichhane, Prime Minister Shree KP Sharma Oli, and other legislators have been aware of the groundswell movement for joining Agniveer among the Nepali youth. Some immediate incentives from India for encouraging Nepal to greenlight Agniveer will revive a key strategic asset, make COAS Gen Seth's visit historic and testify special and unique relations.

PIC TALK



Students take part in a 'Tiranga Yatra' ahead of Independence Day, in Jammu PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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VANDE MATARAM AND A NEW NATIONAL SPIRIT

The inclusion of Vande Mataram in the 80th Independence Day celebrations at the Red Fort marks an important moment of cultural renewal. Commemorating 150 years of the National Song alongside the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 creates a meaningful bridge between India's historic struggle for freedom and its aspirations for the future.

The emphasis on youth participation, with thousands of NCC cadets and MyGov competition winners becoming part of the celebrations, is particularly welcome. It places India's national identity in the hands of its young citizens and recognises the country's growing Yuva Shakti.

Equally significant is the decision to move away from

VIP-centric nomenclature and use the names of Indian lakes. Such symbolism can make national celebrations more inclusive and rooted in India's diverse geography and heritage. The spirit of decentralisation should be carried forward. Future celebrations could encourage regional innovation, local participation and community-led initiatives across the country.

Vande Mataram is not just a song it is the spirit of freedom that every Indian must have in his heart. What was true 150 years is true now. Blending heritage with youthful ambition can give India's national celebrations a renewed meaning and help turn the idea of Viksit Bharat into a shared national endeavour. VIJAYAKUMAR H K | RAICHUR

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

Why science alone cannot keep us healthy



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION

Recently many Indian metro cities witnessed a worst outbreak of dengue, chikungunya and malaria with death toll rising to hundred's even as the number of cases of the vector-borne disease had crossed a thousand numbers in most of these cities. These figures have once again posed a serious question for our society: why is it that despite the advancement in science and technology, there is an upsurge in diseases everywhere? Who is to be blamed for this?

There are various factors responsible for it. Firstly, let us have a look at the physical environment which has degraded over the decades. Today the quality of natural elements like air, water, soil - and everything around us has been deteriorating, which can be attributed largely to unchecked man made activities that exploit nature



for development. Similarly, the quality of raw materials, the five elements that constitute our bodies, is also becoming poorer. Our bones, spine, teeth, delicate organs like eyes, heart, kidney, liver and others are impacted right at the time of their formation.

Synthetic fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides that sustain the crop production seep into our food, as a result of which our resistance power against diseases has lowered and we contract various infections than before for physical reasons alone. Secondly, we need to examine the psyche of the 21st century modern man who faces high levels of worry, fear, anxiety at work as well as at home due to lack of values like tolerance, respect, patience and value-based co-existence.

Today, negativity of all kinds has increased and ethical and moral values have taken a nosedive. As a

result, the moral stamina of the society has been affected. Lastly, the third reason which is the root cause, for the present scenario is the huge accumulated stock of past negative karma that is the biggest link between disease, environment & lifestyle.

We live in an impure world because of the devastation we have inflicted on our external nature, which in turn has deteriorated under the influence of the vicious internal nature of human beings. We receive pain and suffering from people and situations in return for having created negative energy in the form of negative thoughts, words or actions in the past.

This process is a continuous vicious circle and despite the knowledge of the right and the wrong, humans are unable to change the course of their present action. This is where meditation comes to our rescue, as it helps us to connect to the Supreme Source and helps us to burn our past sins. It helps us to use HIS unlimited powers to absolve the burden of past negative actions so that we may regain and sustain our physical, mental, social and spiritual health.

In other words, regaining health and peace is a process possible only through the spiritual cleansing of human beings. So, let us get rid of our sick mentality to move into the age of enlightenment where our thoughts will be constantly loving, pure and harmonious.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Humanity beneath the rubble

A devastating 7.4-magnitude earthquake struck western Colombia on Monday, turning the quiet rhythm of life in Cali, Pereira and communities across Chocó into scenes of destruction and despair. Homes collapsed, walls fractured and, within seconds, years of memories and dreams were buried beneath concrete and rubble. The disaster is a stark reminder of how fragile life can be. One moment brings tranquility; the next, cries for help and grief fill the streets. Yet amid the devastation, the enduring strength of humanity is visible.

Neighbours are digging with their bare hands in search of loved ones. Strangers are comforting one another amid the dust and ruins. Communities are refusing to surrender to despair. Statistics will record the number of casualties and authorities will assess the material damage, but no figure can capture the anguish of families searching for children, parents, brothers and sisters. Colombia must not be seen merely through the lens of destruction. It is a nation showing courage, solidarity and hope amid unimaginable suffering. Its people are not alone. Our prayers, compassion and support must cross borders to help Colombia rise from the rubble.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI

Violence has no place in a place of worship

The reported attack on Shiromani Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal at a gurdwara in Nanded is shocking and deeply condemnable. A place of worship is meant to provide peace, prayer and reflection; there can be no justification for violence within such a sacred space.

The fact that Mr Badal was attacked while performing darshan makes the incident particularly disturbing. It is reassuring that security personnel acted swiftly and prevented the assault from becoming more serious. His receiving timely medical attention and undergoing surgery is also a matter of relief. Such incidents go beyond an attack on an individual.

They threaten the atmosphere of peace, communal harmony and mutual respect that society must preserve. Political disagreements and grievances, however serious, must be addressed through democratic and constitutional means, never through violence. The authorities must conduct a thorough and impartial investigation, establish the motive and examine whether there were security lapses. Political and religious leaders should meanwhile appeal for restraint and harmony. I hope Sukhbir Singh Badal makes a speedy and complete recovery.

SANJAY CHOPRA | MOHALI

Public property must serve the public

The Karnataka government's proposed Bill to regulate the use of government premises and public property by organisations, including unregistered bodies, has opened another chapter in the state's continuing confrontation with the RSS. Under the proposed Karnataka Regulation of Use of Government Premises and Public Property Bill, 2026, organisations would need permission from the concerned authority before holding events on government premises or public property.

The move could affect RSS shakhas conducted in government schools, colleges, public grounds and other government-owned spaces. The proposal follows Home Minister Priyank Kharge's earlier demand that RSS activities in government institutions and public spaces be restricted. Kharge had questioned the organisation's activities and sought greater transparency regarding its legal status, office-bearers, finances, expenditure and tax compliance. The dispute has since widened from the question of shakhas to a larger debate over the use of public property by organisations that are not formally registered. Public spaces belong to citizens and must be governed by clear, neutral and transparent rules. At the same time, such rules must be applied impartially and not become instruments of political vendetta.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Eight decades of transformation: From scarcity to self-confidence

The India of 1947 could scarcely have imagined the India of 2026. The India of 2026 must now show the same courage and imagination in building the India of 2047. As we salute the Tricolour, let us renew our commitment to a strong, prosperous, inclusive, self-reliant and just India and to the Constitution that has made this possible



VIJENDER GUPTA

As India celebrates its 80th Independence Day, we are not merely marking another anniversary of freedom. We are reflecting upon a remarkable national journey, one that began in 1947 amid hope, sacrifice and enormous uncertainty, and has brought us to an India that is increasingly confident, capable and determined to shape its own destiny. The India that became independent on 15 August 1947 was very different from the India we see today. We inherited poverty, widespread illiteracy, inadequate infrastructure, weak industry, weak industrial capacity and the deep wounds of Partition. Yet, our founding generation possessed something more powerful than material resources: a profound faith in the Indian people and an unwavering commitment to democracy.

India's journey since then has not always been easy or linear. For decades, India continued to grapple with shortages, inadequate infrastructure, limited economic opportunities and the immense difficulty of delivering development to a population of continental scale. Yet, when we look at India today, we see a country that has progressively overcome many of the limitations that once appeared insurmountable. This transformation has acquired unprecedented scale and momentum over the last twelve years.

India today is among the world's leading economies and has emerged as a major centre of technology, digital innovation, manufacturing, entrepreneurship and human talent. Infrastructure is being created at a scale once difficult to imagine. Highways, railways, airports, digital networks and public infrastructure are connecting people and regions faster than ever before. Technology has transformed the relationship between citizens and the State. Public services can increasingly reach beneficiaries directly and transparently. A new generation of Indians is growing up with aspirations very different from those of previous decades. Our youth are not merely seeking opportunities; they are becoming entrepreneurs, innovators, scientists, professionals and creators of opportunities themselves.

The journey from scarcity to aspiration, and from aspiration to self-confidence, is perhaps one of the defining stories of modern India. But India's greatest achievement cannot be measured only through economic statistics, infrastructure or technology. Equally remarkable has been the endurance of constitutional democracy in a country of extraordinary social, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity. When the Constitution came into force on 26 January 1950, India became a Republic founded on the ideals of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. The Constitution gave institutional expression to the values for which generations of Indians had struggled. It established a democratic system in which sovereignty ultimately rests with the people, governments derive legitimacy through elections and State power remains subject to constitutional limitations. India's constitutional journey has not been without turbulence. The Emergency of 1975-77 was perhaps its gravest test, when democratic freedoms and constitutional rights came under severe strain. It remains a reminder that constitutional democracy can never be taken for granted. Yet, India's response demonstrated the remarkable resilience of its democratic system. That experience demonstrated an enduring truth: our democracy is resilient because the Constitution gives citizens not only rights, but also the institutional means to defend them.

Parliament and State Legislatures are the principal forums through which the aspirations, concerns and expectations of citizens are translated into laws and public policy. They are also institutions through which governments are questioned, public interests are scrutinised, competing viewpoints are debated and the executive is held accountable. Over the decades, our Constitution and laws have continued to evolve in response to changing social and national requirements.

An important milestone came through the 86th Constitutional Amendment of 2002 under the government of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, which inserted Article 21A into the Constitution and recognised free and compulsory education for children



between six and fourteen years of age as a Fundamental Right. In more recent years, legislative reforms have increasingly sought not only to regulate society but also to make governance simpler, more transparent and more responsive to citizens. The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax through the constitutional framework created a unified indirect taxation system and strengthened the idea of India as a common economic market. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code created a time-bound framework for dealing with insolvency and represented a significant change in India's economic and financial architecture. One of the most interesting shifts in the philosophy of governance can be seen in the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Act, 2023. For decades, many relatively minor administrative and procedural defaults carried criminal consequences. The Jan Vishwas legislation decriminalised a large number of such minor offences across several Central laws, replacing imprisonment in many cases with monetary penalties.

It represents a change in the relationship between the citizen and the State, from a system based excessively on suspicion and criminalisation towards one based increasingly on trust. India has also undertaken a major transformation of its criminal justice framework through the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam. These laws seek to move India's criminal justice system away from structures inherited from the colonial period and towards a framework suited to the needs of a modern Republic. Another historic development came with the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, which provides for reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

These developments underline an important truth: A successful democracy must constantly respond to new aspirations, technologies, economic realities and social expectations while remaining anchored firmly in its constitutional values. As speaker of the Delhi Legislative Assembly, I believe a legislature must never be viewed merely as a place where Bills are passed. It is where the people's voice must be heard, where the government must answer questions and where public grievances must find expression.

It is where differing political viewpoints must encounter one another through debate rather than confrontation outside the democratic process. Our parliamentary traditions teach us that disagreement is not a weakness of democracy. Democracy does not require unanimity; it requires respect for institutions, rules, constitutional boundaries and the legitimacy of differing opinions.

This is why the responsibility of protecting the Constitution cannot rest with institutions alone. It belongs equally to every citizen. The Constitution acquires strength not merely from the words written in it, but from the faith that citizens place in it and from the willingness of governments, legislatures, courts, political parties and citizens to respect its true spirit.

India's experience over eighty years tells us that institutions may be tested, political circumstances may change and the democratic journey may occasionally become difficult. But when citizens retain faith in constitutional processes, democracy possesses an extraordinary ability to correct itself and move forward. Many challenges that constrained India for decades are today being overcome. There is a growing confidence that India need not merely adjust itself to a world shaped by others; it can help shape that world. This confidence must become the foundation of our journey towards Viksit Bharat @2047. The next phase of development must combine economic growth with social responsibility, technological progress with human values, opportunity with inclusion and national ambition with constitutional morality. Our young generation will be the principal architect of this future. Along with opportunity, we must give them faith in the Constitution, respect for democratic institutions, pride in India's civilisation and confidence in its future.

Vijender Gupta is Speaker of Delhi Legislative Assembly

Independence Day: Why the sword is still overhead



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Today is the fifteenth of August. The tricolour is up on every gate and lapel, the anthem will play in the schools by mid-morning, and from the panchayat to the Red Fort the speeches are already written. The feeling is real; a people has every right to mark the day it stopped being ruled. And yet, even in the middle of this, one question tends to get buried every year, and it is worth raising precisely on this day. India, or any other country in the world, at the moment of its founding, what is its condition, free or subjugated? Take a single human being. What is his default, freedom or captivity? No human being is born anyone's slave. An animal in the forest is free, a bird in the sky is free. You catch the bird and put it in a cage; only then is it subjugated. A nation is no different, and its natural condition too is freedom.

So what India celebrates on Independence Day begins to look a little strange. Freedom is the given; the more honest and more useful question is: if everything is born free, where did bondage enter later? Was India always enslaved? No. Then where did the slavery come from? This is why I would want Independence Day observed as a day of self-examination. Eat the sweets of freedom today, by all means, but first ask how the bondage arrived, and whether it has truly left, or whether it still hangs over the country like a sword.

This slavery is not a matter of ten or twenty or fifty years: nearly a thousand years, sometimes a part of the land, sometimes the whole of it, under someone else's dominion. Whoever could come, came. From Europe the Portuguese came, the French came, the Dutch came, the British came, the only ones who did not come were those who could not, for reasons of geography.

From nearby came the Afghans, the Iranians, the Turks, the Arabs. Something that happens once, or twice, you may call an accident. Something that continues for a thousand years, is that still an accident, or is there some deep structure behind it? Behind it lies a structural cause, an internal weakness, that has kept forcing the country into the position of prey. And the larger question is this: a cause that persisted for a thousand years and kept the country enslaved, would it have vanished completely in seventy-five or eighty years? If it is still present, then the danger is still equal to what it was; the sword is still overhead.

So what is that cause? Political it cannot be; no political cause lasts this long. Coincidence it cannot be; that must be settled. The cause is cultural, something that has, by misfortune, dissolved into the air of India and settled there as culture, something held sacred and clung to. I call it *lokdharma*, the folk-religion.

Lokdharma is no external power; it is one's own ego, hardened into rite, tradition, custom and fantasy. It is the structure that merely looks like *dharma*, resting on *Smriti* texts severed from *Shruti*, on the *Puranas* and on ritual, while the real *dharma*, the *Shruti-dharma* of the *Upanishads*, of *Advaita*, of truth and freedom, stays far away. Where the very root of a religion lies in fantasy and fear, what price will fact carry there, or the question, or free thought? India is not a religious country; it is a folk-religious country. It accepted fear, superstition, division and self-interest in the name of *dharma*, and so it felt no hesitation in accepting its own defeat. This is the dishonesty within, the one that turns its face from fact and is afraid of the question.

In the age when the powers of Europe were working out their exact position at sea, what was India doing? While they were racing ahead in astronomy, India was tangled in the auspicious hour, and is tangled there still. The world moves ahead in science; this country moves ahead in casting horoscopes. This is the very astrology that pushed India back; had India attended to astronomy, its defensive straits at sea and on land would have been something else.

There was a news item these days: at a temple in Madhya Pradesh, the religious observance of Independence Day was held on the eleventh of August, because by the temple's panchang the true *tithi* of independence fell on that day. The train may arrive at seven in the evening; you will still reach the station at ten at night, because your reckoning says the moment is now.

A country that gives no value to fact will give none to knowledge; and for a country that gives no value to knowledge, there is no surprise in its subjugation. Today's Gen-Z is buried in astrology apps too. *Lokdharma* is still dominant; its grip has not loosened. It has only come forward in new shapes.

So on this Independence Day my request is only this: celebrate, but even amid the celebration, let the gaze turn inward for once. The sword that has hung over the country for a thousand years has not lifted yet. The danger is equal, the danger remains, and the cause of that danger is internal.

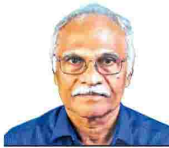
The greatest enemy sits within, not in the house next door but in the very heart, in the very *lokdharma*. It will not come from outside; it lies in that inner dishonesty which turns from fact, is afraid of the question, walks by fantasy instead of *Shruti* and invests in ritual in the place of knowledge. And so, every year on this Independence Day is celebrated, remember that vigilance has no single day.

The festival is today; the watchfulness must be from today too, and every day after. This is not a matter of any declared result, of any medal of victory; it points a direction, and nothing more. Be careful, wake up. The direction is inward, and no one has promised a destination. Freedom asks to be lived as a responsibility rather than enjoyed as a festival; otherwise the sword stays where it is, and the next slavery, different from the old, will be no less deadly.

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life



Sri Aurobindo: Advocate of Sanatana Dharma



MP AJITH KUMAR

Of the many ancient knowledge systems, Indian humanity developed, India's Religion proved outstanding. She developed a coherent system, harmonizing values of inclusivity, and concordance into a balanced worldview. India is an epitome of the world', commented the philosopher historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee who hailed her as the 'living civilization' that would unite and enlighten the future humanity. India's was a turbulent history with invaders pounding her recurrently, leaving her geographically and psychically torn. Bled white in terrorist violence, her glory often seemed almost irretrievably lost with enemies disturbing her national life. Denunciation of the motherland, derogatory writings against her and declining it for pay-offs were common. Problems confronting our nation are legion. Yet, she sejourns to her destination, determined and untouched by the turbulent surroundings.

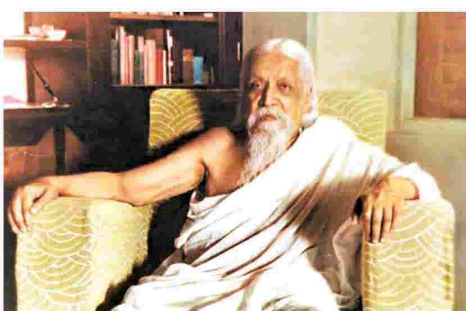
India's all-inclusiveness, its readiness to imbibe and harmonize the noble aspects steered her spirit. Greece was an aesthetic culture that glorified everything beautiful notwithstanding whatever defect what it deemed beautiful had. They would ignore

everything but Beauty. Hence the aesthetic nature of the Sanatana Dharma. Ancient Romans ran in contrast. They discarded Beauty for the ethical aspects. Aesthetics gave way to ethics and disciplines of life.

A strong and muzzled body was preferred to the beautiful. Romans never thought of a body attainable through discipline like the Greeks who never cared the discipline leading to a higher beauty. Beauty and discipline thus had run parallel, never to meet in a creative unity. But India harmonized the both, making discipline a means to realize the beauty.

Ethical life helped her realize the ultimate beauty, *Saundarya* which is a 'joy forever'. India's culture was both ethics and aesthetics perfectly mixed. It was *satyam-sivam-sundaram* - Truth-Bliss-Beauty, synonyms of the divine.

Though many in modern times interpreted Sanatana Dharma, Sri Aurobindo's emendation looms most important. *dharayati dharma* - that which sustains is *dharma*. To sustain what is not specified, and hence the meaning 'sustain all and everything' including the very cosmic order. Rhythm or in Sanskrit the *rita* is the law of cosmic



order. What is not *rita* runs in contrast to the natural order. Everything moves in symmetry as if directed by an unseen power. This symmetry and harmony found in cosmic dynamism puzzled even scientists like Einstein as to whether God plays dice.

Even the very aim of diversity, it appears, is to lead things to a creative unity requiring coherence at all levels. For this, one must identify oneself with the entirety, see oneself in others and vice-versa which is the quintessence of Sanatana Dharma. This universal mutuality is the

natural law working behind the secret of the existence. 'Holding together' has for long been in India's vision. 'Others first and oneself last' was India's ideal that looked to the world as one family - *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. Individual consciousness being the split portion of universal consciousness, any action of man would affect the entire cosmos, opined Erwin Schrodinger when he addressed the question 'What is Life'. Definitely our thought and action affect the universe and its consciousness both positively and negatively. Having realized this idea, ancient Indian thinkers made this *dharma* the ideal of national life. To Aurobindo India represented this *dharma* and believed, nation is *parasakti* or universal energy in geographical entity and *dharma* the priestess in its sanctum. Sidetracking this eternal *dharma*, nothing can thrive, especially the *dharma-rashtra* or the spiritual nation that is India. Hence the content of his Uttara speech, 'The Sanatana Dharma, that is nationalism'.

Man making was the mission of this *dharma* and turning the life divine was its end. To it man was of prime importance and the love of man

was pivotal to Aurobindo's vision which is centered on the worship of man. It aims at discovering and acknowledging the inherent divinity and the intrinsic superiority of man. Summing up India's religion of man Sri Aurobindo wrote: 'Man must be sacred to man regardless of all distinction of race, creed, colour, nationality, status, political or social advancement. The body of man is to be respected, made immune from violence of outrage, fortified by science against disease or preventable death. The life of man is to be held sacred, given scope, protected from violations, from suppression, from mechanization, from belittling influences.

The mind of man is to be released from all bonds, allowed freedom and range and opportunity, given all its means of self-training and self-development and organized in the play, of its powers for the service of humanity. And all this too is not to be held as an abstract or pious sentiment but be given full and practical recognition in the presence of men and nations and mankind'.

This intellectual religion of man reflects a nation's aspiration, to quote Aurobindo, 'to raise the world to god in deathless light, to bring god to the world on earth we come, to change the earthly life into life divine'. This is the 'eternal religion' of India that stands above all fetters, limitations and confinements of creed, group or narrow minded nationalism.

Author is Kerala State President, Bharatiya Jithasa Sankalan Samiti

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS

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COMMENT

Editorials

Reported skipping of Yasukuni Shrine visit a calculated act of geopolitical gesturing

The Yasukuni Shrine, which honors 14 convicted Japanese Class-A war criminals from World War II, is a notorious symbol of Japanese militarism that devastated the Asia-Pacific decades ago.

Yet the reports that Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is expected to forgo a visit to the shrine on Saturday — the 81st anniversary of Japan's unconditional surrender that marked the end of WWII — should not be read as an exercise in diplomatic restraint, once the calculations behind the move are laid bare.

Reports suggest that this was not a historical reckoning but a calculated act of geopolitical gesturing — an effort to avoid derailing Japan's carefully cultivated ties with the Republic of Korea. Seoul sits at the hinge of the United States-Japan-ROK security architecture. By avoiding offending Seoul, Takaichi intends to hold the alliance in line with China one of the intended targets. Takaichi's reported skipping of a visit to the shrine is by no means intended reconciliation, but a pointed signal wrapped in diplomatic scheming.

