



United and free India needs unity, not uniformity; dissent must not be seen as divisive

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Independence Day speech, his thirteenth, was delivered within an entirely new political context, shaped by the recent student protests that led to the resignation of his Education Minister. The protests may have waned, but their underlying and lingering reasons for the unrest remain a matter of serious concern for the country. Mr. Modi sought to offer hope, inspiration and purpose on the one hand while, on the other, built a new phantom labelled 'dimagi naxals', who, he said, influenced policymaking and required purging. The speech was specifically addressed to the young citizens of the nation. Mr. Modi repeatedly stressed the need for big dreams, firm resolve and rapid execution, arguing that India could no longer think in incremental terms. He promised skill training for one crore youth over the next year to prepare India for the artificial intelligence era; free online coaching for competitive examinations to reduce the burden on families and improve access to opportunities; and renewed the government's emphasis on innovation, quantum technology, space, robotics, data centres and other emerging sectors. Mr. Modi reiterated his commitment to self-reliance in defence production, including advanced technologies such as drones and next-generation defence systems. All Indians would naturally appreciate these promises and the statement of purpose.

Whether Mr. Modi wanted, or tried, to build a unified national approach towards these challenges and their management is doubtful. India's progress is a continuum that should ideally have a compounding effect with each subsequent year. Comparing, in absolute terms, achievements before and after 2014, when he became Prime Minister, is neither statistically relevant nor politically prudent. The fact about India as it enters the 80th year as a free nation that fought off colonialism is that its challenges are unprecedented. It has a massive young population entering the workforce even as technology is disrupting life and work as never before. What India needs is an all-hands-on-deck approach, requiring a unified political will among parties and stakeholders that is unaffected by electoral contests. India also needs an indigenous understanding and philosophy of development rather than trying to mimic the techno-capitalism that is rattling advanced economies. This is a point that was underlined by the Rashtriya Swamayeek Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat in his Independence Day speech. Mr. Modi clearly sees the challenges; but he also sees, unfortunately, an enemy in every critic. As he leads the country into a new year of independence, perhaps he could consider new ideas, including those from his critics, instead of amplifying divisive ones.

Not just turbulence India's aviation should not have to depend on chance for safety

The August 4, 2026, incident involving Air India flight AI 2379, from Phukhet to Delhi, with 137 passengers and eight crew, now has two tracks. The first concerns its reclassification: the initial 'event of turbulence' is now a 'serious incident' after inflight technical issues and a significant deviation in aircraft altitude caused injuries to more than 20 passengers and crew, quickly drawing in the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). The subsequent probe by the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau, along with France's investigation authority, BEA, and technical representatives from Airbus, should unravel the multiple anomalies that briefly overtook the Airbus A320N — fault warnings across the hydraulic systems, elevator flight-control faults, autopilot disconnection, emergency-exit door indications and an engine anti-ice warning. Airbus's initial data is said to support the evidence of technical errors. However, it is the second track that has received much attention: the result of the pilot-in-command's post-flight screening for psychoactive substances.

The Tata Group-Singapore Airlines joint venture airline has been prodded into commencing the immediate and mandatory screening of its flight crew 'for any substances or unprescribed medications'. But the deeply discomfiting discovery has exposed the weak link in crew screening — the greater emphasis on pre- and post-flight breathalyzer checks for alcohol than on testing for psychoactive substances, which falls under the Civil Aviation Requirements (CAR) Section 5-Air Safety Series F Part V. In fact, the CAR — which applies to Air Traffic Controllers also — leans more towards random and post-flight/post-shift testing, with graded disciplinary action. With India's air carriers expanding operations, crew citing stress-related issues, and, separately, the availability of substances for medicinal or recreational use, the regulator must ensure stringent psychoactive substance testing and operational compliance. The DGCA's Medical Circular No. 02 of 2021, on 'over-the-counter (OTC) drugs and self-medication', highlights pilot cognitive/psychomotor skills impairment, drawing on the Mangaluru (2010) and Kozhikode (2020) fatal air accidents. Further, documented cases from the West reveal that even small levels of impairment can affect crew judgement, reaction time, coordination, and decision-making, the critical skills needed in the flight deck. Ensuring that fit crew are behind the controls is an aviation industry bedrock, and every Indian operator, large or growing, must uphold the highest standards. This was a lucky escape, but luck cannot be allowed to become a safety strategy.

India's democracy needs different electoral rhythms

The "One Nation, One Election (ONOE)" proposal (to enforce a uniform, synchronised timeline for national and State elections across India) represents a profound misapprehension of the structural mechanics of the parliamentary system, and poses an existential threat to the federal architecture designed by the framers of the Constitution.