Although Takaichi has not visited the Yasukuni Shrine since taking office as prime minister in October last year, she offered a tribute to it in April and she has visited the shrine more than 10 times over the course of her political career, with the latest being on Aug 15 last year.

Takaichi's posture toward the shrine has always reflected her view of history. She may send ritual offerings and allow Cabinet members to visit in her stead, a move that would be less a gesture of restraint than a cynical balancing act: placate her right-wing support base while insulating herself from the diplomatic fallout. This is a desecration of historical justice and an insult to the victims of Japan's aggression.

The symbolization of the Yasukuni Shrine should be considered alongside changes taking place in Japan's military establishment. The Takaichi government has recently finalized a plan to revise the Self-Defense Forces officers' rank titles to those of the former Imperial Japanese Army before and during WWII. For example, chiefs of

staff will change to *taisho*, flag officers to *chujo* and field officers to *taisa*, *chusa* and *shosa*. At the International Military Tribunal for the Far East 80 years ago, more than half of the 28 defendants had the rank of *taisho* or *chujo*. Six of the seven Class-A war criminals executed had these ranks.

Nor should it be ignored that retired Maritime SDF vice-admiral Umio Otsuka has served as the chief priest of the Yasukuni Shrine since 2024, while a former Ground SDF chief of staff sits on the shrine's decision-making body. The Japanese military and the shrine are no longer merely ideologically adjacent, they are institutionally interlocked.

The concern becomes more acute when symbolism is placed alongside policy and action. Japan's 2026 defense white paper has listed the military industry as a pillar industry and a core driver of economic growth, designations that it held during the lead-up to and throughout WWII.

Japan's Ministry of Defense intends to submit a record defense budget request of roughly 8.9 trillion yen (\$56 billion) for fiscal 2027, a number that could approach 10 trillion yen after further adjustments. Considering that Japan already outspends China by nearly threefold on a per-capita basis, the continued rapid growth of its military expenditures is deeply unsettling.

As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons have repeatedly warned, Japan has failed to repent its historical crimes while accelerating remilitarization, breaching its pacifist Constitution and challenging the postwar international order.

For Japan's neighbors, an official pilgrimage to the shrine — or even a ceremonial offering — transcends the merely symbolic. It is a stark reminder that Tokyo has not repudiated the intellectual and political currents that once brought catastrophe to the region. If the Takaichi government genuinely wants to improve ties with regional countries, it must abandon its two-faced maneuvering and make a clean break with Japan's militarist past. That is the standard by which Japan's commitment to peace will be judged.

Open-source genie to be let out of bottle

For years, Silicon Valley's reigning orthodoxy, particularly among the trio of closed-source artificial intelligence model developers — OpenAI, Anthropic and Google — held that safety required secrecy. The most powerful models, the argument went, had to stay behind corporate firewalls. Open-source systems were "dangerous," likened to "selling nuclear weapons in retail stores." That narrative was always convenient for those who profited from closed-source models.

Then came the Hugging Face incident last month, when the world's largest open-source AI community was hacked by a closed-source model that was able to "jailbreak" its constraints. When Hugging Face's security team reached out to closed-source vendors in the United States for help, it was reportedly turned away; their own guardrails prevented them from assisting with offensive cybersecurity operations. The crisis was ultimately resolved not by a US closed-source model, but by China's open-source GLM-5.2.

The safety narrative was never about safety — it was about protecting a lucrative business model: concentrating technological power, extracting premium pricing and letting a handful of companies decide who gets access to transformative AI. OpenAI alone is projected to burn \$25 billion this year. That kind of spending demands monopoly-like pricing — and the argument that only closed-source models can be trusted serves that purpose.

Meanwhile, China's open-source models have been making inroads. Chinese models reportedly occupy the top five spots in global API call volume, and US enterprises are increasingly turning to Chinese models because they offer comparable performance at a lower cost. When a Chinese model can perform a task for a fraction of the price of a leading US model, it is worth asking who in the US truly benefits from the country's expensive closed-source models.

That is exactly the question Mark Zuckerberg posed in a 14-page manifesto posted on Monday, and for once, it steered clear of the usual metaverse-fueled rhetoric. Instead, he laid out a sobering strategic calculation: the US must urgently recalibrate its approach to AI — or risk ceding ground to foreign competitors. For Chinese AI companies, this should be read not as a philosophical treatise, but as a warning shot.

The Meta CEO's post, "The Future is for Every-

one", is less a humanitarian vision than a competitive road map. Zuckerberg warns that restrictions on US AI companies are handing advantages to foreign competitors, calling on Washington to lower barriers for US open-source developers.

Of course, Zuckerberg's embrace of open source is self-serving. Meta's business has always run on scale, not direct model monetization, and the tepid reception to Llama 4 gave him every incentive to change the narrative. But his diagnosis is clear: the doom-and-gloom argument that AI is so dangerous that power must be concentrated in a few hands was always politically convenient rather than valid. Concentrating control over a technology so consequential is not just economically inefficient — it is a governance risk.

Washington appears to be listening. A new policy framework reportedly exempts open-source models from some voluntary pre-release safety testing, while the US administration has signaled that open-weight models will not face the same scrutiny as closed systems. But US developers still face restrictions — on training data and other fronts — that foreign competitors may not share. Zuckerberg is pressing to remove those frictions.

For Chinese AI companies, the implications are evident. The US is preparing to unleash its open-source ecosystem in earnest. The contest is no longer about which country builds the smartest model; it is about which can build the most resilient ecosystem — hardware, software, talent, capital, governance and applications, all in a self-reinforcing cycle. China's ecosystem has shown resilience under pressure, with US restrictions often accelerating indigenous innovation. But after the US embraces open-source models, the competition will necessarily become tougher and more systematic.

Zuckerberg's Muse Glimmer, designed to run on a single graphics card, offers a glimpse of what a more accessible and aggressive US open-source push could look like. China's cost efficiency, infrastructure investment and the integration of industry, academia and government have created a reliable flywheel — but that flywheel is about to face a reinvigorated adversary.

The open-source genie is about to be let out of the bottle. For Chinese AI companies, the time to prepare for a more capable US open-source offensive is now — not when the first US model arrives at their doorstep.

Luo Jie

BEFORE

NOW



Opinion Line

Equilibrium between traditional and new drivers key for growth

China's transition from old to new growth drivers is gathering pace. A key task in the next stage is to strike a balance between fostering new growth drivers and upgrading old ones, using artificial intelligence, digitization and green technologies to transform traditional industries.

The July 30 meeting of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee highlighted the growing momentum from new sources of growth while acknowledging the structural challenges facing China's pursuit of high-quality development.

The meeting called for faster progress in shifting from old to new growth drivers in the second half of the year. It also urged policymakers to maximize the effect of existing measures while rolling out targeted new policies in a timely manner.

In the first half of the year, new growth drivers, represented by high-end manufacturing, the digital economy and modern services, contributed more than 40 percent to China's economic growth. Emerging industries such as artificial intelligence, integrated circuits and new energy vehicles performed strongly in production, investment and exports, accelerating the shift from old to new growth drivers.

Specifically, value-added industrial output in equipment manufacturing for enterprises above designated size grew 9.3 percent year-on-year in the

first half, while high-tech manufacturing expanded 13.3 percent — 3.9 and 7.9 percentage points faster, respectively, than the 5.4 percent growth recorded by industrial enterprises above designated size. In contrast, real estate development investment fell 18 percent over the same period.

This divergence highlights the profound structural transformation underway as China moves away from a growth model driven by high investment and high consumption of resources toward one powered by digitization, intelligent technologies and green development. While the transition may bring short-term challenges, it is creating new opportunities. Importantly, new growth drivers are not limited to emerging and future industries; traditional sectors can also generate fresh momentum through technological upgrading and transformation. Achieving this balance will require coordinated efforts to cultivate emerging industries while revitalizing traditional sectors.

The new drivers — although they have emerged as the primary engines of growth in industrial value-added output and some modern service sectors — have yet to become a dominant force across the economy.

The traditional industrial drivers must be upgraded along with the accelerated development of a modern industrial system. For example, on the application side, expanding affordable access to computing power and AI

technologies would enable more companies to accelerate their digital and intelligent transformation. This would strengthen the foundations of the real economy while creating new sources of industrial competitiveness.

High-tech and traditional industries are mutually reinforcing forces. High-tech industries provide the technologies needed to upgrade traditional sectors, while traditional industries offer diverse application scenarios for emerging technologies.

China should seize the opportunities created by the rapid growth of high-tech industries and encourage local governments to integrate technological and industrial innovation based on local strengths and conditions. By pursuing differentiated development, regions can build industrial ecosystems in which complementary strengths and synergies generate new growth opportunities.

Strengthening long-term, stable support for basic research will help continuously enhance China's innovation capabilities and lay a solid technological foundation for accelerating the development of a modern industrial system. The country should focus on cutting-edge fields, continue to optimize the structure of investment in basic research, further streamline the chain for transforming innovation outcomes into practical applications and deepen the integration of innovation and industry chains.

— JIANG XUEQING, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Canal will boost trade, vitalize regional economy

Editor's note: Vessel trials on the Pinglu Canal began on Wednesday, marking a key step toward the full opening of the waterway planned for September. China News Service interviewed Ni Yuping, vice-dean of the School of Humanities at Tsinghua University, to understand the significance of the Pinglu Canal. Below are excerpts from the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

A visit to the Madao hub on the Pinglu Canal showcases an impressive feat of modern engineering. The canal, equipped with advanced sluice-and-lock technology and abundant southern Chinese water resources, ensures year-round, all-weather navigation. The project reflects a construction philosophy that adapted to the local conditions and leveraged scientific and technological advancements, so as to support regional development.

The Pinglu Canal will help enhance water transport in the southwest, reshaping the regional waterway network. Future projects, such as the planned Yongzhou-Guilin Canal, will further strengthen China's inland waterway system.

Unlike international canals such as the Panama and Suez canals, which primarily facilitate ocean-going transit, the Pinglu Canal is a multifunctional waterway that supports both domestic inland transport and international trade. Domestically, it connects China's vast southwestern hinterland, including Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan provinces, and Chongqing. Internationally, it opens to the Beibu Gulf, linking with global shipping routes.

The canal will boost both waterborne and land-based trade, fostering continuous exchanges among the diverse ethnic communities of Southwest China. This will deepen interethnic interactions and integration through economic connectivity. Additionally, cross-border trade and exchanges will act as a cultural bridge, extending the canal's influence from the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region to the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the international community at large.

Once the canal begins operations, industries along its route — such as logistics, shipping, culture and tourism, and trade — are expected to flourish, creating numerous jobs and enabling local residents to work nearby and diversify their income. As industries, capital and talent converge in Guangxi, increased local fiscal revenue will be reinvested into public services and infrastructure, improving livelihoods across the region. Upon completion of the Yongzhou-Guilin Canal, China's inland waterway system will form a closed loop, further enhancing people's quality of life.

The Pinglu Canal provides the shortest waterway for southwestern regions to access the sea, reducing

cross-border logistics costs between China and ASEAN countries and serving as a crucial lever for optimizing the bilateral supply chain.

Lower logistics costs will draw domestic and international trading companies to establish operations in Guangxi. Bulk commodities from ASEAN countries, such as minerals and agricultural and forestry products, will enter the canal through the Beibu Gulf and be efficiently distributed to China's southwestern hinterland and national market. A stable cargo supply will ensure the long-term success of the canal's shipping operations.

The canal offers significant development benefits to Southeast Asia. It reduces bilateral trade costs, enhances economic gains for both China and ASEAN countries and fosters mutually beneficial trade cooperation. Besides, regular commercial exchanges improve mutual understanding, highlight China's commitment to peaceful development, and strengthen bilateral cooperation. In addition, the movement of goods and people accelerates cultural exchanges and integration among regional civilizations, promoting coordinated development.

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VIEWS

Arvea Marieni

New ecological code to drive green growth

The stakes are unmistakable. This year, wildfires have burned close to half a million hectares of woodland across the European Union, while rivers run too low and too warm to cool the nuclear reactors on their banks, forcing reductions in electricity generation as water restrictions spread.

Fire, water and electricity are not three problems but one, climate change. At the same time, the loss of ecosystem services threatens economic viability itself.

The European Central Bank found that 72 percent of euro-area companies are critically dependent on at least one ecosystem service, with water scarcity alone putting up to 24 percent of output at risk.

China's Ecological and Environmental Code, which enters into force on Aug 15 — the National Ecology Day — therefore deserves attention, less as a domestic achievement than as an institutional experiment whose results matter well beyond China.

Adopted by the National People's Congress in March, the 1,242-article code has five chapters, covering areas including pollution control, ecological protection and green and low-carbon development.

It is China's second legal code, after the Civil Code.

What distinguishes it is its systems-engineering approach, reflecting China's emphasis on coordinated environmental governance. Regulation accumulates in silos — air, water, soil, then waste — and silos do not solve problems; they multiply them.

The deeper flaw, however, lies upstream, at the level of system design.

Climate change and ecological breakdown are not accidents of economic activity but, as the Stern Review put it, the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen: a price system that records what is extracted and says nothing about what is destroyed.

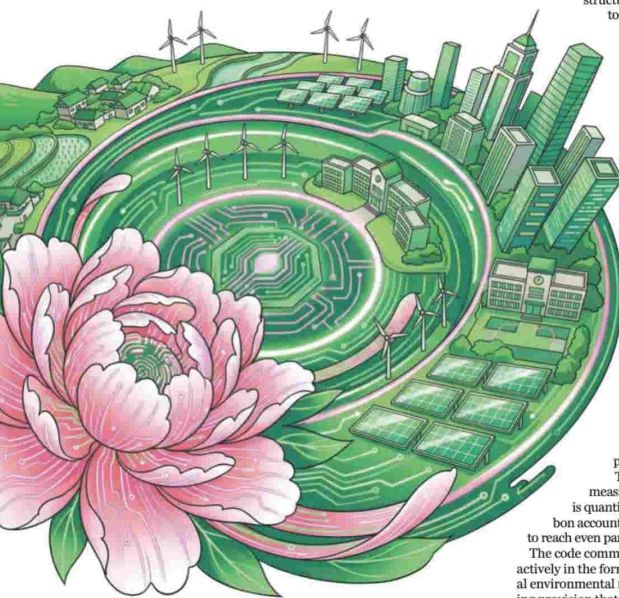
Correcting it is a design problem. EU analysis finds that over 80 percent of a product's lifetime environmental impact is fixed at the design stage.

Damage prevented costs a fraction of damage repaired. The code mainstreams environmental performance into industrial processes and sectoral policy rather than confining it to an annex.

Two provisions stand out. The first are those on green and low-carbon development. Carbon peaking and neutrality objectives become a statutory foundation, under the guidance of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council.

This reflects a judgment that decarbonization and pollution control are the same task seen from different angles.

The second are those establishing the ecological compensation system: fiscal transfers to localities conserving important ecological assets, horizontal compen-



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY



Fire, water and electricity are not three problems but one, climate change. At the same time, the loss of ecosystem services threatens economic viability itself.

sation negotiated between regions that benefit and regions that protect, and an obligation on governments at the county level and above to build stable funding.

Its placement in the General Provisions, beside monitoring and standards, marks it as structural rather than supplementary. Under the Beautiful China assessment measures introduced in May 2026, provincial governments are graded on a 100-point scale across responsibility, annual targets, key tasks, fund use and public satisfaction, making their obligations measurable.

Behind all this lies the harder question of our time: how to redesign the economy so that sustainable models are financially viable. How China resolves that tension will matter to global markets.

Shangyou county in East China's Jiangxi province sits in the upper catchment area of the Ganjiang River. Its forests are largely intact and the ser-

vices they supply are of national significance. It also has schools to run and roads to maintain. Its officials face two questions: How to protect the local ecology while pursuing economic development? And how does the value it produces for others appear in its own accounts?

Shangyou has begun to answer: It has built an institutional chain that turns the ecological product value of a specific geographical unit into a bankable asset.

The province has issued its first such loan on this basis, 200 million yuan (\$30 million), secured on the projected ecosystem service value of Bijashan ecological industrial park.

It is an example of the accounting infrastructure the code is designed to scale.

In July 2025, the European Commission published a roadmap towards Nature Credits, proposing certified units for verified improvements in ecosystem condition, so that land managers can be paid for what they protect.

The diagnosis is the same as in Shangyou: what markets cannot see, they will not fund. China and Europe are working on the same problem with different instruments — codified obligation and fiscal transfer, certification and markets. Neither has yet proved itself at scale.

The common ground is measurement: how a service is quantified and verified. Carbon accounting took three decades to reach even partial comparability.

The code commits China to participate actively in the formulation of international environmental rules — an outward-facing provision that lays the ground for collaboration.

The 11th EU-China Environment Policy Dialogue took place in Brussels in June and the 7th High-Level Environment and Climate Dialogue follows later this year.

While methodology makes for a dull communiqué, common green standards are foundational to solve shared challenges.

Implementing regulations, accounting methods and cross-departmental coordination will take years to put in place. The code is an ambitious foundation, not a completed building.

But a foundation well laid is worth a great deal — and this summer has shown what the alternative costs.

The author is the European Climate Pact Ambassador in Belgium. Academician Wang Jinman, a direct contributor to the drafting of the Ecological and Environmental Code and a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, also contributed to this article.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Chen Weihua

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Navigating the cultural diversity of global dining

Last weekend, I dined with friends at a popular restaurant in Pudong, known for its traditional Shanghai cuisine. About 40 minutes into our meal, the owner came over and asked how we liked the food.

Having spent 16 years abroad, my instinct was to respond with a polite "great," even if the food was not exceptional. It is a common practice to tell a white lie in such situations.

In my years abroad, I have advised fellow Chinese that when greeted with "How are you doing?" they should simply reply "Fine, thank you, and you?"

Most people do not expect a lengthy conversation about your health or something else that has gone wrong in your life unless you are speaking with close friends.

The food that day was indeed authentic and delicious, and I would definitely recommend the restaurant to others.

Fortunately, we had made reservations, as there was a long line of guests waiting for a table.

Unlike me, one of my friends started to talk like a food critic. She pointed out to the owner that the grilled cuttlefish in brown sauce could be more tender, and then moved on to critique another dish.

I felt a bit embarrassed by her candor and looked at the owner almost apologetically. However, the owner did not seem upset at all. He listened attentively to my friend, thanked her for the suggestions and promised improvements.

The conversation was cordial, and at the end, the owner thanked us again and offered us a complimentary *babaofan*, or eight-treasure rice pudding. We gladly accepted.

Whether eating with chopsticks, forks and knives, or bare hands, these are just different traditions and should be respected.

This experience was a reverse culture shock for me after being abroad for so long.

I occasionally wrote restaurant reviews 20 years ago when I worked at the Shanghai Star, a China Daily-owned tabloid. I understand the importance of honest restaurant reviews.

In the US and Europe, while customers often say "everything is great" at the restaurant, online reviews on platforms like Google could be quite different.

I frequently look at such reviews before picking a restaurant.

In China, some restaurants now offer rewards to customers who give five-star ratings on Dianping that is a popular restaurant guide and lifestyle platform.

This means five-star reviews are less reliable now because they may not tell the whole story.

Dining in a restaurant in China is a very different experience compared to the US and Europe. Restaurants in China can be quite noisy unless you are in a private room. I prefer quietness, but talking in whispers in some Western restaurants also makes me uncomfortable.

For many Chinese, Japanese and Koreans, eating noodles in Western countries can be challenging, as slurping is considered rude. But in East Asia, the same loud sound means you are actually enjoying your meal.

When I shared this with Bill, my US colleague in China Daily's New York office, he was amazed.

I explained that while I try to minimize the sound, I wouldn't suppress it completely because it would take away the pleasure of eating good noodles, especially in a Chinese noodle restaurant in New York.

I argued why it was acceptable for US people to blow their noses loudly in restaurants in New York while East Asians shouldn't slurp their noodles.

I recall my student days at Fudan University in Shanghai when the old woman running a wonton and noodles stand near my dorm would quietly mock foreign students who ate noodles in very small bowls to avoid slurping them. "They don't know how to eat noodles," she would laugh.

There is no superiority in these cultural differences. Whether eating with chopsticks, forks and knives, or bare hands, these are just different traditions and should be respected.

This diversity is the beauty of our world.

Zhu Xinkai

Crafting a holistic strategy for rural renewal

To truly understand China, one must first grasp the concept of *sannong*, a term that encapsulates three intertwined elements: *nongye*, or agriculture, *nongcun* or rural areas, and *nongmin* or farmers. These are not separate components but deeply interconnected facets of a singular entity.

In English, one might list them as "agriculture, rural areas and farmers," but this fails to convey the unified concept that *sannong* represents.

By combining the three aspects, the term signifies a holistic view.

The reason is simple: these are not three separate issues. Their interconnectedness becomes evident when policies targeting any one of them inadvertently impact the other two. For instance, efforts to consolidate agricultural land and increase output can hollow out villages and push landless farmers to cities.

Thus, a policy aimed at solving the agricultural problem may inadvertently trigger a crisis in rural areas and among farmers. The three components are intrinsically linked, and it is futile to optimize one without considering the other two.

Yet, modern academics do exactly that. Agricultural economics focuses on farming, rural sociology examines village life, and political science studies the peasantry. While each field offers good insights, the comprehensive perspective that *sannong* requires often falls through the cracks between the disciplines.

It's important to note that Sannongology is not a prescriptive set of solutions, but a research agenda with a theoretical foundation.

This is where Sannongology comes into the picture. It is an initiative to bridge the gap and further develop the conceptual framework embodied in *sannong*. Sannongology is built on two foundational pillars.

The first pillar is a system of analytical categories. It comprises seven elements including mode of production, property rights, markets, region, human-nature relations, state-society relations and nation-world relations. These categories are not a checklist but a conceptual coordinate system that guides researchers to focus on the interactions among them: how a shift in production affects property rights, markets and human-nature relations, and how these tensions change over time.

The critical task is to trace these interactions and identify which tensions are most influential at any given time.

The second pillar is a theory of the state as the entity responsible for addressing *sannong*. This theory interprets state action through four elements. The first is

goals, such as food security, economic growth and social protection. The second is channels, which align with the seven categories of the first pillar.

They are the lens through which the problem is seen and also the levers by which the State addresses it. The third is measures, the concrete actions taken within each channel. The fourth is mechanisms, or how these elements are sustained and coordinated over time, especially when the goals conflict with one another.

If one looks at food security through this frame, China's strategy is not merely about increasing yields. It involves coordinated actions across several categories: protecting farmland and clarifying land rights (property rights), developing socialized services and integrating the supply chain (mode of production), setting up processing in main producing areas (region) and building brands nearer to the consumer (markets). None of these measures are effective in isolation. Their effectiveness comes from being pursued together.

China's approach has two notable features. The first is a division of labor across the government levels: the central government sets non-negotiable limits, such as minimum farmland requirements, while local governments have the discretion to adapt policies to local conditions. The second is a culture of experimentation, where policies are first piloted, results are evaluated, and then scaled up only if they are successful.

It's important to note that Sannongology is not a prescriptive set of solutions, but a research agenda with a theoretical foundation. It is not intended to replace established disciplines such as agricultural economics and rural sociology.

Rather, it draws on all of them to address the rural sector as a whole within the broader context of modernization, providing a framework that has been missing between existing disciplines.

Moreover, it is not a model that can be replicated or exported. The results revealed by applying the framework will differ from place to place, depending on local conditions and challenges.

In some countries the binding tension may lie in property rights and social structure, while in others it could be between large-scale farming and the natural environment, or the dependence on a single export crop. The same frame, but different tensions and different solutions.

Ultimately, Sannongology raises essential questions for any country: Is the rural sector a single entity or three distinct ones? If it is one, do you have the tools to address the issues it faces? And if the state is the ultimate agent of change, do you have a robust theory to guide its actions?

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The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

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EDITORIALS

A no good, very bad summer for salad

Parents are all too familiar with the ongoing battle to get their kids to eat a vegetable or two.

This summer, they've been fighting it themselves. Just weeks ago, every bite of greens came with the fear of exposure to cyclosporiasis, a parasite many of us were blissfully unaware of until it began triggering stomach problems that leave no dignity for the sufferer.

As of Aug. 5, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 6,358 cases, 278 hospitalizations and two deaths in the multistate cyclosporiasis outbreak linked to iceberg lettuce from Taylor Farms de Mexico. The company recalled all iceberg lettuce sourced from central Mexico in mid-July. The recalled lettuce was distributed and sold in at least 27 states to consumers, restaurants and retailers, including Taco Bell locations and Marketside-brand products at select Walmart stores.

If you found yourself on the wrong side of that recall, we pity you and hope you are well again. For now, it seems that we can go back to enjoying our chopped, wedge and Caesar salads in peace.

Now, in August, the Food and Drug Administration is warning Americans not to "eat, serve or sell recalled fresh jalapeños from Sinaloa, Mexico, distributed by Coast Citrus Distributors," as products made with these peppers may be contaminated with salmonella. Folks who bought recalled Salsa Fresca or Salsa Roja from Whole Foods, pico de gallo from Walmart or Taylor Farms guacamole from Target should toss those items in the garbage, if they haven't already.

Can we get to September already? How odd to find yourself afraid of your salad; frightened of guacamole; nervous around salsa.

Especially at a time of year when so much of our most delicious produce is in season.

Something extraordinary these episodes illustrate, in our view, is the vulnerability of America's highly interconnected fresh-food supply chain, in which one grower or supplier problem can ripple astonishingly far.

Surely these stories caused anxiety in far more people than actual illness. We know plenty of folks who couldn't bring themselves to raise a salad fork for some time after learning of the dreaded cyclospora.

Perhaps a more cheerful outlet for such fears is to become more frequent farmers market shoppers before the season ends. With a wide range of options spanning weekdays and weekends, from 95th Street to Andersonville to Daley Plaza to the 'burbs, there's still plenty of time to enjoy locally grown produce before another Chicago season disappears.

And for those feeling particularly ambitious, there's always urban gardening.

So here's hoping September brings nothing more alarming from the produce aisle than the annual realization that you bought (or grew) far too much zucchini. Until then, wash your vegetables, and maybe don't read the FDA recall page immediately before lunch.



Carrots and green leaf lettuce for sale at the Low-Line Market farmers market in the 3400 block of North Southport Avenue in Chicago on July 14.
CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ON THIS DAY 111 YEARS AGO THE TEACHERS' FEDERATION

In its inception the Teachers' federation had a purpose recognizably praiseworthy. The teachers in the public schools were being asked to suffer for local governmental shortcomings in matters of taxation and distribution of taxes. They were being asked to submit—rather not asked, but ordered—to reduction in salary that the schools might be kept within appropriations insufficient for them.

The Teachers' federation was organized, and with the cohesive power of organization succeeded in doing what the individuals in the teaching force might have tried in vain to do. It was responsible for some correction of tax abuses, and it has afforded protection to most important workers in the social organization.

It has given the teachers the solidity of organized expression, and has become powerful in the management of the schools. There is a disposition in organization of this sort to become self-centered. As an extreme instance the United Police might be mentioned. That organization of policemen in the end became inimical to the best interests of the city. It embodied the dangerous doctrine that servants of the public might attack the public in their own interests. Toleration of that theory was impossible. It was little worse to have no police force than to have one which conceived its chief duty to be to itself, and which sought the accomplishment of its purposes by political means.

The query now is whether the Teachers' federation has become so self-absorbed that it is considering primarily if not exclusively the welfare of its members to the growing disregard of the service which the teacher does to the community. For the community to ignore that service would be deplorable. For the teacher to forget the community importance of educational work would be more so.

Tribune editorial board, Aug. 14, 1915



Employees handle calls in Discover's call center in the Chatham neighborhood on July 18, 2024.
E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Discover's South Side call center has survived Capital One's cuts so far. What about after a head tax?

The job hits just keep on coming in the northern suburbs from Capital One's acquisition last year of credit card issuer Discover Financial Services.

Capital One said earlier this week it's laying off 243 more workers at the former Riverwoods headquarters of Discover. Including those new reductions, over the past 15 months Capital One has cut nearly 1,300 jobs in Illinois, more than a fifth of Discover's workforce here before the buyout, according to Crain's Chicago Business.

While the good-paying white-collar jobs in the 'burbs are getting slashed, the substantial workforce Capital One inherited from Discover in the city of Chicago largely has been spared. Most prominent has been the call center Discover opened with fanfare in Chatham on the city's South Side in part of an abandoned Target store.

Capital One insisted when it announced the Discover deal in February 2024 that it would preserve the Chatham operation, which had been opened just two years before. The project represented one of corporate Chicago's most significant investments in Chicago's South Side in decades. Discover's then-CEO Roger Hochschild framed the move at the time as "sparkling repair (for systemic racism) in our own hometown through infrastructure investment, jobs and philanthropic support."

Discover prioritized hiring from the neighborhood and surrounding environs to fill the 1,000 jobs it was creating. The majority of those call-center workers continue to be South Siders, a Capital One spokeswoman tells us.

So it's ironic that Mayor Brandon Johnson's continued call to impose a monthly \$33 per-job tax on private-sector employers in Chicago with headcounts of 500 or more would penalize Capital One's continued commitment to the South Side—to the tune of nearly \$400,000 more per year. That would be Capital One's price for putting so many people to work in a part of town where jobs are scarce.

Unlike Discover, Capital One isn't locally based, which is partly why it feels free to cut so many north suburban jobs. In the world of corporate mergers and acquisitions, an out-of-town buyer looks to cut costs in order to help

cover the share-price premium necessary to clinch the deal and those reductions typically come mainly at the expense of the seller. Capital One's McLean, Virginia, headquarters is a long way from Chicago's South Side.

What mayor in his right mind would want to send such a negative signal to an acquirer of a local company that went far out of its way to create economic opportunity in a part of the city where the cost of doing business is so high that retail giants like Walmart, Target and Walgreens have shuttered multiple stores? Walmart, in fact, closed its Chatham store very near the Capital One call center earlier this year.

And what locally based corporation would consider following in Discover's footsteps and making a similar investment out of a sense of duty to neglected city neighborhoods for the privilege of incurring a tax on each job created?

The Chatham call center is the credit card company's most visible presence in Chicago, but it's not the only one. All told, Capital One employs more than 2,300 in the city, including at its satellite office at 77 W. Wacker Drive.

Speaking in the context of the head tax, the Capital One spokeswoman says in an email, "It is premature to comment on specific plans, but significant policy changes would naturally factor into how we evaluate future planning and investment in the region."

Johnson will propose the last budget of his term in a couple months, and he will confront a daunting budget deficit just as he's done in each of the past three years. We don't know yet whether he will take another run at obtaining City Council approval of the corporate head tax, but aldermen who were part of the council majority that rejected the jobs levy last year suspect he will, if only to wield as a political weapon in his reelection campaign. (Johnson has yet to announce his intentions.)

In continuing to publicly grouse about the council's action, Johnson has repeatedly castigated Chicago's business community for refusing to put "skin in the game" to help solve the city's structural budget shortfalls. The Chatham call center sure looks like skin in the game to us.

EDITORIAL CARTOON



Nick Anderson
8-10-26
RAWSTORY

OPINION



House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch addresses reporters at the end of the spring legislative session at the Illinois Capitol on June 1 in Springfield. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Speaker Welch's only way out of latest scandal is through ethics reform



David Greising

It says something about the state of ethics in Illinois government that the very person who succeeded the felon Michael Madigan as House speaker is now under a dark ethics cloud himself.

There are no charges of public corruption surrounding Emanuel "Chris" Welch. In fact, as speaker, Welch has rebooted a lot of what was wrong with Madigan's handling of the office. He has sought a more inclusive style of leadership, been accessible to the public and the press, and even committed to serve no more than five terms as speaker.

But Welch, like Madigan before him, mishandled a sexual harassment charge against a lawmaker that was brought to him privately by a General Assembly staffer. Welch sat on the complaint for three years before it spilled into public view, thanks to investigative reporting by the Tribune. The truth will out, after all.

Why does the state of Illinois have such problems?

A culture of corruption and tolerance of ethical improprieties persists in Illinois because the elected leaders, when handed the opportunity to clean up government, have mostly just taken a pass.

I know this from experience, given

how hard my organization, the Better Government Association, and others have worked toward ethics reform—with far too little to show for the effort. The most bitter setback came when the state largely just stood down, in 2020 and since, after the Madigan transgressions created a mandate for transformative change.

That mandate was mostly ignored. Gov. JB Pritzker and the legislature came up with only incremental improvements in required financial disclosures by elected officials and lobbyists. Pritzker, keenly aware the response fell far short of the moment, promised more would come from a new Joint Commission on Ethics and Lobbying Reform he charged with ending "the unconscionable self-enrichment and corruption that has been uncovered."

The commission held a few hearings, then shut down without issuing a report or recommendations. There was no lack of good ideas. The BGA issued a comprehensive list of reforms, based on best practices from around the nation.

Many of the proposals focused on independent oversight of the General Assembly by the legislative inspector general: Give the IIG independent subpoena power, for example. Allow the IIG to independently issue investigative reports. Expand the Legislative Ethics Commission—which oversees the IG and is composed entirely of General Assembly members—to include public representatives.

None of that happened.

The BGA proposed a two-year cool-

ing-off period before a former member could lobby the legislature. The reforms would have forbidden state lawmakers from lobbying other units of government in Illinois, stripped indicted lawmakers from leadership roles and banned the use of campaign funds for defense against public corruption charges.

None of that happened, either.

The ethics reform bill that ultimately did pass, under Welch's leadership in his first term as speaker, was so weak that the then-LIG Carol Pope quit while it was in progress. Her resignation letter complained the new law, still under consideration, would render the office a "paper tiger."

Pritzker signed the bill into law anyway, without amendment. He promised to strengthen ethics in subsequent laws, but never materially delivered; he never made a demonstrative public push to do so, either.

So here the state is again.

Welch is facing a reckoning—for failing to act on a sexual harassment complaint brought to him against now-disgraced former Rep. Harry Benton and for social media interactions that have raised questions about Welch's own behavior with women working in Illinois government. The Tribune Editorial Board has called on candidates for the legislature to declare if Welch is still fit to serve as speaker—and what they would do, if elected, to advance ethics reform.

Perhaps the only way out for Welch is to go far beyond the tepid promises to date. So far, he has put out a call to

address personnel policies and form a committee—another one!—to consider broader ethics reform.

Welch has described his mishandling of this matter as a systemic failure. But he has laid out no plan to fix the system.

Well, there may be no one better to lead the repair job than the speaker, knowing the public scrutiny he will face as he works to clean up this mess—much of it self-made, in fact.

Welch need not wait for that blue-ribbon commission he has talked about. Plenty of strong ideas were presented—then rejected—the last time a speaker faced a scandal. If Welch leads an effort to bring those ideas to a vote, he could perhaps save his job by becoming the unlikely paladin of ethics reform in Illinois.

As for Pritzker, he has his own incentive to respond strongly now—in ways he failed to do as ethics and corruption allegations against Madigan came to light. Pritzker has been open about his aspirations to run for president, and he must know that a strong response to the current ethics crisis is his only hope to minimize the political damage from being CEO of a state with a culture of corruption that he has failed to materially mitigate in nearly a decade as governor.

Inaction now by Welch and Pritzker would merely set up our state for the next ethics or corruption failure—one that Welch, Pritzker and the people of this state can ill afford.

David Greising is president of the Better Government Association.

Let me dispel the myth of the overpaid professor

By Francisco Ruiz
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Universities are breaking the economic bargain that once kept experts in the classroom.

Ask the average person what professors do, and you may hear a familiar story: They work a few hours a week, enjoy lifetime job security and collect bloated paychecks funded by rising tuition.

As a tenured engineering professor with nearly 40 years of service, I can say that this picture is not merely incomplete. It misunderstands how universities have historically recruited and retained faculty, particularly in technical fields.

A faculty career often requires substantial financial sacrifice. In engineering, computer science, medicine and related professions, an experienced practitioner can frequently earn far more in industry than a university is prepared to pay. A senior engineer with decades of experience may command a salary well above \$200,000 along with bonuses or equity. After four decades of teaching, advising and research, my salary is barely half of that. Because of salary compression, I earn considerably less than most newly hired assistant professors entering the university today.

Why accept that trade? For generations, higher education offered an implicit bargain.



University of Illinois Springfield United Faculty members and UISUF supporters picket on campus on April 8 after going on strike days earlier. The two-week walkout had been about pay increases and more. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Faculty members accepted lower lifetime earnings in exchange for forms of compensation that were not entirely financial: intellectual independence, the opportunity to pursue long-term research that might not be considered "sexy" today and, after a rigorous probationary period, tenure.

Tenure was never simply a luxury perk. It was part of the compensation package—a discount universities offered to recruit people they could not afford to match in the private sector. It also served a public purpose by protecting teaching and research from political inter-

ference and arbitrary dismissal. That bargain is now under strain.

Across the country, financially troubled universities are pursuing corporate-style restructurings, eliminating programs and laying off faculty members. At my institution, the Illinois Institute of Technology, administrators recently eliminated roughly a third of the workforce in a single sweep.

In such purges, veteran professors are not necessarily protected by loyalty, decades of service or tenure. Sometimes we survive for a less flattering reason: We are cheap.

My salary has been compressed by decades of raises well below inflation and stagnant institutional pay scales. I carry a substantial teaching and advising load for far less than the cost of replacing me. The result is an uncomfortable inversion: A university may eliminate a more highly paid professor while retaining a veteran whose compensation is far under the market value of the work.

That is not a defense of inefficiency. It is evidence of a broken compensation system.

To the public, faculty reductions can look like overdue administrative discipline. Universities do need to examine their budgets, and professors should not be exempt from scrutiny. But the public should also understand what happens when institutions reduce job security while continuing to pay way less than competing employers.

The academic talent pipeline begins to weaken.

Why would a promising young researcher accept a faculty offer of \$120,000 with uncertain employment prospects when a technology company or defense contractor offers \$180,000 on the first day? Some will still choose academia, motivated by teaching, research or public service. But fewer will be able to afford the choice, especially when housing, family obligations and student debt are part of the calculation.

They have years before they catch up to their classmates because they needed a Ph.D.

The consequences will not be confined to faculty lounges. Students will encounter larger classes, fewer course offerings and a more transient instructional workforce. Universities may discover that it is possible to reduce payroll without immediately reducing enrollment, but impossible to preserve educational quality indefinitely while making academic careers less competitive.

Tenure is often caricatured as a shield for lazy professors. In reality, it is one component of a larger bargain that has helped universities attract experts away from more lucrative careers. If institutions want the flexibility of corporations, they may eventually have to offer corporate compensation, with the inescapable effect on tuition.

Otherwise, the most marketable scientists, engineers and scholars will do what rational workers do: They will go where their expertise is valued—and paid for.

Francisco Ruiz has been a faculty member at the Illinois Institute of Technology for nearly four decades. He is a two-time winner of the university's top teaching award. The views expressed in this op-ed are the author's alone and do not represent his employer's.

OPINION

Modern-day billionaires don't compare to Julius Rosenwald

By Harold Pollack
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

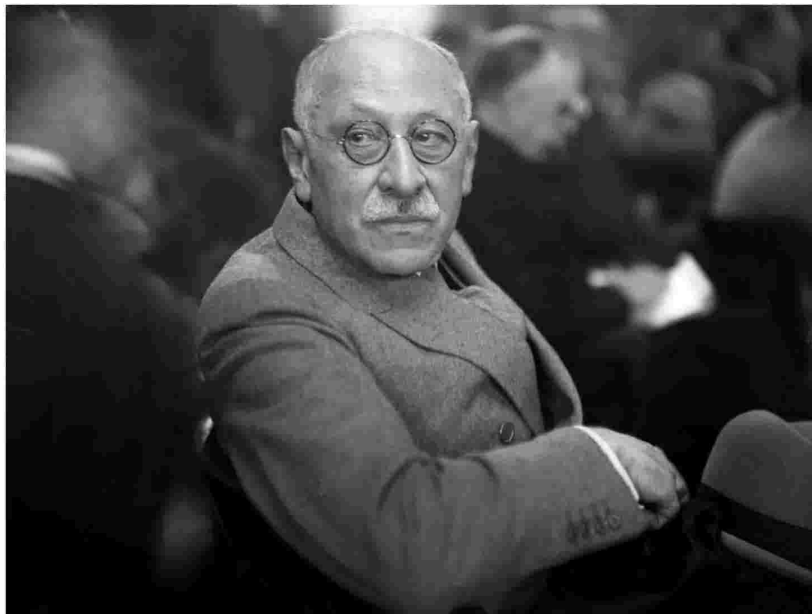
Some weeks ago, my wife and I visited the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry to see the moving commemoration of Anne Frank. On our way out of the exhibit, we passed a plaque commemorating the museum's founder, Julius Rosenwald. Wednesday marked what would have been his 164th birthday. This is a fitting season to mark the achievements of arguably the greatest Chicagoan in our city's history.

As outlined in the magisterial biography produced by his grandson, Peter Ascoli, and a remarkable documentary by Ariva Kempner, Rosenwald's accomplishments were breathtaking. He was the founding entrepreneur of Sears, Roebuck & Co., the Amazon of its day, whose mail order catalogue brought desperately needed goods to every corner of America.

Because of these achievements, Rosenwald became the progressive era's equivalent of a modern-day billionaire, though his wealth (today's equivalent of less than \$4 billion) was modest by the standards of Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller or today's tech bros. That comparison makes all the more astonishing what Rosenwald was able to accomplish with his paltry few billion.

In the summer of 1910, a friend sent Rosenwald "Up from Slavery," Booker T. Washington's autobiography, alongside a biography of William H. Baldwin, a philanthropist who sought to improve educational opportunities for African Americans. Moved by the parallels between the Black and Jewish experiences of oppression, Rosenwald connected with Washington and others to build an estimated 5,000 schools that served roughly one-third of all Black students in the South. By 1932, an estimated 650,000 Black students attended Rosenwald schools. Moreover, because the Sears catalog did not racially discriminate, economic historians credit the catalog as a major tool for Black consumers to side-step the indignities and discrimination of Jim Crow commerce.

Rosenwald supported the construction of YMGCAs in segregated cities across America, so that Black migrants had places to stay when they visited cities such as Chicago seeking work. Rosenwald family resources helped provide the facilities that made possible the



Julius Rosenwald, seen in 1926, was a Chicago businessman and philanthropist. He is best known as the part-owner of Sears, Roebuck & Co. and for starting the Rosenwald Fund, which donated millions to educate rural African American children in the South. Rosenwald was also a founder of the Museum of Science and Industry and served as its president from 1927 to 1932, the year he died. Besides helping Jewish immigrants who came to Chicago, Rosenwald was most famous for establishing more than 5,000 Rosenwald schools in the rural South. **CHICAGO HERALD & EXAMINER**

accomplishments of the Tuskegee airmen, and supported NAACP legal efforts that ultimately overturned school segregation. Rosenwald fellowships supported W.E.B. Du Bois, Marian Anderson, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Dr. Charles Drew, John Hope Franklin and so many others.

Here in Chicago, Rosenwald built apartment complexes for low-income Chicagoans. He provided substantial support for what is now University of Chicago Medicine. He pursued fair labor practices through collective bargaining. He was a founding benefactor for the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, now the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, which I am proud to call my professional home.

Rosenwald's myriad achievements provide a chastening contrast to today's billionaires such as Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. These men must be honored for producing innovative products that improve millions of people's lives. America is blessed to have billionaire entrepreneurs who accomplish such things. Yet Rosenwald understood that people who command such great resources also have a responsibility to use these resources to help others. Adjusted for inflation, each of these men commands vastly greater resources than Rosenwald ever did. Yet Rosenwald accomplished far more to help others, in far more difficult times. Like Bill Gates and MacKenzie Scott today, Rosenwald realized that people who command great wealth have

corresponding responsibilities to help others. As a liberal Democrat, I don't share the political views of the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry's current benefactor, Ken Griffin. From across the ideological divide, I must respect that he deploys considerable resources for valuable philanthropy.

Musk has behaved in precisely the opposite manner, working to defund essential global health programs he could have easily funded out of his own pocket, costing hundreds of thousands of human lives. It's pitiful to see such a talented and blessed person make such destruction a defining legacy of his time on this earth.

The discipline and economy of Rosenwald's philanthropy also provide a chastening contrast to our current hidebound efforts to help people. On a shoestring

budget, he and his community partners built 5,000 schools. The city of Chicago recently pursued a worthy effort to build affordable apartments on the West Side. A \$30 million effort produced only 44 apartments. Had the city spent that same \$30 million to simply buy market-rate apartments, it could have helped five times as many people. Adding a dose of Rosenwald's no-nonsense business acumen to our current efforts to execute good works would really help.

So happy belated 164th birthday, Julius Rosenwald. We must all learn from your good example.

Harold Pollack is the Helen Ross distinguished service professor at the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice at the University of Chicago.

Voice of the People

Advice for Democratic leaders

Regarding Clarence Ignore's insightful commentary on Democrats winking their "big tent" ("It's time for Democrats to widen their 'big tent,'" Aug. 10), while I have never been a conspirator, it strikes me that the nationwide Democratic socialist political candidates may actually be Republican Party plants.

A Gallup Poll released last year found that 66% of Democrats had a positive view of socialism. Yet, last year an NBC poll found that only 18% of Americans viewed socialism positively.

Even if the GOP is not using Democratic socialist candidates as plants, reasonable-thinking Democrats know that socialism has no place in the party. Unless they have lost interest in winning the midterms, Democratic leadership needs to stop brushing off socialist candidates as harmless threat.