To align the distinct political rhythms of dozens of individual States with the central government, in the name of national uniformity, is to prioritise administrative convenience over democratic substance. The argument for synchronisation relies heavily on a superficial calculation of financial expenditure and an overblown narrative of governance paralysis. Yet, it ignores the fundamental constitutional friction that occurs when presidential mechanics are clumsily grafted onto a parliamentary democracy.

Flexibility at democracy's core

At the very heart of the parliamentary form of government is the principle that the executive branch derives its legitimacy directly from, and remains continuously accountable to, the legislature. Unlike a presidential system, where the executive is elected independently for a strict, unalterable calendar term, a parliamentary executive exists entirely at the pleasure of the legislative majority. A Prime Minister or a Chief Minister rules only as long as they command the confidence of the house. Consequently, the parliamentary system is inherently built around flexibility; terms are not rigidly fixed because the collapse of a governing coalition, a successful motion of no confidence, or a shifting legislative realignment must naturally trigger a democratic reset. That is why India's elections, which ran on the same timetable from 1952 to 1967, no longer do: governments at the State and the Centre fell at different times when they lost their legislative majorities, and were elected accordingly thereafter, leading to the current situation where some State or the other is going to the elections every year.

Imposing a fixed-term electoral calendar artificially binds the legislature, completely short-circuiting this parliamentary accountability mechanism. If a government falls, forcing a fixed timeline means that the electorate is stripped of its sovereign right to choose a new government for a full five-year mandate. Instead, the system must resort to truncated midterm Assemblies elected merely to serve out the unexpired remainder of the original calendar. This introduction of variable, short-term governance undermines the stability it claims to protect, creating weak, insecure "lame-duck" administrations whose bureaucrats, police forces and political opponents will simply run down the clock rather than engage in decisive long-term policymaking.

The alternative, of resorting to President's Rule when a State government falls, rather than



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holding a fresh election, is even more undemocratic. This would inevitably force a domino effect of constitutional crises that severely erodes the value of a citizen's vote. Under a synchronised system, the democratic leverage of the electorate is fundamentally distorted. A citizen voting in a midterm election to fill a two-year unexpired term is structurally handed less political bargaining power than a voter casting a ballot at the dawn of the five-year cycle. If full-term and midterm governments wield identical constitutional powers, it is a violation of democratic equity that their corresponding popular mandates carry unequal temporal weight. Furthermore, the logic of synchronisation dictates that if the national Parliament dissolves prematurely due to a fractured coalition in New Delhi, stable State legislative assemblies possessing absolute, robust majorities would be abruptly terminated by operation of law, simply to keep the national "one election" clock on course. To dissolve a functional, democratically elected State government because of a political realignment in New Delhi is a direct assault on the political sovereignty of that state's electorate, subordinating regional democratic choices to national political dynamics.

National politics will overshadow States

This subordination exposes the deeply anti-federal undercurrents of the synchronisation agenda. India is fundamentally a union of States, a vast pluralistic landscape where regional identities, local economic contexts, and historical trajectories demand distinct political expressions. Federalism is not a mere administrative arrangement; it is a vital mechanism for cultural and political accommodation.

By combining State and national elections into a single mega-event, the distinct boundaries between localised issues and national narratives are blurred. In a synchronised ballot, national parties with vast financial apparatuses and dominant media presence naturally tend to overshadow regional players. Local grievances regarding regional infrastructure, provincial welfare, and cultural preservation risk being entirely subsumed by overarching national rhetoric or geopolitical theatre. Electorates are subtly coerced into prioritising national alignment over regional suitability, a phenomenon captured by the majoritarian push for uniform alignment under the guise of developmental efficiency. This dynamic pressures voters to install identical parties at both the State and centre, penalising States that choose independent political paths and starving them of federal resources if they dissent from the national ruling party.

The financial justifications used to defend this centralisation of power are equally flawed. The claim that simultaneous elections will drastically cut public spending deliberately conflates the minimal, necessary administrative costs incurred

by the State with the unregulated, private campaign expenditures of political parties. The official funds spent by the Election Commission of India to manage independent cycles are a drop in the ocean for an economy of India's scale, a small and necessary price to pay for maintaining a responsive democracy. Conversely, the vast sums of money circulated by political parties during campaigns actually function as a form of informal economic redistribution, temporarily generating widespread employment and shifting capital back down to printers, local transport networks, artisans, and working-class citizens. To restrict this economic circulation to once every five years under the banner of austerity is an argument that privileges elite preferences over the periodic economic stimuli that campaigns provide to the informal sector.