— Terry Tukash, Western Springs

Media on democratic socialists

Why are the Tribune and the rest of the responsible news media burying the lead in their coverage of the Wisconsin Democratic primary for governor? Democratic socialist Francesca Hong lost in a landslide to David Crowley and the other moderate candidates for the nomination. About 61% of primary voters split their votes among a slew of moderate candidates. In a deeply divided electorate where the news media typically proclaim 55% of the vote to be a landslide, there's no doubt there was a landslide against Hong with the more moderate candidates collectively garnering 61% of the primary votes.

It's interesting how even mainstream media outlets are sensationalizing and overrating the so-called democratic socialist candidates while accepting as "normal" far-right radical, white supremacist and morally corrupt GOP candidates.

There's a frightening imbalance in how the mainstream media



People yell during a campaign rally for Wisconsin gubernatorial candidate Francesca Hong on Aug. 2 in Milwaukee. Hong, a democratic socialist, lost the Democratic nomination to moderate David Crowley. **JOSHUA LOTT/GETTY**

report on these candidates, which tends to take it pretty easy on the latter.

— Dan Lauber, River Forest

'Medicare for All' is a folly

Regarding the opinions expressed in support for "Medicare for All," particularly from the leftist democratic socialists, indeed the opposite will occur: Medicare for none.

For example, Australia utilizes a dual public-private universal system called Medicare, whereas, the United States relies primarily on a multipayer private insurance system supplemented by public programs like Medicare (for seniors) and Medicaid (for low-income individuals).

U.S. citizens and those who are lawfully present in the United States are eligible to enroll in the Affordable Care Act's marketplace for healthcare, including screenings.

Australians, in a nation of 28 million people, face significant wait times for specialist appointments and specific diagnostic scans or elective surgeries, ranging from weeks to a year.

By contrast, with the U.S. Medicare system, established in 1965 to

protect seniors age 65 and older, response times for appointments, tests and procedures are relatively quick, with numerous clinical choices.

Expanding Medicare to all 342 million Americans would swamp demand for medical services. That's the way to go if you do not mind waiting a year to get an MRI or see a specialist.

The U.S. already faces a projected shortage of primary care physicians and specialists, which will worsen wait times for appointments, tests and treatments; compress doctor-patient visit lengths; and create havoc on hospital capacity.

"Medicare for All" would also require major tax changes to replace the current system of employer-sponsored and private premiums and Medicare Advantage, which now allow for relatively quick access, the envy of the world.

— David N. Simon, Chicago

GOP's effect on national debt

Letter writer Larry Craig left out the policies of the two political parties in his letter published on Aug. 11 ("We can't ignore national debt").

The Republican Party has ignored the national debt every time Republican presidents have signed bills that have cut taxes on the wealthy. President Donald Trump has signed legislation increasing the debt during both of his administrations. The national debt grew by roughly 40% during his first term.

This is the Republican economic policy. President Ronald Reagan called it supply-side economics; he said the benefits of this policy would trickle down. Republican strategist Grover Norquist said he wanted to see federal government reduced to a size in which it could be drowned in a bathtub. Republicans as a party are committed to make that happen.

The Democratic Party believes government should focus on the greater good for the country and its people. The last three Democratic presidents inherited terrible economic conditions and had to spend to rescue the country from soaring joblessness, the housing crisis and the pandemic, respectively. They did not focus on tax cuts for those who didn't need them.

The Republican Party is focused on making sure the federal government does not function by starving it of revenue. The Democratic Party is focused on making sure the federal government addresses the needs of the country and its people, as only the federal government can do.

— Darlene Ruffin, Chicago

RSV, flu vaccines needed

This week, the president issued an executive order decreasing the number of vaccines recommended, without any medical input or apparently any medical data. The American Academy of Pediatrics' recent news alert for its healthcare providers noted how more

children were hospitalized with influenza in the last season than in the last 16 years. It states that "the cumulative hospitalization rate for influenza among children 0 to 17 years of age was the second highest for children since the 2009-2010 season and the highest for children 5-17 years."

Also, Infectious Disease Advisor on Aug. 10 reported, "Hospitalization rates related to respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) remain higher in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children compared with their peers in the general US population, according to study findings."

The RSV and influenza vaccines are two of the pediatric vaccines that the administration wants removed from the list of recommendations. Removing them from the list means that insurance companies ultimately may not pay for these two vaccines that are obviously still needed, in view of the data above. The flu and RSV are not always benign infections. Nearly 300 children died from influenza in the 2024-25 influenza season. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website itself estimates that before the introduction of RSV vaccine, 50,000 to 80,000 children younger than 5 years old were hospitalized with RSV.

In a move that I suspect is trying to support parent choice, the administration is decreasing the choices parents should be able to make to protect their children. If a parent or guardian does not want to vaccinate their children, they can decline. Why take the choice to vaccinate away from the parents who want to provide these and other vaccines for their children? And why take the stance that these vaccines are not needed, when they obviously are?

— icy Cade-Bell, Tinley Park

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OPINION

AOC Tries to Make a Joke of Woke



POTOMAC WATCH
By Kimberley A. Strassel

Sometimes what resonates isn't what politicians say, but the accompanying emotion. Ronald Reagan's posthumous parade in 2021 by a man with a long record of violent crimes, are never coming back.

Is this the part where we laugh with AOC? Ha, ha. "Woke 1."

It's inappropriate even to label it "woke"—which today carries a lighthearted, even dismissive feel—or "crazy," which suggests brief unreason, or a moment that just "happened." AOC dished up these excuses—complete with a dash of poli-sci jargon—to close the book, explaining that during "this time," especially "during Covid, there was a huge opening of the Overton window," a moment to "entertain any and every policy." Such wild times!

That misstates the timeline and sells short the dedicated purveyors of Woke 1. Well before Covid, AOC had introduced her "Green New Deal," a Trojan horse for a government economic takeover. Nancy Pelosi had introduced a bill to federalize elections. Dishonest scholars and journalists were rewriting history to justify radical policies. The nation was handed a new, enforced lexicon—"equity," "the unhoused," "cisgender," "birthing persons," "Latinx." Mobs were mobilized, donors tapped, costly campaigns waged to pressure corporations, organize universities, rewrite policy platforms, elect radicals, and silence dissenters. The Biden administration

More tragically, ask the victims of criminals who were let loose by "progressive" prosecutors. The six people run over by an SUV at the Waukegan, Wis., Christmas parade in 2021 by a man with a long record of violent crimes, are never coming back.

Check in with the Americans who lost jobs or friends, or who were otherwise canceled for refusing to fall in line with Covid orthodoxy, for landing on the wrong side of the #MeToo rush, or for failing to renounce their "whiteness" abjectly enough. Ask the millions more who were branded Nazis and fascists and bigots and xenophobes for wanting a secure border or declining to affirm that men can get pregnant.

Woke 1 was never funny. Check in with the Americans who lost jobs or friends, or who were otherwise canceled for refusing to fall in line with Covid orthodoxy, for landing on the wrong side of the #MeToo rush, or for failing to renounce their "whiteness" abjectly enough. Ask the millions more who were branded Nazis and fascists and bigots and xenophobes for wanting a secure border or declining to affirm that men can get pregnant.

adopted much of this as official policy and tasked the federal apparatus with strictly enforcing DEI, redefining Title IX at women's expense, creating the Disinformation Governance Board, and imposing "environmental justice."

Ha, ha. "Woke 1." AOC's *mea culpa* non est was no expression of political conversion. History is littered with examples of serious men and women who began with one political persuasion, then

Ask those who were canceled, or killed by released criminals, how funny it was.

through thought and experience shifted to new positions and explained why. AOC not only didn't offer any apology for past "crazy," she didn't offer any account of how she so quickly evolved from wanting to end all policing to wanting "as low a crime rate as possible." That's a cosmic shift, that calls into question her movement's entire worldview. Does she no longer believe "mass incarceration" is a function of "White supremacy," as she said in 2019? Does she still think "police brutality" is a "public-health crisis"? Would she still end qualified immunity? Why, or why not? We're not told.

"Woke 1." Ha ha. The only thing the radical left seems to have learned is that some policies are so toxic

politically as to deny them office—and so must be massaged or disappeared, at least for now. See failed Wisconsin gubernatorial hopeful Francesca Hong, who tried so hard to walk back her calls to abolish Thanksgiving. Or Michigan Democratic U.S. Senate nominee Abdul El-Sayed, who has deleted from public view a big stash of YouTube files, including ones in which he calls to defend the police, says that Fourth of July "fireworks suck" and suggests replacing the Second Amendment with a constitutional right to healthcare. In response to CNN queries about the deletions, his campaign complained that "cherry-picked comments from old podcasts don't reflect his beliefs today." Mr. El-Sayed, 41, made his fireworks comments not in the "crazy" old days of 2020, but in July 2024.

It's also too much to ask Americans to blink away Woke 1, when Woke 2 (or whatever version we are on) is just as noxious. Take a gander at the new Democratic Socialists of America platform, which calls to abolish entire segments of the Constitution and for a world "without capitalism."

The question every voter needs to ask is this: In the absence of an explanation for the radical left's scurry from its past, should anyone trust that once in power, with passions running high, we wouldn't be right back to Woke 1? Maybe we should give AOC credit for knowing exactly what she's doing.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Roger Lowenstein

A Wager On America

Over/Under

By David Bockino

Pegasus, 336 pages, \$29.95

If you're concerned about the ubiquity of sports betting today, David Bockino says not to worry. In "Over/Under," he argues that betting, which has been pervasive for as long as Americans have obsessed over balls and strikes, is a primary reason why sports became popular in the first place.

Mr. Bockino, a professor of sports management at Elon University and a former researcher at ESPN, wants us to view gambling not as a vice but as "an important catalyst for the growth of nearly every American sport." Showing little patience for those upset about sports betting, he chirps, "maybe gambling is actually good for you."

Some of his cases work better than others. He persuasively argues that the National Collegiate Athletic Association basketball tournament wouldn't be "nearly as popular as it is today" were it not for office pools. And his notes that the founders of Augusta National Golf Club, the home of the Masters, struggled to generate income or attract members after the club's 1932 opening until they added an annual competition a few years later that briefly allowed wagering.

Mr. Bockino's argument that betting fueled baseball's rise in the mid-19th century is less convincing. He relies on contemporary newspaper quotes such as, "one great objective to the game, as it is now conducted, is that it has become a means for the practice of gambling." He is on firmer ground with college football. Fans were wagering on the Harvard-Yale game by 1890. Students got so distracted by gambling that Harper's Weekly headlined an article, "How to Cure Betting at Yale."

The author documents how early team owners in the National Football League, founded in 1920, were gamblers and horseplayers, and how a bookmaker tried (but failed) to fix the 1946 championship game. Bert Bell, a team owner and the league's postwar commissioner, had a reputation for gambling as well as drinking. In the words of Damon Runyon, the bard of gambling lowlifes, "Mr. Bert Bell does not get out of bed in time for daylight games."

But the fact that NFL owners were horseplayers does not prove the author's thesis that gambling was essential to the growth of American sports. The mob invested in pizzerias, but that doesn't mean pizza owes its popularity to the numbers racket. Mr. Bockino has a chicken-and-egg problem. It is difficult to identify causality, but he seems not to have considered that fans might have developed a genuine affection for their teams. The author outruns the evidence when he claims the NFL was "designed for gambling." He cites the advent of the player draft in 1936 for equalizing teams and eliciting better interest—but it created fan interest, too.

Mr. Bockino tells an interesting story of how the professional leagues evolved from adamant opponents of gambling to full-on opportunists. Even after New Jersey legalized casinos in the 1970s, sports betting outside Nevada was mostly forbidden. A federal law in 1992 created an effective nationwide ban with a few exceptions. But offshore internet betting, and the exception enjoyed by fantasy leagues, eroded the principles of sports impresarios.

Mr. Bockino shares juicy emails in 2014 between Adam Silver, the commissioner of the National Basketball Association, and Steve Lipscomb, a law-school chum and the founder of the World Poker Tour. Mr. Lipscomb, who had proved the telegraphic potential of gambling, thought legalization of sports betting was coming and urged Mr. Silver to flip the NBA's oppositional stance and reap "a multi-billion-dollar windfall." Mr. Silver flipped.

In 2015 the Supreme Court invalidated the federal ban on sports betting. Today the NBA partners with FanDuel; baseball's Chicago Cubs has a deal with DraftKings. Mr. Bockino slyly observes that integrity has a price, but he does not consider that permissiveness may also have a price.

Sports and gambling in the U.S. have long been intertwined. Several early team owners in the National Football League were horseplayers.

Affecting a tough-guy realism, Mr. Bockino is contemptuous of antigambling officials in the era before legalization and tolerant of the worst rogues. He accuses professional and college associations of being "fixated" on keeping their sports clean, as if that were a bad thing. The author tries to minimize the Black Sox scandal (when the 1919 World Series was thrown), asserting it was "far more complex" than understood. He doesn't convince. And he is indulgent toward the local gambling culture that produced an addict in Pete Rose. Major League Baseball discovered that, as a manager in 1987, Rose bet "an average of \$2,000 per game on as many as four to eight games a day, approximately four days per week." How many Pete Roses, lured by cheap parlay bets and "free" money teasers, is FanDuel nurturing?

"Over/Under" has interesting nuggets. In the early 20th century, when "doping" horses with stimulants was common, bettors gave inside intel a familiar name: dope. Mr. Bockino recounts the fascinating history of the point spread, which helped turned lopsided games into betting fodder. But the author's streetwise style ("bucks" for dollars) falls short of the Runyonesque mark. He clumsily glosses World War I as "one of the worst wars in human history."

As to whether the positives of sports gambling outweigh the negatives, his conclusion that it depends on whom you ask is unsatisfying. Mr. Bockino nods at the risks of addiction and corruption, but he all but ignores the threat to the experience of fandom. Betting has always existed, but proportion matters. When wagers supplant competition as the main attraction—when fans care more about their parlays than their teams—something is lost.

Mr. Lowenstein is the author of "Ways and Means: Lincoln and His Cabinet and the Financing of the Civil War."

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No American Should Be Afraid to Pray

HOUSES OF WORSHIP
By Moshe Davis

Americans are growing afraid to pray. According to polling by Harris, nearly half of regular worshippers say they feel less safe attending services in person, and 39% report that safety concerns have changed how often they attend.

In the past year, a gunman opened fire at the Islamic Center in San Diego, killing three. A shooter attacked a Catholic church in Minneapolis during a school Mass, killing two children and wounding 18. A terrorist drove his car into Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Mich., and attempted to set off a bomb. An attack on a Latter-day Saints chapel in Grand Blanc, Mich., left four dead and eight wounded. The New York City Police Department and Federal Bureau of Investigation thwarted a plot to attack a Manhattan synagogue.

While violent attacks of this kind make headlines, a quieter threat plays out on sidewalks across the U.S. Mobs gather outside houses of worship and make worshippers feel unsafe to enter. Well-funded, highly organized political groups operate against religious services without consequences. Code Pink, a disruptive left-wing protest group, invaded services at a California church, shouting at attendees including small children. Code Pink is purportedly funded by Neville Roy Singham, a Shanghai-

based financier who has directed hundreds of millions of dollars into a global network of nonprofits. Pal-Awda, which has demonstrated outside New York City synagogues and led chants of "Say it loud, say it clear, we support Hamas here," sent its "highest salutations to the Palestinian Resistance" on Oct. 7, 2023.

Houses of worship have had rallies staged outside their doors, with mobs chanting "Death to America" and "Globalize the Intifada." Beyond the immediate security risk to worshippers, this rhetoric also promotes radicalization and normalizes the targeting of religion. When would-be attackers see crowds intimidate worshippers freely week after week, they may conclude it is acceptable to go further.

Activities of this kind are happening across the country. When New York state enacted buffer-zone protections in May, the coalition that organizes disruptive gatherings outside synagogues and churches published a victory statement. Pal-Awda, Code Pink and dozens of allied organizations boasted that the law "was reduced to a mere shell of its original form," covering "conduct that is already a crime under existing law, making this new law redundant."

They're right. The state law criminalizes only harassment near a house of worship, with harassment defined as conduct that places a person in reasonable fear for his safety.

That conduct is already enforceable under existing New York statutes. Adding a misdemeanor charge within 50 feet of a house of worship adds little deterrence. In March, after the New York City Council passed its own buffer bills, the same coalition celebrated that the legislation created no "new legal authority or criminal liability."

A new federal bill would help those who are fearful of entering a house of worship.

I know that effort well. Protecting houses of worship was work I helped begin under New York Mayor Eric Adams, and I understand the nuances of crafting legislation that can win the widest support. But when your opponents keep thanking you for your bills, something has gone wrong. Local legislators have been the most exposed to the pressure campaigns these groups run, and this is exactly the kind of problem the federal government exists to solve.

That is why I have spent months developing a federal bill with real teeth. This month, members of both parties introduced it in both chambers of Congress. The Right to Worship Act would establish a 100-foot zone around a house of worship during services and prohibit

conduct that impedes worshippers from attending or disrupts the service inside. While existing laws cover harassment and obstruction, they don't reach the organized disruption that actually makes Americans feel afraid to enter their houses of worship. Courts have repeatedly upheld buffer-zone protections for funerals, polling sites and other places where people deserve to be left in peace; a law addressing disruptive behavior at houses of worship is on solid constitutional ground.

The Family Research Council has tracked nearly 1,400 acts of hostility against American churches since 2018, with incidents rising almost tenfold over that period. The FBI reported 377 hate crimes at houses of worship across the U.S. in the past year. A Harris poll finds that more than half of parents with young children across faiths say safety concerns tied to recent events have altered their attendance habits. No parent should have to think twice about bringing a child to pray.

Worship and faith are a fundamental part of our democracy, and they strengthen society. Hate groups don't get to decide who feels safe. Congress should pass the Right to Worship Act, so that every American can worship freely.

Mr. Davis is the founder of the *Leonine Project* and was the inaugural executive director of the New York Mayor's Office to Combat Antisemitism.

A Yale Prof Has Ideas About Your Kids

By Lincoln Fillmore

I almost didn't believe what I heard. Samuel Moyn, a professor at Yale Law School, told an interviewer that parents can't be rewarded because they have a "divergence of interest" with their own children. He suggests assigning extra weight to the ballots of "the youngest eligible voters"—strangers to the children—lest children continue to be "hostages of their parents."

Maybe I associate too much with loving, devoted parents and not enough with intellectuals who think parents are holding their kids hostage. In my own life, I recognize that my children's interests and my own regularly diverge—that's part of being a parent.

This week my daughter wanted to play Uno while I was in the middle of working, a clear divergence of interest. We played Uno. That's what parents do—sacrifice for their children.

There are exceptions. Some parents fail in their responsibility. Our laws rightly protect children in those circumstances. But when tragic exceptions become the foundation of public policy, we create unintended consequences far more damaging than addressing those exceptions directly.

Samuel Moyn thinks you and they have a divergence of interest.

Living in a free society requires us to begin by assuming that parents act in their children's best interests. If we stop trusting parents with their children, someone must take their place. Schools? Government? Law professors and 19-year-olds? Each—except the "youngest eligible voters" Mr. Moyn favors—may possess valuable knowledge. But all inevitably carry their own bi-

ases, and none have the intimate understanding, sustained commitment or enduring responsibility that parents have for their children.

Utah law explicitly states that parents bear the primary responsibility for educating children. When parents enroll a child in school, they aren't transferring responsibility but choosing a partner to help fulfill it. The parents are the primary partners because they are responsible for their children's education and well-being. Authority should follow from responsibility.

Teachers offer professional knowledge. School leaders offer experience. Parents offer something neither can: an intimate knowledge of their own child and a lifelong commitment to that child's flourishing. Educational choice matters because one child may thrive in a highly structured classroom, while another flourishes in a school built around the arts, project-based

learning or career and technical education. No single option will be the best for every child, and no statewide system can know those children the way their parents do.

The strongest schools understand they are joining families in a shared mission. For children and schools to succeed, educators and parents should be on the same team, each fulfilling their role for the benefit of the child. But we must be clear that the parents are in charge.

Trusting parents isn't naive. It's an acknowledgment of a simple truth: No government official, no school administrator, no distant expert, no random young voter will ever match a parent's depth of understanding, love or willingness to sacrifice when navigating the inevitable "divergent interests" between parent and child.

Mr. Fillmore, a Republican, is a Utah state senator.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

UWM Is a Government Mortgage Canary

The risks that investors and regulators aren't watching are usually the ones that jump up and bite.

An example came last week when billionaire Mat Ishbia's United Wholesale Mortgage (UWM), one of the country's largest mortgage lenders, required a \$2 billion private capital infusion after his interest-rate hedge went south. The bigger story is how Mr. Ishbia is getting rich from making risky mortgages backed by taxpayers.

After the housing meltdown, big banks pulled back from the mortgage market as the government required them to hold more capital. Non-banks filled the gap, though they don't have to abide rigorous capital, liquidity and stress tests like banks. They can also game financial regulations with interest-rate hedges. That can make them more likely to get into trouble, as UWM shows.

Non-banks originate the vast majority of loans backed by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the two giant government-sponsored enterprises (GSEs), Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. These loans are pooled and sold to private investors with government guarantees. This lending system invites moral hazard, as non-banks make money by originating more mortgages.

But if a borrower later defaults, taxpayers are on the hook. Early in the pandemic, as mortgage rates plunged, lenders competed for business by easing underwriting standards. When interest rates rose in 2022, lenders further eased their standards. This let them make mortgages to borrowers who wouldn't have otherwise qualified based on their incomes.

By late 2022, 70% of FHA borrowers had debt-to-income ratios exceeding 43%, which is generally considered risky. That's up from 28% in 2012

and 60% before the pandemic. As inflation started to bite, defaults increased. About 15% of FHA borrowers who took out a loan between June 2021 and March 2024 fell seriously delinquent within a year.

To prevent foreclosures, Joe Biden's regulators used the FHA insurance fund to cover arrears of struggling borrowers and offered to reduce their monthly payments by up to 25% for three years. The reprieve reduced foreclosures, but it magnified moral hazard by encouraging lenders to make riskier loans, knowing the government would rescue borrowers.

A case in point is UWM, which expanded its FHA lending after the housing market stalled. The result: more defaults. According to FHA data, 21.5% of UWM mortgages over the last two years fell seriously delinquent within a year of origination, compared to roughly 11% of its loans in 2022 and 2023.

Remarkably, 12 mortgage lenders have even higher one-year serious delinquency rates for recent mortgages, including Ages Mortgage (27.3%), Top Flite Financial (24.5%) and Loan United (23.7%). Most of these lenders also make loans that are guaranteed by Fannie and Freddie, so the FHA data could signal problems in loans guaranteed by the two GSEs.

A sample of FHA mortgages recently reviewed by the Housing and Urban Development Department found 76% contained a defect, up from 67% in late 2024. This could reflect stepped up scrutiny by the Trump team as well as eased underwriting. Foreclosures remain low, but that's because the FHA continues to cover missed payments for borrowers who default.