Moreover, the complaint that the continuous cycle of elections creates a perpetual state of policy paralysis due to the Model Code of Conduct is an administrative myth. The electoral code is designed strictly to prevent the ruling executive from announcing opportunistic, brand-new financial handouts or executing politically-motivated bureaucratic transfers during the immediate run-up to a vote. It does not freeze the wheels of the State, nor does it halt the execution of ongoing public works, routine governance, or essential administrative duties. The narrative of paralysis is often deployed by executives to excuse structural inefficiencies that have nothing to do with the electoral calendar. In reality, the frequency of independent State elections serves as a critical check on executive hubris, forcing political representatives to regularly return to the doorsteps of their constituents with folded hands. This continuous accountability cycle keeps political parties responsive to shifting public sentiment, whereas a single, synchronised event leaves a five-year void where representatives are essentially insulated from the popular will.

Diminishing the voter's voice

Ultimately, the drive toward uniform elections is an attempt to transform the organic, messy vitality of a decentralised parliamentary democracy into the rigid, totalising efficiency of an authoritarian state model. It reduces the sovereign voter to a cog in an administrative machine, strips States of their distinct political timelines, and creates dangerous vacuums where insecure, short-term governments cannot effectively rule. By treating elections as an expensive administrative burden to be minimised rather than the primary lifeblood of public accountability, the ONOE model devalues the constitutional spirit of the republic. True democratic strength does not lie in forced conformity or synchronised clocks, but in the enduring resilience of a federal compact that allows its many distinct regions to live, breathe, and vote according to their own unique conditions.

India is losing West Asia, but it is not too late



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India is losing West Asia, one country at a time. Even as the region undergoes a once-in-a-generation shift in its security architecture and political battle lines, it is unclear what India's strategy is...or whether New Delhi has one at all.

It was not supposed to be this way. Just 10 years ago, India was rapidly remaking its footprint in West Asia. In 2016, Saudi Arabia awarded India's Prime Minister its highest civilian honour. In 2021, the I2U2 agreement was signed binding India, Israel, the United States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) together. In 2024, Iran leased Chabahar to India. All these successes though are now memories from the past.

Pakistan's new diplomatic moment

In the last four months, the U.S.-Israel war with Iran has escalated into a catastrophic regional conflict with Iran attacking the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the Saudis hitting Iraqi militias, Houthis attacking Saudi ships and Israel carrying out strikes in multiple countries. Now, the Gulf countries are rethinking the efficacy of the U.S. security umbrella. They see a threat from both Iran and Israel.

Among the Gulf countries there is a schism on how to handle this threat — through engagement (as the UAE is doing) or through deterrence (as the Saudis are contemplating).

In this context, Pakistan's role as mediator in the U.S.-Iran conflict is gaining it reputational benefits in the region. Irrespective of Pakistan's motives, analysts in the region see that Pakistan waded into the conflict at a time when it seemed that no one could bring U.S. President Donald Trump and the Iranians to the table despite efforts by Türkiye, Qatar and Egypt.

The latest collective defence pact in Mecca between Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan comes in this context. This pact may mean less in shaping the U.S.-Iran war as none of these

countries is likely to directly take on Iran alongside the U.S. The pact is thus aimed less at Iran and more at deterring Israel. All three countries see themselves as the next target of Israel after Iran. They thus want to pool Saudi capital, Pakistan's military strength, and Türkiye's technological advances.

This is a challenge for India. A future war between Israel and Pakistan will inevitably draw in India given the close partnership between Israel and India. Similarly, even greater Turkish support for Pakistan in a future conflict that Pakistan might have with India cannot be ruled out.

The choices before India

What then is India's strategy? It appears to be confident of Israel's victory in its various battles in the region given its proximity to the U.S. But U.S. politics are changing rapidly, with both 'Make America Great Again' Republicans and Democratic Socialists questioning the once-unquestioned U.S. support for Israel. Can Israel then emerge triumphant alone?

India has cultivated a special relationship with the UAE given the importance of remittances from Indian expat workers in the country, the investments by the Indian elite in the UAE and the UAE's strategic investments in India. But the UAE's mounting differences with Saudi Arabia are a cause for concern, as are its positions against UN-recognised governments in conflicts as far as Sudan. Can the UAE emerge unscathed in all these conflicts?

India can choose to sign military alliances with Israel and the UAE. But this would hurt what is left of India's relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia. India can choose to do nothing as it is doing now. And its merchant mariners may keep getting killed in the Strait of Hormuz while more Indian ships may sink in the Bab-el-Mandeb.

West Asia is changing rapidly and India must act before its influence fades

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Political labelling

The Prime Minister often creates new terms and expressions to disparage opponents and dissenters. After previous labels such as 'urban Naxals', 'tukde-tukde gang' and 'andolanjevis' became outdated, he has used the national platform to introduce a new one:

'dimagi (intellectual) naxals'. This seems aimed at the student leaders behind the Gen Z protests, which have somewhat damaged his strongman image. If his warning about a 'malicious plan to harm the country' was genuine, he should have clearly outlined the traits of such individuals.

This vague label is another excuse for his government to target inconvenient voices and regain lost ground (Page 1, August 16).
Kamal Laddha,
Bangalore

True patriotism

The controversy over the rendition of the full version

of *Vande Mataram* at the headquarters of the Congress party (August 16) has emerged amid the government's emphasis on its complete rendition. Patriotism should extend beyond symbolic expressions of attachment to the nation to include a tangible commitment to the

safety, dignity and well-being of its people. Mindless violence against individuals suspected of transporting beef, or attacks on Christians at peaceful prayer meetings, are equally incompatible with the values of patriotism and constitutional democracy. The democratic ideal is not

the dominance of the majority over minorities, but a constitutional framework in which every citizen can participate with equal dignity and security.

Matthew Adukani,
Chennai

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

How AI can be optimised for better healthcare

Modern medicine has built an extraordinary depth of knowledge. However, how much of that knowledge can reach the patient who needs it now? The answer has traditionally depended on the number and distribution of trained clinicians, the institutions in which they work, and the systems that connect them to patients. All three are difficult to expand quickly. For India, which is still expanding its healthcare capacity while its disease burden becomes more complex, the question of how far health expertise can reach is particularly consequential.

Here, Artificial Intelligence (AI) introduces a new dimension. It offers a way of taking the accumulated knowledge and making more of it available at the point of care. The change is visible across major health systems. In January 2025, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said it had authorised more than 1,000 AI-enabled medical devices. These include tools used in radiology, cardiology, and other areas of diagnosis. In the U.K., the NHS issued a guidance in April 2025 for the use of AI-enabled ambient scribing. By January 2026, the country was developing a national programme to support wider adoption, with early evidence suggesting that the technology could give doctors up to a quarter more time with their patients.

These examples point to a wider change. AI is moving out of innovation teams and into consultations, diagnostic workflows, and hospital operations. The real work now lies in making it dependable enough for routine use.

The economic benefits India has its own set of challenges. Specialist care remains concentrated in larger cities, while chronic conditions require patients to be monitored over many years. Hospitals are also managing rising volumes without being able to increase clinical



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capacity at the same pace.

An AI tool that helps prioritise a radiology scan, alerts a care team to a deteriorating patient or supports a physician handling a complex case in a smaller city can make existing capacity work more efficiently.

The country has already built much of the digital foundation required for this shift. By May 2026, more than 100 crore health records had been linked to the Ayushman Bharat Health Accounts, twice the number recorded in February 2025. A July 2026 government update reported that the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) Scan and Share service had reduced outpatient registration waits at participating hospitals from around an hour to between two and five minutes. These improvements did not require a dramatic reinvention. It came from removing friction from a familiar hospital process. AI can extend the same principle to appointment scheduling, clinical documentation, claims, inventory planning, and discharge management. Each task takes time away from care if handled poorly.

Additionally, the financial benefits from using AI is becoming harder for healthcare providers to ignore. A January 2026 McKinsey analysis estimated that applying AI across healthcare revenue-cycle operations could reduce the cost to collect by 30% to 60%. For hospitals, these gains can free resources for clinical teams, equipment and capacity. They can also reduce administrative work that contributes to staff fatigue.

There is yet another part related to the business side that receives less attention. AI can help providers offer services that were previously difficult to deliver at scale. Remote monitoring can extend care beyond discharge. Risk-based preventive programmes can identify people who need attention before symptoms become severe. Virtual specialist support can connect smaller hospitals with expertise located elsewhere. Diagnostics can

be taken closer to communities, while hospitals maintain an ongoing relationship with patients managing diabetes, cardiac disease or cancer.