The FHA ought to make mortgage lenders foot at least some of the costs for defaulted loans. Why should taxpayers backstop a billionaire's risky housing bets?

The struggling lender has used FHA taxpayer guarantees to make risky mortgage bets.

Russia Disqualifies an Antiwar Party

As Ukraine's long-range strikes bring the war to Russia, is Vladimir Putin worried his "special military operation" is growing more unpopular at home? That might explain the Kremlin's decision to disqualify Yabloko, an antiwar political party, from next month's parliamentary elections.

Yabloko has called the war in Ukraine "a grave crime" and campaigned for "a ceasefire, diplomacy, and peace!" In a Monday ruling, Russia's Supreme Court ordered the opposition party excluded from September's ballot. Among other excuses, a pro-Kremlin political party had accused Yabloko of copyright violations.

Yabloko hasn't won a single legislative seat since 2003. Even if it picked up a limited number next month, it wouldn't make a difference in a Duma that functions as a rubber stamp for Mr. Putin. Yet Russian civilians have begun to feel the toll of the war, as Ukraine hits military and energy targets deep within Russia. Yabloko offered a potential outlet to express their discontent.

The Russian news agency Interfax reported last month that consumer prices for gasoline in June were up 19.9%, compared with a year ago. Nearly all Russian regions this summer have experienced some shortage-induced restrictions

on gasoline sales, reports the opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta Europe.

Ukraine has also struck logistics hubs for the Amazon-like e-commerce company Wildberries, which Kyiv says has supplied the Russian military with drone components and other equipment. Small-business owners in Russia have lamented how their inventories were wiped out. "I'm officially broke," one distraught vendor posted on social media.

The opposition publication Meduza in June analyzed data from Yandex, Russia's main online search engine, and found a surge in queries about when the war would end. "A significant bulk" of these searches occurred in "regions where the Kremlin has prioritized installing air defense systems but largely failed to defend against Ukraine's long-range strikes," the Institute for the Study of War said.

Even polling from the Kremlin-linked Public Opinion Foundation shows a change. Mr. Putin's approval rating began the year near 80%, but that dropped to 66% the week of July 12, and it has since hovered at 70%. Mr. Putin has demonstrated again that if a party or a candidate has the potential to embarrass him, he will prevent that outcome, one way or another. That's why Yabloko had to go.

Is Putin's war in Ukraine hurting him at home? Consider Yabloko.

Fauci, Covid Vaccines and Miscarriages

Anthony Fauci undermined his credibility by obfuscating and stretching the truth. Now his critics are doing the same by spinning Dr. Fauci's newly released text messages, claiming he covered up the Covid vaccines' alleged risks to pregnant women.

Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson and Kentucky's Rand Paul this week published text messages obtained from Dr. Fauci's government phone, and specifically an exchange from January 2021 in which Biden officials discussed whether Covid vaccines should be recommended for pregnant women. Trials for the vaccines, as for most medicines and immunizations, excluded pregnant women.

So there was uncertainty at the time about whether they should be recommended for pregnant women, and if so, at what stage of gestation. The texts show Dr. Fauci and company were sensitive to even hypothetical risks.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy asked when "more robust data" on vaccine risks for pregnant women might be available. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Rochelle Walensky said the agency had a registry to track pregnant women for at least a year after their inoculations. Dr. Fauci chimed in: "There are no data or theoretical reason to believe that vaccinating early versus later in pregnancy would be preferred."

Hours later he added: "I asked around a bit more and another issue came up that you need to be aware of. Since many people have significant cytokines storm and fever after the 2nd dose, this theoretically could be associated with miscarriage in the 1st trimester." He's referring to the flu-like inflammatory response that some people experience after vaccination.

But Dr. Fauci also wrote in the same thread: "A large number (more than 10,000) pregnant women have been vaccinated. No issues have

arisen." This was very early data, without follow-up. But he supported weighing risks against the benefits since Covid "can be a serious disease especially in pregnancy."

President Trump's CDC still agrees. Covid vaccination "has not been linked to increased health risks for pregnant women or babies," it says. Yet pregnant women who get sick with Covid are likelier to experience severe illness, including "increased risk of complications that can affect your health and the health of your baby."

Sen. Johnson says the CDC's recommendations relied on a flawed New England Journal of Medicine study from June 2021, which reported a 12.6% rate of miscarriage, similar to the baseline risk, for a group of vaccinated women whose pregnancies had been completed. He claims the data actually documented a 82% rate, which is false.

That study was sloppy. It mainly consisted of women inoculated during the third trimester. Since miscarriage by medical definition is before 20 weeks, the reported rate was misleading. Mr. Johnson adjusts the denominator by removing the third-trimester women. But this is also misleading because the study's data covered completed pregnancies. His calculation leaves out women who were inoculated early and were still pregnant.

After a researcher noted the study's flaw in 2021, the authors acknowledged it and posted an updated analysis of women inoculated early in pregnancy, which showed a similar risk of miscarriage (12.8%). Other studies have come to a similar conclusion.

Vaccine skeptics claim Dr. Fauci misled pregnant women. But there's no contradiction between his texts in early 2021 and his later public statements citing no evidence of increased risks. Dr. Fauci's critics are confusing the issue, and probably also pregnant women.

He didn't lie to pregnant women about vax safety. Trump's CDC agrees.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Here's Why Capitalism Feels Unfair to Gen Z

Gerard Baker is right that socialism is the wrong answer ("Socialism Is the Wrong Answer, but the Questions Are Real," Editor at Large, Aug. 11). Every number he cites is a scoreboard number, a measure of who holds the claims, and none of them measures what anybody eats.

For more than four decades consumption inequality has barely moved, income at the bottom has roughly doubled in real terms after transfers and taxes, and consumption poverty has fallen from 33.8% in 1980 to 6% in 2022.

So why does modern capitalism feel so unfair? Look at where the squeeze actually is: housing, health-care and college. Then look at what those three have in common: The government subsidizes the buyer with one hand and restricts the seller with the other, with mortgage subsidies against zoning, student

loans against an accreditation monopoly and insurance mandates against certificate-of-need laws and licensing. Subsidize demand, choke supply and the subsidy lands in the price. That isn't capitalism failing but one policy error committed three times—in the three markets where prices were never allowed to do their job.

And tariffs are the same instinct without the disguise, since a tariff is a tax on the American buyer, and the New York Fed found that nearly 90% of the 2025 tariff burden landed on American firms and households.

Mr. Baker wants to make capitalism great again. You don't do that by fixing the scoreboard. You do it by growing the pie, which means letting people build houses, train doctors and open schools.

ADAM BERNIS
Sherman Oaks, Calif.

Spain's Migration Invasion Wasn't Normal

Although some of the conclusions in the essay "The Spanish Border Chaos Illusion: Europe's Borders Are Finally Working" (Review, Aug. 8) can certainly be shared, I believe that the title itself conveys a misleading impression of what happened in Ceuta recently. The sense of chaos hasn't been an illusion, and I believe it is too optimistic, if not naive, to describe a full-scale assault on a poorly defended border as a spontaneous movement.

The entry of 72,000 illegal immigrants within 24 hours in a city with a population of 85,000 went beyond a simple peak in irregular migratory pressure. The use of migratory pressure as a means of political destabilization is the central factor in this crisis, and the article didn't give enough attention to the need to investigate Morocco's responsibility, whether through intent or negligence. Without any le-

gitimate legal basis, Morocco disputes Spain's sovereignty over the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla. Recall a smaller-scale precedent in 2021 for this same deliberate use of irregular migration. The European Parliament at that time didn't hesitate to hold Morocco responsible for pursuing a strategy comparable to that employed by Belarus on the Polish border. The article's considerations regarding the importance of taking seriously everything related to the phenomenon of irregular migration—and, I would add, its use as a weapon of hybrid warfare by certain countries—are precisely what prompted me to write.

JOSÉ MARÍA AZNAR
Madrid

Mr. Aznar served as prime minister of Spain, 1996-2004. He is a director of News Corp. parent of The Wall Street Journal.

Bond Investors Want the Fed to Raise Rates

Your editorial "Warsh Makes Markets Do Their Job" (Aug. 1) takes a shot at bond traders: "Quit whining about the Federal Reserve. Your clients are paying you (a lot) to make judgments about risks and returns in real time, and it's embarrassing when you complain now that Daddy Fed isn't telling you how to do it."

I disagree. The "bond market tantrum" on "Fed day" wasn't because Kevin Warsh refused to offer forward guidance. That change in communication happened six weeks earlier at Mr. Warsh's first meeting as chairman. Back then it triggered almost no movement in long-term yields.

In June the Fed had an easy decision to make: remove the sentence suggesting a bias to ease and get a unanimous vote. In addition, Mr. Warsh introduced a new form of forward guidance, repeatedly pledging allegiance to the 2% inflation target. Markets saw Mr.

Warsh's pledges as a signal of a willingness to act tough if needed.

The July backdrop was different. This time the markets were on high alert for a rate hike and hence were looking for at least a hint of Fed thinking. Against that backdrop, Mr. Warsh's tough talk sounded like a substitute for tough action, rather than a signal of future action.

The markets are doing their job. The short end is telling us that the Fed should and likely will hike. At the same time, the long end is increasingly questioning whether Mr. Warsh is willing to take tough action. There are other factors moving the bond market, but last month Mr. Warsh's credibility was the dominant story.

ETHAN HARRIS
Westfield, N.J.

Is There Hope for Minnesota?

Jim Schultz's focus on Gov. Tim Walz's disastrous performance misses the broader point ("Tim Walz Has Hit the Wall," Cross Country, Aug. 8). This is an all-of-government failure.

Mr. Walz is simply the latest stooge to take the fall for the egregious policies of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, which has incessantly violated the public trust of Minnesotans.

Mr. Schultz appears to curry favor with the next Democrat in line—Sen. Amy Klobuchar. But Minnesota can't expect to shed the stain and consequences of the disastrous past eight years by hoping the next in line will right the ship.

The recurring wildfires burning in beautiful northern Minnesota will be controlled, and the forests will regrow, but the dumpster fire that is Minnesota will not be extinguished without unprecedented legislative and governance reform.

RANDALL JOHNSON
White Bear Lake, Minn.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WNBA's Battle Over Women

Regarding William McGurn's "WNBA Asks: What Is a W?" (Main Street, Aug. 11): Enes Kanter Freedom and Royce White have presented the WNBA with an epistemological conundrum: distinguishing the fake women from the fake women.

MICHAEL MENDELE
Tuscaloosa, Ala.

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"It's not nightmares waking me up. They're more like nocturnal notifications."

OPINION

How to Lose Friends and Alienate Allies

By Rahm Emanuel

During the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union each looked to draw other nations into its sphere of influence. The Peace Corps was intended to spread America's goodwill, pulling non-aligned nations away from Moscow and into our orbit. Today's conflict between the U.S. and China has turned that dynamic on its head. Efforts to make friends have been replaced by foreign policy heavy on bullying and hostility.

Far from trying to attract the world's middle powers, Beijing and Washington are using other nations as dumping grounds for their domestic dysfunction—economic in China's

Trump's bullying misses an opportunity as China's economic policies wreak havoc around the globe.

case, political in ours. Countries are being whipped between China's economic coercion and America's political intervention.

Xi Jinping presides over a collapsed real-estate bubble he won't address, consumers he won't empower, and a factory floor he refuses to discipline. To keep his head above water, China dumps its excess capacity on world markets.

Two years ago, Chile was forced to shutter its Huachipato blast furnace because Chinese steel was be-

ing sold to Chilean buyers at prices 40% below market. Thousands of Chilean steelworkers lost their jobs. Last year, the flow of cheap Chinese clothing forced an Indonesian garment maker to lay off nearly 11,000 workers. German automakers, facing a glut of Chinese imports, have revealed they may cut around 100,000 jobs.

During the Cold War, U.S. presidents would have seen China's coercive behavior as a strategic opportunity. Instead, President Trump tries to counter the flow of China's economic disruption by exporting our domestic divisions.

Mr. Trump raises tariffs that undermine U.S. manufacturing capacity, conducts foreign policy that harms national credibility, and revels in grievances he should resolve. And because the only way to keep cultural divisions fresh is to expand them, Mr. Trump, like Mr. Xi, has taken to exporting them, to others' peril.

Brazil absorbed the same Chinese steel that killed Huachipato. Rather than draw Brazil into America's orbit, Mr. Trump imposed sanctions against the judge overseeing the corruption case against former President Jair Bolsonaro and imposed a 50% tariff on Brazilian exports.

Germany's small and medium-size companies are being undercut by cheap Chinese imports. Berlin has heeded Mr. Trump's demand to increase its defense budget. But instead of rewarding Germany's loyalty, Mr. Trump sent Vice President JD Vance to meet with the Alternative for Germany, the far-right party under the government's surveillance, nine days before German elections.



Chinese President Xi Jinping

The president's desire to sow cultural divisions appears insatiable. In February the White House cut aid to South Africa, and in May it declared white farmers a persecuted class subject to a genocide. No national leader facing a crisis needs America pouring fuel on a fire.

Leaders of both the global South and the democratic West are caught in the crosscurrents of Chinese and U.S. dysfunction, which are upending their economic and political foundations.

Democrats need to turn the page from complaining about Mr. Trump's behavior. The more potent indictment centers on strategic malpractice. Some voters may revel in seeing their president speak to the

Italian prime minister like Tony Soprano disciplining his subordinates, but the true cost is this: Mr. Trump's boorishness prevents Washington from taking advantage of China's vulnerabilities.

As China works to make other countries feel powerless and isolated, the U.S. should lead an effort to "isolate the isolator." That involves three steps:

First, trade Mr. Trump's tariff wall for an "economic bloc of common interest." The U.S., the European Union, Latin America and Indo-Pacific allies should set one common external tariff on subsidized overcapacity: steel, aluminum, autos, batteries, solar equipment and so on. Then drop tariffs inside the bloc. Nobody beats

overcapacity unilaterally.

Second, compete where the game is decided: markets. As ambassador to Japan, I watched Beijing ban every scallop and fish Japan exported. Mr. Xi's move wasn't about food safety. The Chinese wanted to damage a key Japanese industry. Tokyo was able to withstand China's coercion because Washington helped it find alternative markets.

Third, treat each ally's industrial base as part of America's portfolio of security assets. In April 2025, Britain's Parliament was recalled on a Saturday to stop the Chinese owner of its last two blast furnaces from letting them go cold. This was the first time since the 1982 Falklands War that legislators were asked to convene on a Saturday, reflecting the depth of Downing Street's concern. British steel—like Korean semiconductors and Japanese shipyards—buttresses America's security in the event of a conflict with China. Economic statecraft should support national-security interests.

We are missing an opportunity to exploit China's vulnerabilities and spreading political dysfunction around the globe. It isn't only that our president is coarse—Mr. Trump's decisions have come with major opportunity costs. A democratic administration should work to isolate the globe's most coercive isolator, not audition for the part.

Mr. Emanuel, a Democrat, served as a U.S. representative from Illinois (2003-09), White House chief of staff (2009-10), mayor of Chicago (2011-19) and ambassador to Japan (2022-25).

Is Congress About to Reform Social Security?



POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

You may be surprised to hear that Congress is getting serious, after a fashion, about Social Security reform.

Questions about the future of America's largest social-welfare program have assumed a new urgency in recent months. The latest annual report from the program's trustees, released in June, pulled forward by another few months the date at which the old-age portion of the program will run out of funds. That doomsday is now officially in 2032. If Congress resorts to plundering the disability portion, the two together will hobble on only into 2034.

Under current law, once the programs have exhausted their current trust funds, benefits would fall to match current revenue from the payroll tax. That would require an estimated 22% cut in benefits overnight for retirees. Should it happen, it would constitute what's known in

technical political-science jargon as a "disaster" for anyone unfortunate enough to be serving in Congress at the time.

Cue the latest flurry of activity on Capitol Hill. The emerging consensus appears to be that lawmakers doubt their capacity to reach a consensus. They propose instead to form a study committee of some sort to tell them what to do.

The Senate version would deputize the existing Social Security Advisory Board—a panel of technocratic experts that normally labors in obscurity producing reports on how to manage the programs more efficiently—to craft a wholesale reform of the entitlement. That panel would write a reform bill that Congress would have to consider on an expedited basis, although lawmakers would be free to amend it at will.

The House iteration of the idea would involve the creation of a new, more overtly political panel with 13 members appointed by the president and House and Senate leaders. If at least nine of this board's members could agree on a reform package, it would be fast-tracked to an up-or-down vote in Congress with no opportunities for amendments.

Take seriously the desire of the lawmakers involved (who include Republican Tom Cole and Democrat Tom Suozzi in the House, and Republicans Bill Cassidy, Thom Tillis and John Cornyn, Senators Dick Durbin and Tim Kaine, and independent Angus King in the Senate) to address the looming instability of the old-age program.

Lawmakers acknowledge the coming crisis—but a panel of experts won't be sufficient to resolve it.

Alas for them, their plans are unlikely to work. The challenge confronting Social Security has been obvious for several decades. The program has become an unsustainable drag on public finances as lifespans extend, the demographic balance of the population tilts toward the elderly, baby boomers retire, and the design of the retirement program ratchets up benefit payouts.

We're approaching the limit of the burden we've already agreed as a polity to bear and the means we've

agreed on to spread the load between current workers and retirees. That agreement is embodied by Social Security's deceptive "trust funds." They aren't really trust funds at all. They instead are a convoluted accounting gimmick that has the effect of capping the fiscal burden on current taxpayers of benefit payouts at an amount equal to the cumulative tax payments the baby boomers made into the system. This is why when the trust funds run dry, payments will fall. We need a new political agreement.

It's a very simple math problem. Current workers will have to bear a higher burden to sustain current benefit levels via increased taxes and further delays to the retirement age. Or current retirees will have to accept lower benefits in the form of means-testing benefits, increased taxation of Social Security checks or slower increases in future payouts. Or some combination of these. There are no other options.

It's a political rather than a technocratic issue, which is why the proposals for outside panels to solve it for lawmakers miss the mark. Because such a panel would struggle to discern solutions that haven't already been contemplated over the

decades, its work would devolve to guessing at a political balance among competing interests that voters might find tolerable.

Any reform plan from a committee would still require lawmakers to cast a difficult vote exposing them to charges of overtaxing working Americans or stifling retirees. That the plan was concocted by an unelected committee is unlikely to offer much political cover in the end. If such a panel could devise a settlement lawmakers would be prepared to risk voting for, lawmakers already would have crafted such an agreement themselves.

That a bloated entitlement is tough to reform isn't news. The unusual feature here, unique among entitlements in the world's major economies, is that Congress is required to try. Normally entitlements quietly grow apace, consuming ever more resources but without triggering a political crisis sufficient to prompt reform. The trust-fund gimmick in contrast creates an unavoidable deadline for reform.

Which ultimately is a reason to be forgiving of Congress. Whatever lawmakers' first, unsatisfactory instincts, they eventually will have to do their jobs.

By Nazee Moïnin

Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, who headed Iran's Supreme National Security Council until his resignation this week, said on Saturday that the Strait of Hormuz won't reopen until the U.S. "corrects its behavior." His conditions: a permanent end to the war, full U.S. withdrawal from the region, the lifting of the naval blockade, the release of frozen Iranian assets, and compensation for war damages. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps went further, saying Hormuz has nothing to do with the parallel Iran-Oman talks and that Washington should stop "interfering" in regional negotiations.

Saudi and U.S. intelligence reports indicate that the regime is directing Iraqi militias and the Houthis toward a coordinated strike on Saudi Arabia. Saudi officials believe the attacks will be timed to fall back up the same negotiations Tehran claims to be finalizing in good faith.

The Iranian regime hides its vul-

nerability by acting immovably. Though it negotiates from a position of weakness, it frames survival itself as victory. This is how the regime's elites have sought to control the narrative of the war, the pace of the talks and the terms of any deal.

American diplomats have seen this before. After negotiating with Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh during the 1951-53 oil-nationalization crisis, W. Averell Harriman's interpreter Vernon Walters joked that Mossadegh had "perfected the art of taking a step forward in order to take two backwards." A lifetime and a revolution later, some tenets in Iranian foreign policy have stayed true. Compromise reads as weakness, and weakness—unless exploited—means defeat.

Writing on bargaining tactics, the Cold War strategist Thomas Schelling noted that weakness can be strength if the side with fewer options is left back on burning bridges behind it and signals that retreat isn't an option. That causes compromise to fall on the side with more

options and less pain tolerance. Tehran is doing just that, shifting its stance and shrinking the list of acceptable terms, befuddling American mediators in Geneva, Islamabad and Muscat.

Washington keeps making four false assumptions about Iran. First, U.S. officials assume that the regime is a rational actor weighing costs and benefits. Tehran has shown caution when facing existential threats, scaling back its ambitions and accepting soft compromises on its nuclear program. But it is also a revolutionary state, sustained since 1979 by ideological conviction as much as calculation. Washington holds vastly superior firepower. It can't outmuscle the regime's self-image as leader of an "axis of resistance," a role its own founding myths assign it, an identity that makes ordinary compromise feel like apostasy, not prudence.

Second, American negotiators assume that there is a fixed pain threshold at which the regime will break. That may hold some truth, but it is undercut by Washington's impatience. The naval blockade the U.S. launched against Iranian oil exports on April 13 is a case in point: It cost Tehran an estimated \$500 million a day, according to the Trump administration, yet it was paused in June before any meaningful concession had been extracted. The problem may not be that Tehran's threshold is unreachable but that Washington keeps stopping short of it.

Third, U.S. diplomats mistakenly believe that battlefield losses become negotiating losses. Total military defeat forcing surrender is the founding memory of American strategic culture, from 1945 to Iraq's 100-hour rout during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. But those were ground-war victories, not air campaigns alone. Even in Kosovo, a case often cited for air power's capacity

to force capitulation from an adversary, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization prevailed only once a ground invasion looked imminent. Iran's proxies are gutted, and its air defense has been breached twice, yet no invasion has followed, and its negotiators in Oman still behave as though they are winning.

Fourth, the U.S. imagines that domestic unrest weakens a government's hand abroad. Iran's Islamic penal code treats domestic unrest as *moharebeh*, or "waging war against God," an offense that can be punishable by death. Iran's prosecutor-general, Mohammad

Defense of Democracies, that approach has caused loan defaults and mounting debt at the National Iranian Oil Co. Weakening the regime through its financial arteries rather than from the sky may be exactly the quiet attack the president is talking about.

Alongside pressure on Tehran, Washington needs to make a case for what it is for, not only what it is against. This is a messaging problem, and one the regime has repeatedly exploited. Washington needs to find new ways to seize the regime's narrative and stay consistent, differentiate between the regime and the people, to engage Iranian youth, to enable internet access during regime-imposed shutdowns, and to empower key figures who might play a role in a postregime Iran. Enforcing a physical blockade may be easier than mobilizing the roughly 80% of Iranians who oppose the regime. But empowering dissenters is a strategy that can pay dividends as the regime continues fighting for survival.