Judicious use

These models create revenue, but their value does not come from selling more technology. It comes from reaching patients earlier and avoiding preventable deterioration. This is also where restraint matters. A system that performs well in one hospital or population may not work equally well across India's States, disease patterns, and care settings. Clinical validation, representative data, and human oversight also need to be seriously considered. The FDA's September 2025 call for better methods to evaluate AI-enabled devices in real-world settings reflects a concern that every health system will have to confront. The tools' performance at launch does not guarantee performance over time.

Healthcare does not need AI everywhere. It needs it where delays can be reduced, clinicians can make better-informed decisions, and more patients can receive appropriate care. As India marks another year of Independence, there is a larger dimension to this conversation. The economic strength of a nation ultimately rests on the capabilities of its people. Healthcare therefore belongs within the architecture of economic development. India has built considerable physical and digital infrastructure over the decades; the next phase of development will depend increasingly on the health, longevity and productivity of its population. AI can contribute by making expertise widely available and by shifting healthcare towards earlier detection and continuous management.

The economic return on AI in healthcare will be measured not by the number of systems deployed, but by the number of lives touched and its impact on human life and happiness.

Andhra's urban transformation

The State's municipal department is trying to build a sustainable urban model

STATE OF PLAY

V. Raghavendra

The Municipal Administration and Urban Development (MA&UD) Department of Andhra Pradesh is caught in the time warp of archaic administrative measures. But now it seems the light has dawned as it tries to catch up with the times.

A top official of the department, at the recent Green Andhra Summit organised by the Indian Green Building Council, noted in disbelief that one of the most laughable things about urban local bodies was its imposition of a 'tree guard fee'. The audience went into a fit of giggles as the official continued to say that about 45 different types of charges are being collected by the MA&UD Department. He stated that he has since sought to make systemic changes with a new sense of urgency in order to achieve sustainable development.

An overhaul

The government is streamlining a whole lot of procedures and doing away with redundant ones in keeping with the Swarna Andhra 2047 Vision.

A significant step towards transforming cities and towns into cleaner urban agglomerations is a mandate to apartment complexes, if the waste generated per day exceeds 100 kilos, to set up their own in-situ solid waste management units. This has not yet been made formally mandatory, but it is a welcome move as the government intends to rid cities and towns of waste.

To complement this move, the department contemplated giving incentives for using treated wastewater, like it is done in some advanced coun-



tries across industrial, commercial, and drinking purposes. The Reuse of Treated Used Water Policy, 2026 has been approved by the government to boost long-term water security, reduce freshwater dependence, and promote a circular water economy.

Additionally, the existing model of developing slums is being reworked to achieve the twin objectives of improving the quality of life for the slum dwellers and making cities look beautiful. Towards this, the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation is embarking on the redevelopment of a slum on the DBFT (Design, Build, Finance and Transfer) basis under the Visakhapatnam Economic Region Program through suitable amendments to the Andhra Pradesh Building Rules of 2017. It involves the construction of a high-rise building which should accommodate 177 housing units. This is a first-of-its-kind project taken up anywhere in the State as a result of the slew of relaxations made in the Floor Space Index (FSI) norms in order to make projects viable for developers in small slum areas.

A green economy The MA&UD Department has also laid greater thrust on green buildings by encouraging the use of green materials at the design stage itself as well as for necessary modifications in existing buildings; va-

rious incentives are also being planned to accelerate this adoption such as giving discounts in development charges, irrespective of the types of use (residential or commercial). The focus on green buildings is in tune with the growing need to reduce the carbon footprint of the construction sector, and in the process facilitate the unobstructed transmission of natural light and free flow of air, which makes the buildings energy-efficient and thereby economically viable.

Keeping in view the multiple benefits of green buildings, the government is extending the initiative to ordinary houses, schools, hospitals, and commercial establishments like never before. It has also stipulated hefty penalties in case of violations.

These things apart, the government has prioritised the optimisation of land use (utilising vacant private land for public spaces) and transit-oriented development to incentivise transit corridors and stops. The MA&UD has already eased the zoning regulations and reduced the number of zones from 15 to 10 for the sake of flexibility in urban development.

The whole idea, as per the MA&UD official, is to make the city grow rapidly and be adaptive, like it happened with London and Paris among other great global cities.

A decisive shift is thus underway towards deep-tech governance, fiscal self-reliance, and environmentally resilient urban living, keeping in line with the theme 'build faster and better and grow green'. This can already be seen in Amaravati, the emerging greenfield capital city of Andhra Pradesh.