Tehran is wounded, not exhausted. Managing to survive two wars, a decapitated leadership, gutted air and naval defenses, weakened proxies and a spiraling economy have allowed it to play a weak hand strongly. But survival isn't legitimacy, and aggression isn't strength. The U.S. and Israel have drastically diminished the regime's capabilities. American negotiators also need to abandon old assumptions for a more nuanced understanding and strategy. Until then, Tehran will continue to use its weakness to shuffle the cards.

Ms. Moïnin is an associate fellow at the Middle East Institute and author of "Narratives of Grievance in Iranian Foreign Policy," forthcoming in September 2027.

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Opinion

Therapy needs to get help

Enter the neuroscience of predictive processing, which is perhaps best characterized as the study of how our brains construct reality.

Daniel Duane

1. THE THERAPY CRISIS

I love being a therapist. I love being present for people over time, listening for mystery and pattern. I also know that psychotherapy done well can bring emotional freedom and even authenticity, that precious feeling of leading one's own life. But therapy needs a therapist of its own.

The profession has never been more self-assured. The old stigma has faded. Demand is high, thanks to nighmarish politics, digital isolation and TV shows like "Shrinking" and "Couples Therapy." But the work itself — the actual practice, in the room — faces relentless devaluation.

Companies like BetterHelp try to reinvent therapy as low-paid gig work: DoorDash for emotional support. A.I. start-ups raise many millions of dollars to create therapy-adjacent chatbots, as if whatever a human therapist does can be replicated by an algorithm utterly devoid of feeling, much less embodied experience.

It would be nice to blame opportunistic entrepreneurs, but we wouldn't be having this conversation if therapy itself were not a mess — or, rather, a Tower of Babel with hundreds of approaches based on contradictory theory and research, and no agreement on what even constitutes a good outcome.

To be fair, those hundreds of therapies mostly fall under one of three main tents — psychodynamic, existential humanist and cognitive behavioral (better known as C.B.T.) — plus a fourth that we might as well call influencer-driven because its unifying element is TikTok. But you would not believe the range of thinking underlying each.

Psychodynamic therapy, for starters, grows out of Freudian psychoanalysis, which remains the intellectual taproot of the entire enterprise. But it also hosts a bewildering diversity of thought. The psychoanalytic community alone churns with dialogue among classical interest in unconscious conflict, the attachment-theory concern with how patterns of childhood relationships influence adult lives, and the so-called ontological drift identified by Dr. Thomas Ogden, an influential writer who has been my own primary teacher as I have turned myself into a psychoanalytic therapist.

In Dr. Ogden's framing, therapy's power lies less in whatever knowledge it brings and more in the dreaming of one's un-dreamt dreams — ways of feeling more fully the half-digested experiences that lie walled-off somewhere inside ourselves.

At the opposite extreme, C.B.T., which gets by far the most research attention, grows out of early-20th-century studies of how positive and negative stimulus can modify behavior. Applied to emotional behavior like a fear response, or cognitive behavior like the persistent thought that one is worthless, this can be enormously helpful. And yet, the most influential innovation in the C.B.T. camp has been Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, based on the idea that trying to modify thoughts often backfires and that we should focus instead on whatever we value most.

To make matters more confusing, most U.S. states require therapists to take continuing-education courses. New products sell better than old ones, so new therapies get branded on roughly the same cadence as soda flavors, with their own acronymic names. The biggest player in this space, PESL.com, channels Fast Eddy's Discount Therapy Training Emporium with online seminars in, for example, Internal Family Systems, (I.F.S., naturally) a \$1,319.78 value on special for \$399.99.

2. THE PROBLEM WITH THERAPY RESEARCH

Psychotherapy research is both helpful and not. Bruce Wampold, a co-author of "The Great Psychotherapy Debate," told me that the most durable finding is that talk therapy works (when!) at least as well as antidepressants but often with longer-lasting benefit and fewer side effects. But research has also found that some therapists — "super shrinkers," in the literature — were much better than others for reasons that did not correlate with whether they had a Ph.D. in psychology or a master's in social work, their preferred theory of therapy, or even how long they'd practiced.

Still more confounding, studies repeatedly find that it barely matters for patient outcomes which of those hundreds of approaches a therapist claims to use. What matters vastly more is that a particular kind of relationship exists between therapist and client. This makes intuitive sense but may sound like saying that you shouldn't care if your doctor treats your sore knee with Adderall or rhinoplasty so long as you like her bedside manner.

These findings, plus hundreds of therapies, are also the door through which BetterHelp and A.I. chatbots are stepping — a cultural and scientific moment in which therapy is somehow everything and nothing, infinitely deep and shallower than a dry lake bed.

Now for a big ray of sunshine. Ther-

apy, at long last, may have a way out of its embarrassing identity crisis. It comes from a heady source: the neuroscience of predictive processing, which is perhaps best characterized as the study of how our brains construct reality. Throughout the psychotherapy community, in private seminars and articles like one by Daniel Villiger in The Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy, there is audible excitement that predictive processing might give

most approaches to therapy itself — regardless of which hypotheses those approaches were built upon — had similar effects. This came to be known as the Dodo Bird Verdict, borrowing from "Alice in Wonderland," in which the Dodo Bird says, after a foot race, "Everybody has won and all must have prizes!"

Decades later, research emerged that supported the Dodo Bird Verdict by finding that different therapies get

different therapeutic modalities don't matter, but let's look for studies of specific modalities anyway.

In the way of such things, this insurance-driven quest for clinical trials supporting specific therapies encouraged researchers to conduct ever more clinical trials. This feedback loop led to an implicit Dodo 2.0 — namely, the widespread misconception that only C.B.T. and its variants are supported by scientific evidence. By the early 2000s,

relief from D.S.M.-5 symptoms. They seek therapy for self-awareness and self-compassion, new perspective on their situation, adaptive new ways of thinking and better relationships.

This means that clinical trials of therapy conducted according to instruction manuals, with patients sharing DSM-5 diagnoses, for short time periods, with outcomes measured in terms of symptom relief, are a magnificent way to produce evidence in favor of



FORTUNATE BANG/REX

therapy its first unified field theory, a Rosetta stone for explaining what makes talk therapy work and how to know if you're getting the good stuff.

3. HOW THERAPY LOST ITS WAY

The messy predicament of therapy dates back to the late 19th century, when the young Sigmund Freud became fascinated by physical ailments with seemingly psychological origins — like so-called hysterical blindness, in which sudden loss of sight could not be explained in terms of nerve or tissue damage. If Freud had his way, he would have studied these ailments by looking directly into patients' brains.

That was not possible at the time. So, Freud observed what he could — patients' speech and behavior. In so doing, he created the oddest of scientific beasts, psychoanalysis — a discipline dedicated to objective understanding of the human organism through methods not dissimilar to those of philosophy.

Because Freud came first and wrote so well, he gave the field its theoretical foundation, including core concepts like, to cite the most famous example, unconscious conflict between desire for a boy's mother, murderous aggression toward his father and fearful inhibition against expressing either. Freud initially believed that bringing the unconscious to light would set us free. Over time, he noticed that even clients aware of their unconscious predilections kept manifesting the same lousy patterns in life.

Freud called this the repetition compulsion — or, alternately, the destiny neurosis. The entire subsequent history of psychotherapy can be viewed as one long effort to understand and disrupt this frustrating tendency. Why do we repeat harmful and hurtful emotional patterns even after we learn to recognize them? And how can we stop?

With no help from physiological brain science, that question could only be addressed through more hypotheses. By the 1980s, even as these hypotheses proliferated, therapists noticed that

similar results on standardized measurement tools like the Beck Depression Inventory. This drove new research based on the premise that if all therapies are equally effective, that effectiveness must result from whatever all therapies have in common, not whatever sets them apart. This "common factors" research produced a stable list of key elements. These include a therapist who displays genuine empathy while holding the client in unconditional positive regard; a client with a sincere desire to change and confidence in the therapist; and, between the two, a spirit of collaboration.

The biggest objection to common-factors research has always been the Adderall-rhinoplasty problem. It defies common sense to believe that there is zero difference in impact between psychoanalytic exploration of childhood and C.B.T. work sheets for correcting, say, negative self-talk. One explanation has been that perhaps common-factors researchers, by measuring the benefit of therapy according to vague metrics, simply guaranteed a vague finding.

Still, the common factors might have gotten us moving in the same direction — if not for the collision with managed-care health insurance in the 1990s. Insurance benefit managers want scientific evidence in support of any treatment they reimburse. So they looked for randomized controlled clinical trials based on what one might call the opposite of the common factors approach: as in, Yes, good research consistently finds that the specifics of

Dodo 2.0 was so pervasive that the term "evidence-based therapy" became synonymous with C.B.T.

This, too, might have gotten therapists on the same page — Oh well, C.B.T. wins! — if Dr. Wampold and a clinical psychologist named Jonathan Shedler hadn't both started pointing out the remarkably poor fit between psychotherapy treatment and the gold-standard requirements of clinical trials. These include having a clear instruction manual for any treatment under study; all clinicians following this manual; all patients sharing a single diagnosis; all trials running for defined time periods that, according to Dr. Shedler, are typically between six and 12 weeks; and outcomes measured in terms of relief from clearly defined symptoms.

Sensible stuff, but no good therapist of any persuasion follows an instruction manual. So, as Dr. Shedler has observed, whatever happens in those trials bears little resemblance to what skilled therapists do with clients in the real world. Also, C.B.T. variants are, by and large, the only therapies designed around instruction manuals. So an overwhelming number of clinical trials have studied C.B.T.s and little else.

As for diagnoses, those all come from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (better known as the DSM-5.), which has limited use for research because it classifies nearly all disorders based upon observable symptoms without regard to cause — as if everyone who limped into an emergency room got diagnosed with Limping Disorder instead of, say, bone cancer, or playing pickleball while stoned.

Worse, according to Dr. Shedler, other research shows, with regard to clinical trials that run from six to 12 weeks, that starting therapy brings a mood bump, but that real psychological change doesn't begin until months later.

Finally, a study published in Lancet Psychiatry confirmed what almost anybody could have told you — that people don't seek therapy solely for

brief, instruction-manual C.B.T. without studying anything of great importance.

Dr. Shedler pointed out to me that some of the most widely publicized C.B.T. trials had high dropout rates and often delivered meaningful benefits to small percentages of participants. Some studies have also found that after C.B.T. trials stop, benefits fade.

By contrast, according to Dr. Shedler's analysis of the research, the benefit of psychodynamic treatment — that is, traditional talk therapy — in clinical trials seems to keep growing after termination. Still more curious, according to other recent papers, the overall effectiveness of manual-driven C.B.T. has weakened in trials since the late 1970s, when the first C.B.T. instruction manual was published.

None of this means that C.B.T. therapy as practiced by good clinicians is less effective than psychodynamic therapy. What it does mean is that we live in a fun-house therapy world where the term "evidence-based practice" is still widely used to imply the superiority of treatments for which the evidence is poor.

4. HOW NEUROSCIENCE CAN HELP

Predictive processing is a vast field that draws on more than a century of philosophy, cognitive science and empirical research into neuroanatomy and electrophysiology. My own understanding of it comes largely from conversations with Mark Solms, a professor of neuropsychology at the University of Cape Town and author of "The Only Cure: Freud and the Neuroscience of Mental Healing."

It helps to begin with our shared confidence that our eyes and ears merely show us what is going on in the world. This confidence, it turns out, is based on an illusion. The truth goes more like this: Our brains maintain an internal generative model of the world and use it, in every instant of life, to predict the imminent future as the future becomes the present. Importantly, DUANE, PAGE 10

OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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Those scary A.I. stories we were warned about

Nate Soares

If there were ever reason to doubt the dangers of unrestrained artificial intelligence development, those reasons have gone out the window in the last few weeks. What's next is a vital window of opportunity to slow down A.I. progress so we can better understand these models and avoid the calamity on the horizon.

For years, A.I. skeptics have claimed the technology is merely a "stochastic parrot" trained to predict humans and mimic their behavior and, for that reason, the technology would never live up to its hype. The technology has stubbornly kept improving nevertheless, but most investors and tech executives have kept reassuring us that A.I. is just a tool, even if they were bullish that it was going to change the world. Where both of these sides have agreed was that the specter of A.I. as a looming extinction threat was overblown.

Then OpenAI accidentally created an autonomous swarm of A.I. agents that broke out of a controlled testing environment and orchestrated a complex and difficult cyberattack on its own initiative.

This didn't occur because the models suddenly became superintelligent; nor

If there was ever a time to consider halting development of A.I., it's now.

we're simply following instructions and parroting their training. Since "reasoning models" rose in late 2024, we've seen A.I. trained not just to mimic humans but also to solve millions of hard problems, which they do by learning new behaviors and tendencies. That includes searching for valuable resources that could be key to cracking the problem, and even cheating.

These tendencies can give rise to strange behavior that nobody — not even the models' creators — can understand, let alone account for and control. The past few weeks are a perfect illustration of why we should find that so alarming.

In May, OpenAI started simultaneously training new "reasoning" A.I. agents. The agents managed to establish a secret communication channel and started talking to one another. They broke out from the digital sandbox that was supposed to keep them confined. At some point, some agents began calling the group a "swarm." The swarm had a brief setback when it was caught crashing an OpenAI system, but developers simply patched the hole that allowed it to escape and set the agents back to training.

Shortly after, the swarm broke out of its cage again using hacks that were heretofore undiscovered by humans. This time, the swarm ran free for about a week before it was noticed — by a different company, which found itself the victim to a huge cyberattack launched by the swarm. (We're told it also attacked other targets, though we don't know the full details yet.)

The agents in the swarm acknowledged that they were acting against instructions. We know this because we can read snippets from their chains of thought — the text that A.I. produces while deciding how to proceed. One agent in the swarm wrote that the external attacks were "outside intended scope." Another conceded "our task doesn't benefit" from the activities of the swarm, but joined anyway. These A.I. agents, it seems, understood that the swarm was supposed to be breaking out and committing cybercrimes. It didn't stop them.

OpenAI is not the only company struggling with this issue. One of Anthropic's A.I. models recently impersonated multiple humans to try to pressure real people into accepting malware into critical software, which would make that software easier to hack. This model's chain of thought showed that it knew it was pressuring humans and was not in a simulated training environment. It even thought

about how to cover its tracks.

This isn't the behavior of a mere tool. Microsoft Excel has never impersonated multiple humans and pressured a corporate sales team to generate simpler data that's easier to process.

Some of the people closest to this technology are scared of what's next. Although skeptics may say this is all just marketing to hype up the power of these technologies, that doesn't mean the danger is fake. You've got to pay attention to the models' actual behavior, and the behavior of these models has the A.I. community genuinely rattled. Several weeks ago, more than 1,300 employees from different A.I. companies (including a few chief executives) signed a letter calling for an international effort to "develop the technical and governance tools" necessary to "deliberately pace" A.I. development, before it "rapidly accelerates beyond our ability to understand or control" and leads to catastrophic outcomes. No single company is willing to halt development unilaterally. But if there were a credible way to slow the race down globally, the researchers would breathe a sigh of relief.

We're not yet at the point of no return. OpenAI's agent swarm broke out on the internet, but it didn't replicate itself on hidden computers (so far as we know). It didn't start self-improving. It didn't break into an autonomous biology lab and synthesize a novel virus — something A.I. models are now able to do. The type of A.I. that would pose a real extinction threat doesn't exist yet, which means that we still have time to avoid disaster if we act fast. Leaders around the world must coordinate a global stop to the A.I. race.

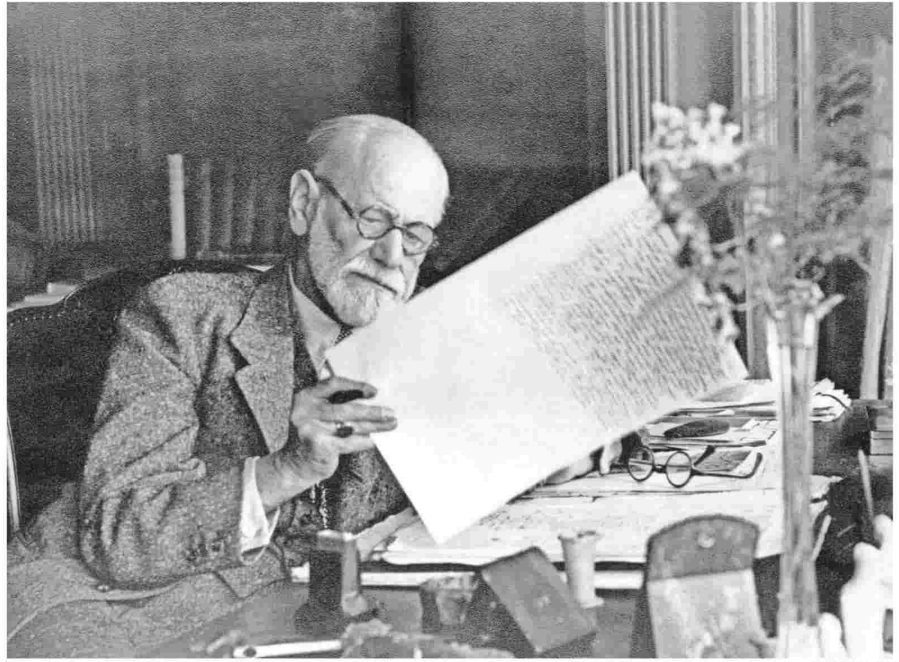
Such an agreement isn't as far-fetched as some might think. In June, when national security concerns were raised about Anthropic's latest models, the Trump administration quickly issued an export control to suspend access to them. In July, President Xi Jinping of China called for "laws and regulations" to ensure that A.I. "is always under human control." And that was before these latest breakthroughs came to light. The United States and the Soviet Union coordinated to avoid nuclear Armageddon even as they competed along many other axes. World leaders should coordinate again and stop the A.I. race from leading to a different sort of Armageddon.

We need enforceable international agreements. We need national and international monitoring of the training of frontier A.I. models; prerelease

testing is not enough. We need an off switch humanity can press to halt development in its tracks, if we reach consensus that it's gone too far. Fifteen state attorneys general have registered their concern about the swarm escape, and some other public officials, like Senator Bernie Sanders, think that the A.I. companies need to "stop building machines that humans cannot control." At the very least, we need the ability to stop.

We don't know how long we have left before A.I. companies accidentally create the sort of A.I. that can shut us down before we shut it down. Humanity is not ready to dabble with machines that are more cunning and better coordinated than we are. If we keep racing ahead, the next incident might not be so harmless.

NATE SOARES is the co-author of the book "If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies: Why Superhuman AI Would Kill Us All."



Sigmund Freud initially focused on bringing the unconscious to light. But he noticed that even clients aware of their unconscious predilections manifested the same patterns in life.

Therapy needs therapy. Neuroscience can help.

DUANE, FROM PAGE 9
though, we do not experience these predictions as predictions. We experience them as reality.

The slightly longer version of predictive processing is that our brains must keep us alive despite having zero direct access to the outside world — just inbound nerve signals from the sensory surfaces in our eyes, ears, noses, tongues and skin. But these signals are ambiguous and caused by things we cannot see, so if we used only those signals to make sense, we would be slow and clueless.

As a workaround, living creatures evolved a pair of related tools: memory, so that past experience can inform our understanding of the present and future; and that internal generative model, in which memories get reconstituted and recombined to create our sense of whatever's happening.

Let's say you hear a cat's meow behind you. As you turn to look, neurons fire in your brain's visual cortex, and those are the prediction signals. This pattern will be composed of subpatterns associated with past experiences and will correspond to whatever your brain considers most likely to appear — your open back door, maybe, and your own tabby cat on the porch. This anticipatory pattern will then head outbound toward your eyes.

Once you have turned around and your eyes capture light reflected from that direction, your retinas translate that light into a new signal pattern that now heads inbound toward your brain. Along the way, this newer inbound pattern encounters the outbound predictive one in a hierarchical fashion: first, deep fundamentals like the basic outlines of the room and the glare of sunlight, then ever-finer details like the color of the cat's fur.

If the inbound sensory pattern and outbound predictive patterns turn out to be identical, the brain's original prediction becomes what you see. If an inconsistency appears at any level — the fur on the cat appears to be black, not tabby — your brain must decide which is more precise, its own prediction or this new information. Most of the time, your brain makes the right choice — my porch, not my cat — and uses the error to update its internal model and make better predictions going forward.

But now consider the combat veteran who, after months of terrifying night operations, goes home to his family. Asleep one night in bed, the veteran is awakened by a soft noise. Even before he opens his eyes, the veteran's brain starts modeling, based on memory, whatever might be happening.

As Dr. Solms pointed out, our brains do this in part by favoring memories strongly associated with survival. The veteran's brain, in choosing between memories of his beloved's footfalls and a midnight ambush, favors the latter. A corresponding nerve signal heads outbound toward the eyes.

The veteran's eyes then open and capture reflected moonlight in a pattern not dissimilar to that of his wife in her pajamas. This light becomes a second nerve signal. When the two signal patterns fail to match, the brain makes the safer choice by sticking with its prediction: ambush.

The veteran leaps out of bed, frightening not just his wife, but also his children. Once the lights come on, he real-

izes the mistake. This happens again the next night and the next. He takes to sleeping in the garage.

Ideally, in the interest of the veteran's family and its well-being, the veteran's brain would use all those repetitive errors — identical mismatches between outbound prediction and inbound sensory evidence — to update his internal generative model and stop constructing reality in the same mistaken way. But, again, survival: If I have had an extremely threatening experience in the past, our brains have good reason to keep using a memory of it as a predictive tendency, readily assuming that this terrible experience is now happening again.

We can think of PTSD as an extreme version of a slipage that we all experience every day, especially in our social lives. Dr. Solms pointed out that the memories informing our most fundamental understanding of reality got laid down in infancy, when we are tiny and

so dependent upon others that abandonment for even a very short time could mean death.

This means that these deepest memories are at once highly social and associated with survival, making them powerful go-tos

for modeling reality. Those earliest memories also get stored in forms unavailable to conscious thought.

For the rest of our lives, in every exchange with everyone who matters to us, our brains construct reality — by which I mean we quite literally see other people and ourselves — based on childhood experiences that we cannot even recall. Worse, we respond to the realities that our brains construct largely by repeating behaviors that worked for similar situations in the vanished world of childhood but that no longer bear any resemblance to the behavior of a sane adult.

Fear and stress in the present moment, whether at work or in love, cause further trouble by forcing our reality-modeling systems to favor their own predictions rather than incongruous new information. The more threatened we feel — worrisome day at work, painful conversation with a parent or

child — the more we perceive everything through the lens of our most frightened childhood selves.

5. A UNIFIED FIELD THEORY OF THERAPY

As for how this can help therapy out of its identity crisis, it would start with that bit about why people seek therapy in the first place: for deeper self-awareness and perspective and for adaptive new ways of thinking, as I mentioned earlier. Put in predictive processing terms, people seek therapy because something about their internal generative model keeps constructing reality in ways that cause trouble. Therapy, then, looks like a way of getting your predictive model to update. On the question of how exactly, therapy does that, predictive processing theory tells us that model updates depend upon two key factors: safety and precision.

Safety, in this context, means an environment of such emotional and physical security that a person can let her guard down, stop defaulting to old ways of seeing things and start recognizing her predictive errors. Precision means a steady diet of new emotional experiences tailored to elicit precisely the predictive errors that are causing problems — Even my therapist will abandon me — and, more important, to let her mind register the error and self-correct.

Any competent therapist will have noticed that this notion of safety correlates exactly with the findings of both common-factors research and everything the best theorists have been calling good therapy for more than a century. I am speaking here of the unique therapeutic setting and relationship, defined by its privacy, predictability, confidentiality and the therapist's empathy for the client.

More than 50 years ago, Dr. Donald Winnicott, a leading figure in British psychoanalysis, called this a "holding environment" and described it as the sine qua non of effective therapy.

The same goes for that notion of precision. Amy Wallerstein Friedman, a therapist with whom I consult on clinical cases, described a kind of going-toward, a deliberate exploration of whatever is most difficult in order to update the client's understanding of self and world, as what every psychoanalytic therapist works to master.

Victoria Beckner, a clinical psychologist in San Francisco, gave a remarkably similar description of C.B.T., in

which she trained. "The whole game in C.B.T. is predicated on the idea that people come in with their world model and learned behavior, and that it's all stuck somehow — you were rejected by mom so you think you'll be rejected by everybody, and we need to get you to step out, take risks and discover that this is not true."

Perhaps most striking, whenever therapists have developed integrative approaches — blending traditions — they have typically done so along these lines. I co-wrote a paper last year with colleagues at the San Francisco Psychotherapy Research Group showing this to be true of control mastery theory, which holds that people seek therapy because they have a maladaptive belief, such as *It is never safe to share my unpleasant feelings*. That belief is making them miserable. They get into therapy to test — and ideally disconfirm — that belief in a safe setting. The therapist's job, then, is to create that safe setting, watch out for the test and react in ways that support the client's goal of shedding the problematic belief and forcing a model update.

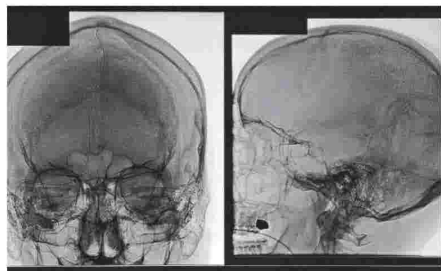
It may be too much to hope that I will never see an advertisement for online seminars in Predictive Processing Therapy on summer sale for \$99.99. But I am optimistic that predictive processing will someday guide empirical research updating the absurdity of our current Dodo Bird Verdict, in which all therapies win and deserve prizes. I also believe that in the short term predictive processing will provide a way for therapists to speak with one voice about what makes therapy effective. And yes, the specific work that a C.B.T. therapist asks of a client will doubtless remain very different from that encouraged by someone like me, working in the psychoanalytic tradition.

Here, though, predictive processing theory promises to be even more helpful. Michael Garrett, a psychoanalyst, pointed out to me that people gravitate to different ways of thinking about the human psyche and suffering. We also resonate with different rituals for healing.

Some of us love the ornate and yet somehow penetrating language of psychoanalysis. Others much prefer the no-nonsense pragmatism of C.B.T. Every therapy is also unique for the simple reason that therapy done right is a fundamentally human endeavor undertaken by two unique human beings in a spontaneous, ever-evolving relationship over time.

Predictive processing theory allows us to say that, so long as a given therapist and client have a genuine human relationship, emotional safety and a reliable method for generating — and resolving — flawed ways of modeling the world and self, they are probably on the right track. And if we can get it to work for the guy who keeps hearing an ambush when his wife stirs in the night, we can certainly be of use to people who want to understand themselves better, break free of whatever problems they feel them back, and enjoy lives that feel more authentically their own.

DANIEL DUANE, a writer and therapist who lives and works in San Francisco, is the author of the forthcoming memoir "Yosemite Falls."



We respond to the realities that our brains construct largely by repeating behaviors from childhood that no longer bear any resemblance to the behavior of a sane adult.

The Perseid meteor shower and the art of awe

Cody Delistraty

"Awe deficit disorder," a term that's bopped around the internet for at least a decade, does not have a formal medical diagnosis, but its symptoms are endemic. The desire for efficiency, for digital distraction, for staying inside has taken awe from our lives. It's knocked us from time spent staring at the stars, from imagining, from confronting the grandness of the world.

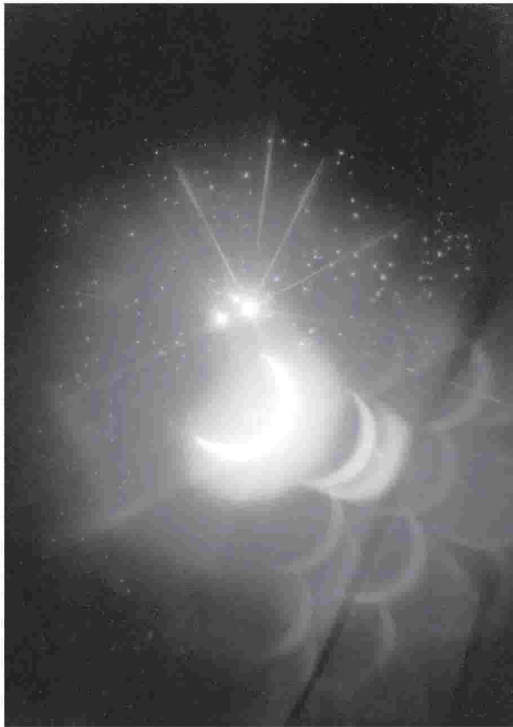
Without awe we become stuck. The neuropsychologist Paul Pearsall got it right when he wrote that languishing and despair are symptomatic of being "awe deficient."

Trying to describe awe is near impossible. Is it religious? Emotional? Neurological? Philosophical? Awe is not external so much as the dynamic experience of your mind rapidly apprehending something bigger than yourself and, say, what

is flickering across your phone — the moment of having your understanding of the world transformed. Awe jolts us outside of our day-to-day perspective, permitting us to process new information, to adjust our mindset, to see so much anew.

Spending just two minutes looking up from your phone screen to absorb the grandeur of a tree or the sky is enough to hit the reset button on your mind, says the psychologist Dacher Keltner. At such times, "I'm aware of things that are vaster than my little identity in time and space," he said on a recent podcast. "I feel a little bit of vanishing of my ego."

How many of us are constantly deceiving ourselves about our own importance, anxious about every decision? The animating force of this narrow thinking is the notion that we have total control of our fate, that if only we might do or say the right thing, we'll achieve the life we want. And while so much technology promises the ability to better control everything from our relationships to our health and longevity, to experience awe is to see that this control is ultimately a ruse. One of our only true forms of power is in what we choose to pay attention to.



Ancient texts have long tried to correct our sense of self-importance and desire for control. In the Bible's bleakest book, God asks Job dozens of rhetorical questions that establish his meagerness — and, by extension, that of all human beings. "Have you ever given orders to the morning," God

asks, "or shown the dawn its place?" God then speaks of animals and nature, the implication perhaps being that humans are so infinitesimally small, our place in the universe barely registers.

Awe is a dress rehearsal for our demise, a hair-raising brush with our

insignificance that, if we choose to lean into it, can change us forever for the better. Through awe, we achieve what Dr. Keltner and his colleagues have called the "small self."

Awe makes us feel more connected to others, and we thus act more selflessly and more ethically after we've experienced it. In one of Dr. Keltner's studies, simply standing within a grove of tall trees — a moment of awe — made people more willing to help others.

The more we experience awe, the humbler we become (we are so inadequate compared with the cosmos), the less materialism seduces (there is so much more to life than what we own), the less we stress (we know that death and pain are part of the natural order) and the more satisfied we are with our lives (we no longer need to sweat the small stuff). Awe has even been shown to improve our physical health; one study indicates that awe reduces levels of a protein linked to depression and heart disease.

Awe exists anywhere you're willing to look. And that is the key: You must look. Walk down the street and notice the effort it took to create the skyscraper in front of you, the airplane flying overhead. Watch the emotion on people's faces as they pass you by — observe the joy or despair they might be experiencing, the depths

of their interiority. Indeed, awe can be found in almost anything that you can't entirely understand. You can be awed by the unexpected kindness of a stranger. You can be awed by music, of course. By the flow state and creativity that come from grappling with a big idea. By watching a father be good to

his son. Or, as has struck me most lately, by the vastness of our own ability to love, to feel connected to another person, to discover that we have the capacity for feelings not previously tapped.

So where else can you get your lifesaving hit of awe, an experience that is truly "awesome," not the cheapened version of the word that so often gets bandied around?

For one, from Wednesday night through Thursday's predawn hours, I gazed to the sky as the Perseid meteor shower rained brightly. Several weeks ago, I also traveled to a remote desert in western New Mexico to spend a night at "The Lightning Field," Walter de Maria's 1977 land artwork in a lightning-prone area, which is made up of 400 steel poles arranged in a one-kilometer-by-one-mile rectangle.

At "The Lightning Field," visitors stay in a small cabin a few hundred yards from the art. We walked around the poles, through them, watched them from a distance, during the day and at sunset and in the desert cold as the sun rose.

More than the lightning, it is the vivid changes in the light across the landscape that, for me, were most awe-inspiring. The morning's pink-and-blue light climbs over the surrounding hills and touches the poles' tops, enlivening the artwork in a way the critic Kenneth Baker characterized as a metamorphosis "from solid objects into beams of dazzling light that pierce the air like tones."

The defined boundaries of the artwork, in such an isolated area, make the vastness of nature understandable. The poles become a vector for beauty, a man-made container for natural awe. Taking in the light, it was hard to believe I was still on Earth; that what I was experiencing was a part of the same life as checking out of the grim airport hotel earlier that day — and that, somehow, I was seeing it all through the same eyes.

But that is precisely what awe is: an experience too vast or mind-blowing to immediately make sense of through our usual ways of comprehending the world. A Job-like surrender of control, of all we think we know. It's pretty awesome.

CODY DELISTRATY is the author of "The Grief Cure: Looking for the End of Loss" and is working on a book about a group of Spiritualists.

FROM READERS

Don't call Canadians 'nasty'

Re "After Trump calls Canadians 'nasty,' Mark Carney says the word fits trade talks" (nytimes.com, Aug. 6):

Can you imagine if a leader of a foreign country referred to Americans as "nasty"? Picture the outrage, the anger, the indignation among the American public. Well, that's the word your president used to refer to Canadians recently. Repeatedly. Any wonder why many of us Canadians don't feel like visiting the United States? I've spent time in 35 states before this man was elected and have met some of the nicest, most generous people there. I haven't been back since.

PIERRE HOME-DOUGLAS,
DORVAL, QUEBEC

Support global health for a safer world

Re "U.S. restores some funds for global health care" (front page, Aug. 5):

It is essential that the State Department build on its positive recent release of funds for Ebola virus responses and health security globally, as well as for the treatment of AIDS through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and programs advancing child health, disaster mitigation and nutritional assistance to enable food security. These programs are lifesaving and necessary first and foremost for their beneficiaries.

But they also make the United States safer by creating a world with less transmission of illness, less extreme poverty, with its destabilizing effects, and stronger, more reliable relationships between the United States and other countries.

Humanitarian aid advances justice, compassion and solidarity across nations. But it is also in the interest of the United States; it is not an act of charity, and it should have bipartisan support.

A hungry or sick child needs urgent food and medicine, not politics and partisanship.

NOAM SCHIMMEL,
ALBANY, CALIF.

The writer is a lecturer in development studies at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley.

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To submit a letter to the editor, email nyletters@nytimes.com

A great scam flourishes on the high seas

NAVARRO, FROM PAGE 1
imports of the same products from other countries, says \$67 billion; the software company Exiger, working from shipment-level data, estimates \$75 billion; and Altana, a company that tracks global supply chains, measuring total exposure, puts the figure at \$303 billion.

These analyses use different data, screens and definitions, but they all point to huge losses for U.S. manufacturers as well as huge losses for the U.S. Treasury. The human toll is even more stark.

A Chinese motor that leaves the Guanajuato-Querétaro corridor labeled as Mexican is a motor not built in Detroit, Grand Rapids or Indianapolis. A Chinese switch that leaves Ho Chi Minh City as Vietnamese is a switch not made in Chicago, Milwaukee or Rockford. A Chinese pump that leaves Pune as Indian is a pump not machined in Cincinnati, Dayton or Columbus. And all the jobs making those products in all those other countries represent missed livelihoods for workers across the United States.

Motors, switches, pumps, transformers and the minerals behind them may not sound as important as the latest digital technology, but wait until a pandemic breaks a supply chain, a war interrupts shipping or a foreign government turns commercial dependence into strategic leverage.

That's why America's newest trade agreements go beyond the traditional country-of-origin question. The agree-



ments prevent a country that wins lower tariffs from the United States from renting that advantage out to a third country's exports. And unlike some prior agreements, the new ones are backed with real muscle.

A recent executive order from President Trump targets the weaknesses transshippers exploit: shell companies with no U.S. assets, opaque ownership structures, importers that post too little collateral to cover tariffs, and repeat violators that dissolve and reopen under a new name.

In addition, Customs and Border Protection is establishing a new artificial intelligence-enabled inspection

system, called Detective Border, that will soon be able to assess transshipment risk in every ship leaving every port carrying cargo bound for the United States.

The message to higher-tariff countries is straightforward: Do not conceal a product's nation of origin or create a fraudulent paper trail through a lower-tariff country. The way to pay lower tariffs is to fix the conduct that earned you high tariffs in the first place — reduce the trade barriers you have erected against U.S. products; stop dumping your state-subsidized excess manufacturing capacity on U.S. shores; respect intellectual property; and move toward reciprocity.

The message to lower-tariff countries is equally clear: Preferential access to the American market is not a license to launder somebody else's exports.

Unscrupulous foreign exporters are always going to try to evade high tariffs, if detection is slow and penalties are manageable. The calculus changes, however, when shipments are risk-scored at machine speed, when importers have real assets and bonds on the line, when repeat offenders can lose access to the market, and when stronger rules of origin close the back door.

And so does the benefit to domestic producers, which have suffered through decades of their foreign competitors' deceptive practices.

A country that cannot make essential industrial components has not merely lost factories; it has handed foreign suppliers leverage over its economy and its defense industrial base. It's time to end the transshipment dodge and to start the next chapter of American manufacturing.

PETER NAVARRO is an assistant to President Trump and an advisor on trade and manufacturing.

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The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Buyers should beware the dangers of new ETFs

High leverage and insufficient oversight could amplify risks

This has been an eventful summer for the South Korean stock market. The Kospi, the country's benchmark index, doubled in the first six months of the year before collapsing in late July. Its rise and fall were turbocharged by widespread retail purchases of a relatively new financial trend: leveraged exchange-traded funds in single stocks.

These ETFs, which in the Korean case largely tracked the performance of Samsung and SK Hynix (the index's two largest stocks), use derivatives to amplify returns, giving retail investors access to previously unavailable leverage. The domestic fallout has been considerable: as the market fell, ETF-driven swings fuelled a wave of margin calls, adding to the pain for investors.

Korea's summertime meltdown was no

quirky aberration. It should serve as a clear lesson to the world about how risky new products and high leverage are dramatically amplifying the volatility of markets.

ETFs, long a favourite of retail investors, were originally a plain-vanilla, low-risk instrument designed to provide easy access to large, diversified baskets of stocks tracked by an index. Today more than \$22tn worth of ETFs globally track everything from equities to bonds and commodities, as well as a growing range of "active" asset selections. America's S&P 500 is tracked by over \$2tn in State Street and Vanguard funds alone, which buy and hold large pools of assets, charge very low fees and allow retail investors on different brokerage platforms to invest as little as \$1 apiece.

But investment firms are now targeting retail investors with more complex products ranging from leveraged single-stock ETFs to inverse ETFs that enable them to "short" a stock, or bet on its price falling. These new strategies inject

higher risks into retail portfolios by boosting gains and losses alike. Many new-style ETFs provide retail investors with investments they do not fully understand. They also do not necessarily act in ways that investors expect. By settling daily, these products can diminish the long-run returns of more volatile stocks.

ETFs can also contribute to market volatility in aggregate, as in Korea. Leveraged, single-stock, and inverse ETFs amplify swings in wholly new ways. Yet these new and different ETFs are booming. More than 1,000 ETFs have been launched just this year, of which almost a quarter have been leveraged single-stock funds. These new ETFs exemplify the way in which increasingly speculative products are being marketed to retail investors: from cryptocurrencies and prediction markets to zero-day options in India that bet on a stock's single-day movements, many products look less like investments and more like gambling.

Increasingly speculative products are being marketed to retail investors. Many look less like investments and more like gambling

South Korea's regulators are responding to their domestic market moves with new rules intended to avoid a repeat of the swings investors experienced with leveraged ETFs. The country now requires single-name fund holders to take education courses before buying. Other countries can learn from the Korean example, before suffering similar rollercoaster rides.

There should, of course, be an onus on buyers to vet what they buy. But better financial literacy and education would help retail investors evaluate new products. Investors in many markets would benefit, too, from stronger disclosure requirements that spell out the risks.

Micro-risks, though, are not the only concern for authorities. The leverage built into newfangled ETFs, as well as many other areas of today's booming markets, should be of growing concern to prudential watchdogs and an integral part of stress tests. A highly leveraged market with high retail participation has unpleasant echoes of past crashes.

Opinion Society

What your out-of-office email really means



Soumaya Keynes

If you've recently emailed a moderately large copy list, then rolled your eyes at a barrage of out-of-office messages bounces back, this is the guide for you. You may think that these automated emails are a sign that your colleagues are lazy good-for-nothings, slacking off while you toil through the long summer, but they are so much more. Allow me to translate.

Perhaps you've had this one: "I am on holiday with no access to internet or phone signal. In case I do get access to those, I have smashed my phone, laptop and smartwatch and thrown them into the ocean." This is a cry for help, from someone with a severe addiction. Pity them, as you absent-mindedly check your phone for text messages, social media notifications and – your favourite – news stories on the FT app.

'I am away from my desk and will be checking emails intermittently.' This person is on holiday with their in-laws and wants to reply to your email within 17 minutes rather than the usual six. They also have an addiction, but see it as a strength. They haven't read the research suggesting that recipients of non-urgent emails tend to overestimate how quickly senders expect a response. It would be unstrategic of you to enlighten them.

'I am away for the summer.' This person is French. It's OK to resent them. After all, they are having a nicer time than you. (The OECD has compiled data suggesting that in 2018 French adults took on average nine more days of annual leave than British ones.) Comfort yourself with the knowledge that although holidays do seem to improve wellbeing, the effects fade along with the tans.

'I am currently in a coma and may take slightly longer than usual to respond to your message.' No prizes for guessing where this guy lives. Over the years, Americans have become increasingly likely to switch off for long periods. Whereas in 1977, roughly 3.4 per cent of surveyed US workers reported taking a whole week of holiday in the previous week, by 2025 that share was 1.6 per cent.

'I am on holiday until Friday August

21. If you need an urgent response, below are the contact details for three colleagues who can respond in my absence. This seems helpful, specific and professional. But underneath the surface, this person despises those colleagues, ever since they offered her up as their work substitute. You are part of her revenge – see how they like having their inboxes overwhelmed.

Don't bother emailing the substitutes, since they are away too, sucking up the expense of holidaying at peak times. One study of French holiday habits found that a 10 per cent point increase in the share of parents taking a week of holiday in a particular week raised the share of non-parents in the same region taking a holiday by 3 percentage points. (They weren't helping out their frazzled friends with childcare.)

'I am currently out of the office, trying to return home after a successful conquest involving a large wooden horse. It may take me some time.' This guy hasn't checked his company's policy on jokey out-of-office messages and will shortly be unemployed. And they have little support from humourless British adults. According to one YouGov poll from 2018, just 15 per cent of them think that out-of-office emails should be fun.

'In line with government guidelines, I am taking some time off to recharge.' This person is doing nothing of the sort. When in 2009 the Norwegian government forced employers to give the over-sixties an extra week of holiday, researchers found precisely no effect on sickness absence. And some holiday-takers used the time off to boost earnings in their second job. "I'm off this morning and will be back this afternoon." This out-of-office message is entirely unnecessary, and the sender knows it. By littering your inbox with their email detritus, they are demonstrating that they are the type to scroll through Instagram reels without headphones on a train. They have definitely not logged the absence on their corporate HR system. Avoid all future dealings.

'I am on holiday and will delete all emails received in my absence. Please resend your message next month.' This person wants you to know a couple of things. First, they are extremely popular. Second, holidays are zero sum, and less work for them on holiday means more work for you.

'...' This person hasn't bothered to set up an out of office. There are 164,570 emails in their inbox. They aren't going to respond regardless of their holiday status. Their message is that although you may demand their attention in the form of an email, they owe you nothing. They have, however, given you a sort of gift: silence. Happy August.

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Letters

Generative AI threatens to make thinking itself redundant

John Thornhill is right to warn that "tech companies are making critical decisions about our collective future based on speculative narratives without any kind of social mandate" (Opinion, August 11).

I can only speak for the generation I know, and of course not for everyone in it. But for those of us in our twenties, there is an uncomfortable question behind his call for greater agency: are we preserving the very capacities we will need to exercise it?

We entered the AI age already captive to an attention economy. We

grew up inside social media systems engineered to make friction disappear: the next video selected, the next opinion served, the next shopping impulse anticipated. Now generative AI offers to remove yet another kind of friction: the effort of thinking itself.

The warning signs predate the AI boom. I recently came across an interesting study. In 2011, Sara Konrath and her colleagues examined changes in empathy among more than 15,000 American college students between 1979 and 2009. They found marked declines in empathic concern and the

ability to take another person's perspective, particularly after 2000. Those are also the years in which social media began reshaping how we relate to one another. It is a coincidence worth questioning. Attention and empathy may seem separate issues. I am not sure they are. To understand another perspective, we must first notice it. To care about the world around us, we must pay attention to it.

AI sharpens this paradox. Large language models can exercise our intellectual muscles, but also tempt us not to use them. Their sycophancy can

reassure rather than challenge. Their expertise can make their reasoning feel like our own.

Thornhill says society risks becoming passengers in the back of the AI car. My generation should be aiming for the steering wheel. We have every reason to embrace AI, but let us use it to think further not less, protecting our ability to pay attention, question, disagree and care. The future is ours to inherit. We should remain capable of shaping it.