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Girls conditioned from childhood to take up domestic burden

The time women spend on housework begins to rise around the age of 10 and reaches a peak of nearly 460 minutes a day around age 30

DATA POINT

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In a recent interaction with women aspiring to become entrepreneurs in rural Haryana, it was found that other than social and cultural norms, the biggest practical problem constraining the women's ability to do more paid work was that a large share of their time was tied up in cooking and completing household chores. Strikingly, their daughters, rather than their sons, were already sharing this burden by helping them in the kitchen and other chores. The next generation, it seemed, is already learning to reproduce the gender gap in invisible, unpaid work.

India's Time Use Survey (2025) highlights that the division of labour that emerges in adulthood begins much earlier, through childhood conditioning. What starts in childhood widens with age, reaching its peak in the prime working years (Chart 1).

The time women spend on housework begins to rise around the age of 10 and continues through the late teens and twenties, reaching a peak of nearly 460 minutes (7.5 hours) a day around age 30. The male curve, however, never crosses 65 minutes at any age between six and 75. Adolescence, in this sense, is not separate from adulthood; it is when the adult pattern begins to take shape (Chart 1). Data shows that at age six, Indian boys and girls spend almost the same amount of time on domestic and care work at about five minutes a day (Chart 2). Their trajectories remain relatively close through early childhood. Thereafter, however, they diverge sharply.

Around age 10, the girls' curve begins to pull away. Girls spend about 15 minutes a day on domestic and care work at age 10, 75 minutes at 15, and around 130 mi-

nutes by age 17. Boys, meanwhile, move from roughly five minutes at age six to only about 17 minutes by the end of childhood. The result is a dramatic widening of the gender gap. The girl-to-boy ratio in unpaid work rises from 1.6 among children aged 6-9, to 4.5 among those aged 10-14, and to 7.5 among adolescents aged 15-17.

Little control over time

The cost is leisure. Between ages six and 17, girls' housework rises by roughly 124 minutes a day, while their leisure time falls by around 115 minutes. For boys, the decline in leisure is much smaller but the time they spend on housework changes relatively little.

This matters because the cost of girls' domestic work is often framed primarily as a trade-off with schooling and education. But data shows that girls, in fact, are spending slightly more time on learning than boys at most ages. They, therefore, remain in school but still pay a substantial price in leisure time that could be spent on sport, friendships, rest, exploration and simply having discretionary control over their own time. These are not economically irrelevant activities. They are part of how children build confidence, social networks, physical capability and even a sense of agency, all of which influence their ability to build career trajectories later in life (Chart 2).

Cooking lies at the centre of this divergence (Chart 3). Among adolescents aged 15-17 years, 42.4% of girls report cooking, compared with only 2.9% of boys. Girls in this age group spend close to an hour cooking, while boys spend just two minutes. Cleaning and laundry also become increasingly gendered, with wide gaps in both participation and time spent. The only tasks where adolescent boys match or exceed girls are farm work and shopping; activities that are more outward-facing (the field and market), rather than inward-facing into the kitchen.

Between childhood and adulthood, therefore, girls are being trained for the household while boys are being trained for the world outside. This helps explain why childhood conditioning can later appear as an "efficient" gendered allocation of household work.

One of the clearest manifestations is women's absence from the labour force. In the 2025 PLFS, childcare and domestic responsibilities were the single most-cited reason women gave for staying out of the labour force, reported by 52.5% of urban women and 40% of rural women, compared with less than 1% of men.

Most policy interventions address women's unpaid work in adulthood through childcare, community kitchens, safe mobility infrastructure, flexible work and social protection, among others. But the Time Use Survey suggests that policy must also start much earlier, by addressing the unequal assignment of domestic work between boys and girls.

The objective is not to remove domestic work from children's lives, but to remove its gender assignment. Schools can help by giving every child, boy or girl, equal opportunities to learn practical life skills, from cooking and home management to stitching, carpentry and financial management.

India has invested heavily in keeping girls in school and improving their educational outcomes, but equal attention must be paid to what happens to their time outside school. Otherwise, by the time young women enter the labour market, years of gendered conditioning and unpaid work may already have narrowed their choices.