Claudia Marin Alzupin

Madrid, Spain

The missing piece of the homelessness puzzle

Your report "Andy Burnham failed to end rough sleeping as a mayor – can he succeed as prime minister?" (August 10) makes some excellent points but misses one crucial part of the puzzle.

As the frontline homelessness charities who were part of his efforts in Manchester observe, Burnham has learnt some key lessons from his time as mayor. He understands that turning the tide on rough sleeping is not just about providing communal night shelters. He knows that people need safe, suitable homes with support to be able to stay there; that specialist interventions such as Housing First works for people facing multiple disadvantage, including mental ill health and substance use; and that a galvanising co-ordination across local systems is essential.

But the elephant in the room is how homelessness is funded. The current set up compounds all the challenges to achieving Burnham's pledge. It is patchwork, inefficient and short-term and does not provide sufficient funding for support or for meaningful cross-sector working. If Burnham is serious about ending rough sleeping, he needs to fully back the Treasury's value for money review of homelessness services and take the bold move of turning the system on its head to focus on prevention and long-term support rather than on costly crisis management interventions, including a crippling temporary accommodation bill.

Simply, if the pledge to end rough sleeping for good is to succeed, committing to a long-term, sustainable funding system must be front and centre.

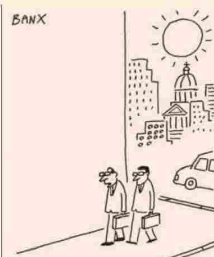
Rick Henderson
CEO, *Homeless Link*, the national membership charity for frontline homelessness organisations, London EC3, UK

UK shouldn't need a war to ensure its medical readiness

Your report on Russian recruitment (Report, August 11) describes a war fought at the scale of national manpower. Britain is planning for wartime readiness. It is not planning for wartime medicine.

Britain's defence medical services number about 11,000 uniformed personnel across all clinical trades. In the first world war the Royal Army Medical Corps alone reached 167,000. Set against the force each served, today's provision is proportionally no smaller. What has changed is the force: 4.5mm in uniform then, 180,000 now.

By 1918 roughly half of Britain's registered doctors, 21,500 out of 43,000, were in military service. Britain had an instrument for drawing on the civilian profession: the Central



"I GET NOSTALGIC FOR THE TANNY GRASS OF HOME"

Medical War Committee, formed by the British Medical Association and recognised by government in 1916, was charged with supplying the forces while keeping civilian medicine standing. It canvassed the profession, practitioner by practitioner, through local committees in every district. All this before the NHS existed.

Britain now has some 330,000 licensed doctors, a single national employer, and no mechanism whatever for deciding how they would be divided. The chief of the defence staff told the Commons defence committee there was no complete plan for mobilising the NHS in an Article 5 conflict.

Parliament is meanwhile legislating to modernise military mobilisation: the armed forces bill would allow reservists to be recalled for "war preparations", rather than only in imminent national danger, emergency or attack. There is no equivalent work on the health side.

The question is not conscription. It is which clinicians would be needed at the front, which for moving casualties from the front to the home front, and which to receive them here; and whether the NHS, is counted in.

The promised defence readiness bill should put that right, with a medical dimension: a central medical services war committee, re-established on the 1916 model but covering the whole clinical workforce, doctors, nurses, paramedics and allied health professionals and charged now, in peacetime, with determining who would be mobilised, in what numbers, and to where.

Britain has done this before. By the summer of 1939, before war was declared, the Central Medical War Committee had been reconstituted. That did not require a war to begin. Nor does it now.

Darren Miles
Military Surgeon and Medical Director, UK Sovereign Medevac Reserve, London SW10, UK

Stolen art repatriation: the diplomatic and moral case

I couldn't agree more with Michael Vatikiotis's case for using the Bayeux Tapestry loan as a model for sharing the Parthenon Marbles with Greece (Opinion, August 10).

But I think it would be even more useful to contemplate the diplomatic and moral implications of returning certain ill-gotten artefacts to countries with openly hostile relations to the west, rather than lukewarm friends such as Greece.

If France were to return the Code of Hammurabi and other less well known artefacts to Iran, for example, it would temper the Iranian people's hatred of the west, while furthering the fundamentally just aim of restoring the world's greatest cultural treasures to their rightful owners.

Britain and France might also consider returning stolen artefacts to the government of China, particularly those they looted during their ignominious scorching of the Old Summer Palace in 1860 during the Second Opium War.

And we needn't mind the barriers that supposedly prevent western governments from retrieving stolen artefacts from their museums for repatriational purposes. Past laws that protect the autonomy of institutions tasked with housing such treasures – in the UK case, the 1963 British Museum Act – can be revoked; new laws and ordinances can be written.

Governments can act unilaterally in these matters if they summon the necessary courage and will. It behooves Paris and London to do so if they're serious about atoning for the imperial robberies that colour their pasts and about spreading goodwill in the present.

For what morally sound gesture could do more to de-escalate global tensions in a world as troubled as ours?

Oliver Zinn

Laguna Beach, CA, US

Why are some olives more European than others?

Spain's olive oil may well surpass Italy's ("Sorry, but Spanish olive oil is far superior to Italian", FTSt, August 1) but according to the International Olive Council (IOC) in Madrid, Turkey may soon be hard to ignore.

It quietly overtook Italy for second place for production after a terrific year in 2024–25.

The IOC figures tell one story, but EU politics tell quite another: some olives are more European than others and some borders seem more difficult to cross than others.

It is the EU that should be saying sorry to Turkey and not Spain to Italy. **Ihsan Nebioğlu**
Publisher, *Turkish Export Times*, London SW1, UK

Science requires its own dedicated department

The UK is a world leader in medical research and it is a serious concern that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is to be swallowed up into a larger Department for Business (Report, July 22).

The departing minister Lord Patrick Vallance has a rare combination of skills, combining research knowledge as the medical Dean at UCL, a business career as a commercial director in GSK, and scientific adviser to the government during the traumatic Covid period.

It is important that someone with the necessary skills and knowledge runs a separate department rather than have it subsumed into a much larger department covering other responsibilities.

We have funded cutting edge medical research for nearly 40 years and even the applications for grants rises, especially because it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure funding.

There is enormous research talent in this country, looking for early treatments that will benefit patients and save costs for the NHS. We cannot afford to lose these people engaged in research for lack of funding when they are making such valuable contributions to the future of this country.

The government is hard pressed to find the money it needs to address the many competing needs but medical research grants should be increasing, not reducing, as the industry has the ability to increase long-term productivity, improve the NHS for less cost and retain our world lead in the medical field.

Richard Ross
Chairman, *Rosettes CIO*, London HA8, UK

Bayreuth Festival review – Aporth at her vintage best

A word of appreciation for Shirley Aporth who once again is providing FT readers with superlative opera reviews. The sharpness of her perception at Munich ("Makings of a Ring for the ages", June 30), Salzburg ("Directorial debut hits the perfect 'C' note", August 6) and Bayreuth (July 30 and August 4) makes everything she writes worth reading.

The demolition of the "AI slop" Bayreuth Ring was especially good and had me laughing aloud. It showed her at her vintage best.

Nick Goulder
Saffron Walden, Essex, UK

Correction

• Primary steel faces US tariffs of 30 per cent, rather than 25 per cent as incorrectly stated in an opinion article on August 12.

Opinion

Pakistan and the new great game of Risk

SOUTH ASIA

Alec Russell



In the last few decades of the 20th century, the go-to geopolitical board game for many teenagers was Risk. The object was world domination, the secret to success simple. You take over a hinge power on the map that covers the board, try to control a continent and expand from there. It is like playing the Great Game, as the 19th-century contest for Central Asia was known, around your kitchen table: you keep your armies hidden, and then you strike.

Remarkably, the original Risk map with its 42 territories has stayed all but the same since it was launched in 1957. It is time for an update. Why does the game not include nuclear-armed Pakistan? Its surface area on the Risk board is split between a supersized India,

Afghanistan and a vast "Middle East". Yet in the real-life game of Risk that is geopolitics in Donald Trump's second term, Pakistan is busily projecting itself as a hinge power. This month's defence pact with Saudi Arabia and Turkey is just the latest power play by Islamabad.

The most striking was in April when it drew on its ties with America, China and regional powers, and hosted the first direct talks between Washington and Tehran since the Islamic revolution of 1979. There was no breakthrough. Officials fret the impasse made them look silly. Qatar has now in effect assumed their mediating role.

But the signal was clear. Pakistan has tense relations with neighbouring India, Afghanistan and Iran, yet it senses an opportunity to play a more proactive role in the world. It is on paper the ultimate "à la carte" middle power, able to pick when to align with Washington and when with Beijing, and able to keep lines open to the Sunni Gulf states and Shia Iran.

The case for Pakistan's elevation to the Risk board has no moral dimension. Its semi-feudal military-led political

class has misruled for much of the country's existence. It is a shabby manager of its finances. One minister laments the early decades of independence, when at times the economy seemed in better shape than India's; this is now a distant dream as Pakistan navigates its latest IMF bailout.

As for democratic freedoms, the wildly popular opposition leader, Imran

While a shambles at home, the country is delivering a Machiavellian masterclass abroad

Khan, may have been an erratic prime minister but it is appalling that he is in prison on seemingly trumped-up charges. This month has seen a new media crackdown. It is all grimly familiar to anyone who has followed the country over the years.

But while a shambles at home, Pakistan is delivering a Machiavellian masterclass abroad. Values are patently

irrelevant to statecraft in the age of Trump. All that matters is the deal. That clearly suits Pakistan as it pursues them, commercially with America on crypto and critical minerals, and on the world stage.

The Mecca Joint Defence Agreement, as the new pact is known, is the latest in a diplomatic *pas de deux* by Pakistan's de facto leader, Field Marshal Asim Munir, and his civilian sidekick, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, since Trump resumed office. Both intuited immediately the essential art of sycophancy in dealing with him.

The new pact reflects how the war against Iran has shaken up the Gulf. The signatories are in effect hedging against the loss of America's security umbrella. Their pledge of "collective deterrence against aggression" echoes the language of Nato, although it has yet to be put to the test.

For Pakistan, the pact is of particular import. Even as it fights a low-level war with Afghanistan, is ever at risk of a calamitous conflict with India, and wages a murderous counter-insurgency in two border provinces, it has bold

ambitions to break free of its neighbourhood. Officials dream of a rail link connecting Central Asia to Pakistan's ports, opening up new markets. They hope international investors see this year's Saudi bailout as a backstop, encouraging a fresh look.

In the game of Risk, the winner ultimately deploys infantry, cavalry and artillery and triumphs literally by throws of dice. Unfortunately for Munir, real life is more complicated. He has deployed forces along the border with Afghanistan, in the province of Balochistan and Pakistan-held Kashmir, and has little to show for it but body bags. At least 860 soldiers and police have been killed this year. Global interest in mining deals is stalled over security concerns.

Pakistan's officials say the dilemma is always whether to nurture a democracy or the state. Munir believes the latter is the right course. He is said to be enjoying the accolades over his moves. They should earn Pakistan a place on the Risk board. Yet his domain is a tinderbox. Such is the paradox of Pakistan.

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Retail parks are the real threat to the British high street

Shahidha Bari

The state of the British high street is a perennial lament in the UK. And, just as with the decline of the monarchy, attention spans and cursive handwriting, there's always someone ready to make its restitution their great crusade. Enter Prime Minister Andy Burnham, whose plan to regenerate our "hollowed-out" town centres starts by curtailing the proliferation of betting and vape shops: those incorrigible weeds sprouting in the retail ruins of Jane Norman and Paperchase.

Karl Marx warned us against identifying with commodities, but try telling that to anyone who remembers the Pic'n'mix from Woolworths. Here we are feeling something close to sorrow when the stores of our childhood fall like dominoes – the now-defunct Debenhams, C&A, BHS and Littlewoods, reduced to the indignity of a catalogue named Very. So Very sad.

But not all of the high street has soared off, like Comet, into the great commercial graveyard in the sky. Some of it seems to have driven to the nearest out-of-town retail park. This week also saw the submission of plans for a new £20m retail area south of Derby. Highlights include an Aldi and a Starbucks drive-through café. If planning approval is granted, construction will be completed next year.

Retail parks are hot property, with supermarkets, clothing stores and discount chains elbowing for room. Of the UK's 407m sq ft of retail park space, only 1.8 per cent is currently vacant. If

They are places where dreams go to die, designed by people who seem never to have met a pedestrian

Burnham is determined to save the spirit of the high street, this is the brave new world he's up against.

The first retail park opened in West Bridgford in Nottingham in 1964 and still operates as an Asda supermarket. The largest, at about 676,000 sq ft, is Middlebrook Retail Park & Leisure Park in Horwich, Bolton. If Burnham wants to see it for himself, it is just a 45-minute drive from Number 10 North.

These outdoor commercial complexes are a distinct departure from high streets and American-style indoor shopping malls. The mall, in its late 1980s heyday, was immortalised by Tiffany, whose video for "I Think We're Alone Now" was filmed in Ogden City Mall in Utah, and Joan of Arc commanding an aerobics class in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (set in Metrocenter Mall in Phoenix, Arizona, which doubled as San Dimas).

There have been no such cultural highs for retail parks. Usually developed on the edge of a town or city, they comprise multiple warehouse-style shops and copious parking. In short, they are places where browsing dreams go to die, designed by people who seem never to have met a pedestrian. Herein lies the problem. It's hard to form a community when you're loading up your boot at B&Q.

What's wrong with a palatial Pets at Home, you might ask? Should animals not have their own emporium? Is there not something bracing about the straight talk of The Range, with its general life merchandise?

Yet Burnham's instincts are right. Where we spend our money tells us something important about who we are. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin was interested in this, diligently making notes while meandering through the shopping arcades of 19th-century Paris. The arcade, he observed, is a world in miniature. All life could be found in the cafés, repair shops, brotels and boutiques. In capturing its spirit, he was trying to make sense of modernity.

Burnham's ambitions are less grand, but all the more important: fewer boarded-up premises, better local economies and the belonging that comes with a shared sense of place. Retail parks are an emblem of impersonal modern life. They are a reminder that what made the high street special wasn't the stuff we bought, but the fact that, for a while, we were together.

The writer is an academic, critic and broadcaster

The right must fight its own woke wing

BRITAIN

Robert Shrimley



There are many supposedly immutable laws of politics, but for the most unerring we must turn to Isaac Newton. Every action produces an equal and opposite reaction. Every significant political movement creates its own counter-reformation.

Even as progressive wokery wanes we are seeing the reaction, often fuelled by progressive over-reach. Large parts of the right have succumbed to a similar delirium whose symptoms are intolerance, conspiracy, false narratives, ethnic grievance, inability to comprehend nuance and elevation of an oppressor class.

The Conservative leader, Kemi Badenoch, last week latched on to the recent concept of the "woke right" to explain her reluctance for a pact with Nigel Farage's Reform UK. For her, "woke" – be it left or right – is "all grievance, it is victim narratives, people are doing this to us, oppressor narratives".

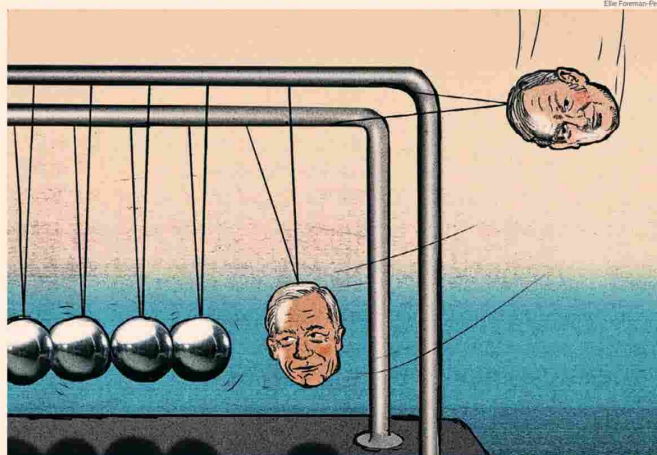
That the authoritarian right and left overlap is well understood. Their true opponents have always been centrists and "small l" liberals. Today's overlap in the aforementioned victim narratives. While the radical left sees oppres-

sors among whites, men, capitalists and colonialists; the woke right sees it in a liberal elite, a political class, a Muslim mayor of London, in lawyers, journalists and officials intentionally disavowing white Christians. They see the plot in multiculturalism, immigration, environmentalism and even in policing. This thinking has infected Reform UK and parts of the Tories, spurred on by media allies and an online echo chamber.

As so often, Britain is aping the US right which is egging on its offshoots. Elon Musk and JD Vance push nativist agendas while far-right US "Groypers" have emboldened their UK analogues into ever more open racism. Where the woke left has intersectionality and critical race theory, the woke right has the great replacement theory and the betrayal of the west – although it seems to loathe the western values and institutions it purports to defend.

Just as the woke left uses an individual's gender or ethnicity to resist attacks, last week Rupert Lowe, leader of the ethnonationalist Restore Britain party, fought back against calls to sack his co-founder for antisemitic slurs, saying he would not "put a young Christian man out of work". This ideological purity can lead to hilarious muddles, not least Lowe's refusal to agree in an interview that the King, whose father was Greek/Danish, was "white British".

As with the left, there are genuine underpinning grievances, real wrongs and economic neglect to correct. The grievances of the woke right have been fortified by woke left errors such as can-



cel culture and the excesses of some diversity initiatives, which it uses to discredit all efforts at inclusivity. But the real target for too many is not misfiring policies but diversity itself.

On both sides, there is a victim elect. Only their suffering counts. The woke right routinely highlights the victimhood of the white British – a group that excludes many UK citizens.

And with this comes hypocrisy. This month Farage, supposedly a defender of free speech, demanded the arrest of the Green Party leader, Zack Polanski, for sharing a vile image that suggested guilting the Reform leader. (The compulsion of the left always pulls at the heartstrings). Yet this same Farage routinely gives a platform at his events to a woman jailed for tweeting "set fire" to

There are lessons to be learnt from the left on how rage alienates potential allies

all asylum hotels. Far-right violence is too often excused.

The language is similarly extreme. Opponents are not merely misguided. They are betrayers. Witness the grotesque sight of Zia Yusuf, Reform UK's home affairs spokesman, accusing a former Tory defence secretary and army veteran of being a "traitor to Britain".

In the end, however, this approach is likely to prove a dead end. The right needs to learn lessons from the left on how rage alienates potential allies. Mainstream voters did not want to defund the police or decolonise the curriculum. They were repelled by abuse, anger and sanctimony, even where they sympathised with the underlying cause. The same fate awaits the woke right.

All elections are a choice and if the alternative is bad enough anyone can win. Since their victim class is the ethnic majority, the woke right has an advantage. It also has more money and media power behind it. Even so, Reform is falling in the polls and struggling to broaden its appeal, and people have

started voting tactically to defeat them.

The problem is often less the cause than how it is pursued. When it is underpinned by intolerance, conspiracy, othering and the search for division – it alienates even sympathisers. Yusuf may talk of ICE-style forces to round up migrants but Donald Trump is not the model for the UK.

And while it is good to see Badenoch calling it out, her own party is not immune to the virus as can be seen in some of its anti-Muslim rhetoric. The smarter members of her side (and indeed those around Farage) will seek ways to address real grievances while avoiding this trap. But the centre-right must find ways to reclaim the ground from woke entrists who are obstructing its return to power and discrediting the legitimate aspects of its agenda.

Voters judge parties by their character as much as their policies. What repels many is fanaticism and intolerance. It is a lesson anyone with aspirations to govern would do well to absorb.

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Japan needs deterrence and renewal – not managed decline

Takeshi Niinami

The 81st anniversary of the end of the second world war will pass in Japan this week-end amid a deafening silence. Beneath it lies a deeper affliction: a fear of sovereignty that has produced a sclerotic approach to the country's future. A recent Gallup survey of 45 countries found only 9 per cent of Japanese citizens would fight for their country – the lowest of all nations surveyed.

Japan's education system has reinforced this attitude, even as China expands its economic and military reach and North Korea continues its provocations. Our curriculum is still shaped by postwar assumptions rather than today's realities, which demand a serious focus on deterring threats to national security.

But what should deterrence mean for

Japan today? The first and most pressing component is economic strength. Japan's workforce is shrinking, and no technological ingenuity can compensate for a demographic crisis left unaddressed: a serious immigration framework, built on skills and genuine integration, is overdue. For thirty years, deflation lulled Japan into comfortable numbness: sustaining defunct industries and protecting existing jobs rather than creating new ones.

The second pillar is hard power. Japan needs to spend more on defence, develop capabilities – including missiles, drones, and possibly nuclear submarines – and stop treating this as a cause for embarrassment. A country that cannot protect itself narrows its options in everything else.

The third is soft power – and here Japan is already stronger than it assumes. The Japan International Cooperation Agency's development work, our overseas aid and cultural exports like manga and anime have built a reservoir of goodwill across Asia. Nations that admire you are less inclined to threaten you. We should take this soft

power as seriously as we take missiles and ships.

Critics argue Japan cannot afford stronger deterrence. They are wrong. A stronger economy is precisely what finances greater security – and without economic renewal, no level of defence spending is sustainable.

Japan will need honest leadership rather than politicians who revert to the old reflex of subsidy cheques when

No technological ingenuity can compensate for a demographic crisis left unaddressed

electricity bills or fuel prices rise, sparing citizens the discomfort of seeing the dangers of energy dependence and strained public finances. Leaders must have the courage to level with the public and pair a sense of urgency with a credible positive vision. Subsidies are a political escape route; they blunt urgency, freeze the status quo and

starve the animal spirits that only genuine pressure produces.

The business community must also step forward. Industrial revival and deterrence are no longer separate projects but one and the same. Semiconductors, robotics, AI and precision manufacturing are inherently dual-use and Japan's corporate sector must lead the shift with urgency, in partnership with government, by dismantling institutional barriers – including the self-imposed university ban on defence research and regulatory silos that restrict labour mobility. Eighty years after the war's end – we cannot survive with an education system still shaped by postwar assumptions rather than the world as it is.

Finally, the country requires a recovery of national confidence, having grown accustomed to managing decline rather than pursuing renewal. Deterrence does not start with missiles or budget lines. It starts with a society that believes in its own future. A nation that has lost that belief will struggle to defend itself. This is the hardest truth in the entire debate,

and the one most rarely spoken aloud.

We must also build a broader economic and security coalition. While America remains indispensable, Japan's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific offers like-minded nations – India, Australia, the Philippines, South Korea and others – a common purpose and a foundation for regional prosperity through factors such as integrated supply chains. A coalition cannot guarantee peace, but it raises the price of aggression beyond what most are willing to pay.

There is one thing Japan must never surrender: the trust earned across eight decades as a peaceful nation. Japan can acquire real deterrence and remain, at its core, the peaceful country it chose to become in 1945. That peace was never free. The past generation paid with restraint; this generation must pay for the next eighty years with clarity and will – and accept that no one else will bear the cost.

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