Disproportionate burden

The data for the charts were sourced from India's Time Use Survey (2025) and the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation (MoSPI)

CHART 1: Time spent on housework (unpaid domestic and caregiving services)

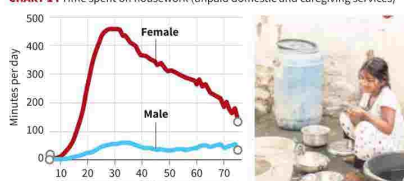


CHART 2: Time spent by children on domestic work, leisure and learning

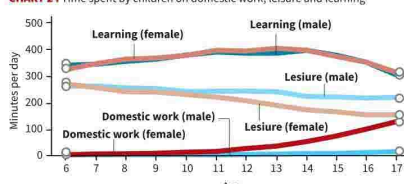
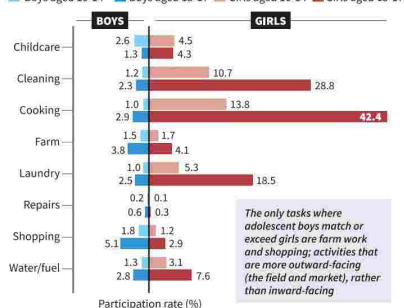


CHART 3: The share (participation rate) of girls and boys who engage in different types of housework



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 17, 1976

Water supplies dry up in U.K.

London, August 16: The possibility that Britain, an island normally drenched by Atlantic rains, may have to import drinking water is now being seriously studied by planners, according to informed sources.

With no sign of a let-up in the country's worst drought since 1727 when records started officials recognise that such drastic action as importing water by tanker from Scandinavia and distributing it by tank lorries may become necessary.

Water supplies are rapidly drying up and a million homes in South Wales already have water cut off at night. From next month, people in parts of Western England will have to queue at Stand-pipes for supplies.

Strict rationing starts in the Channel Island of Jersey to-day and has been in force in neighbouring Guernsey island since a state of emergency was declared in June. Without such measures water would run out in six weeks.

After revelling an unusually dry and glorious summer, Britons are now waking up to the prospect that if the rains stay away through the autumn they could be in for a winter of hardship with food and industrial production hit.

All 10 water authorities in England and Wales have promptly told the Government that they will be applying to use powers made available under the Drought Act. Three authorities covering North-East, South, West and the whole of Wales are demanding the right to cut off water to homes whenever they wish.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 17, 1926

Manchester cotton trade

London, August 16: The Federation of Master Cotton Spinners Association has inaugurated a scheme for the protection of American Spinning Section of the trade from undercut selling.

"Basic prices" which are in effect minimum prices, are fixed for a standard quality of American cotton and beams. Salesmen of the Manchester Exchange representing firms producing these yarns have been instructed to quote prices coinciding with the Federation's list. The elimination of cheap sellers seems only a matter of time if the Federation members stand together. The Federation and Non-Federation concerns have promised loyal support.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Area affected by Belgium wildfire since Friday

3,000 in hectares. A wildfire raging in a nature reserve in eastern Belgium, the biggest to hit the country in recent history, has more than doubled in size in 24 hours to affect some 3,000 hectares, authorities said on Sunday. The Wallonia regional government said that over 250 emergency personnel were mobilised. **APF**

Persons killed in Israeli strikes in southern Lebanon

11 Israel vowed on Sunday it would hit Hezbollah again if threatened, as it identified what it described as a commander killed in strikes a day earlier that also left several children dead. Israeli strikes on Saturday killed 11 people in southern Lebanon, according to authorities, in the deadliest attacks since a deal was reached in June aimed at ending hostilities. **APF**

Roads blocked in Himachal Pradesh due to torrential rains

118 Torrential rains in Himachal Pradesh have led to the closure of 118 roads across the State, as the local meteorological office issued an orange alert for heavy to very heavy rains at isolated places in five districts on Monday and Tuesday. Dharamshala recorded 96.2 mm of rainfall, followed by Palampur at 55 mm and Kangra at 34.6 mm. **PTI**

Students stranded as floodwaters enter school in Odisha

400 Around 400 students, including 150 girls, were left stranded at a government-run residential school in Odisha's Kendrapara district after floodwater entered the campus on Sunday, an official said. The school is located in a low-lying area at Kulasahi village under Penthapala gram panchayat in Pattamunda block. **PTI**

Aid trucks that entered Afghanistan via Pakistan

700 More than 700 trucks carrying international humanitarian aid arrived in Afghanistan via Pakistan despite a near-total closure of the land border between the two countries in October, the United Nations said Sunday. The convoy was carrying "food and other humanitarian items," a UN spokesperson said. **APF**
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The federal dilemma of delimitation

The Centre made an oral assurance while introducing the Bill to increase Lok Sabha seats that each State's share would increase by 50% on a pro-rata basis. However, the increase could weaken the Rajya Sabha's role as a check on the Lower House, while the Lok Sabha's limited sitting days would leave MPs with less time to raise issues

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

The story so far:

The Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly has passed a resolution urging the Centre to permanently freeze the number of Lok Sabha seats at the existing number of 543 and maintain the present State-wise distribution of those seats. It also advocated the preservation of current ratio of 2.2:1 between Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha seats. It sought the implementation of one-third reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha from the 2029 election onwards, without linking it to any future census or delimitation.

Defining delimitation

Delimitation means the process of fixing the number of seats and boundaries of the territorial constituencies in each State for the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies. This 'Delimitation process' is performed by 'Delimitation Commission' that is set up under an act of Parliament. The last time when the number of seats were determined was on the basis of 1971 census population.

'Democracy' means 'rule or government by the people'. It follows that the government is elected by a majority with the broad principle of 'one citizen-one vote-one value'. Article 81(2) of the Constitution provides that the ratio between the number of seats and population of a State, shall as far as practicable be same for all the States. The number of seats in the Lok Sabha based on 1971 census was fixed at 543, when the population was 54.8 crores. This broadly translated to an average population of 10.1 lakhs per constituency. However, it has been frozen since per 1971 census in order to encourage population control measures so that States with higher population growth do not end up having higher number of seats. This was done through the 42nd Amendment Act till the year 2000 and was extended by the 84th amendment act till 2026. This number will have to be readjusted based on the first census after 2026 which would be the next census in 2027. In 2023, through the 106th Constitutional Amendment, the Parliament had provided for one-third reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies. This would be through delimitation based on the census in 2027.

The issues involved

The population explosion that happened in our country during the last five decades has been uneven, with some States like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan witnessing a greater increase than States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The ratio between the current number of seats and the projected population of States as of 2026 does not satisfy the core democratic principle of 'one person-one vote-one value' (Table 1). On the other hand, the increase in the number of seats among various States based on the current population (to 848) is provided in Table 2. Southern States, smaller states in the North, as well as the North Eastern States, are bound to be at a disadvantage when compared to large north Indian States in such a scenario. This would be against the federal principles of our country. It also goes against the philosophy for freezing the seats as per 1971 census with the States

Representation imbalance

The redistribution of seats based on current population could put smaller and less populous States at a disadvantage



Table 1: Value of vote of each citizen based on estimated population as of 2026

State	Number of seats at present	Projected population as of 2026 (in crore)	Projected population per Lok Sabha seat (in lakh)	Value of 1 vote*
Uttar Pradesh	80	25.7	32.1	0.56
Bihar	40	13.5	33.8	0.53
Rajasthan	25	8.4	33.6	0.54
Madhya Pradesh	29	9.1	31.4	0.57
Tamil Nadu	39	7.8	20	0.9
Andhra Pradesh + Telangana	42	9.3	22.1	0.81
Kerala	20	3.6	18	1
Karnataka	28	6.9	24.6	0.73
Punjab	13	3.2	24.6	0.73
Himachal Pradesh	4	0.8	20	0.9
Uttarakhand	5	1.2	24	0.75

* Kerala calculated as 1 and States' values derived on this base

Table 2: If the number of seats is increased to 848 based on 2026 projected population
(Based on research paper of Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton, for the Carnegie endowment)

State	Number of seats at present	Projected number of seats	Existing proportion	Revised proportion
Uttar Pradesh	80	143	14.7%	16.9%
Bihar	40	79	7.4%	9.3%
Rajasthan	25	50	4.6%	5.9%
Madhya Pradesh	29	52	5.3%	6.1%
Tamil Nadu	39	49	7.2%	5.8%
Andhra Pradesh + Telangana	42	54	7.7%	6.4%
Kerala	20	20	3.7%	2.4%
Karnataka	28	41	5.2%	4.8%
Punjab	13	18	2.4%	2.1%
Himachal Pradesh	4	4	0.7%	0.5%
Uttarakhand	5	7	0.9%	0.8%
Total	543	848		

that have been better at controlling the population losing out on their political significance.

Current proposal by the Centre

The Union government had introduced the Constitution 131st Amendment Bill in April 2026 to increase the maximum number of Lok Sabha seats from existing 550 to 850. The Home Minister made an oral assurance in the Parliament that the number of seats in each State/Union Territory would be increased by 50% on a pro-rata basis. However, this bill was defeated in the Lok Sabha. There are expectations that the government may introduce the bill again, in the near future with explicit provisions for 50% increase in seats for all States/Union Territories on a pro-rata basis.

The larger implications

There are two main arguments in support of the proposal for 50% pro-rata increase. First, it would not alter the current proportion of representation of various States/Union Territories in the Lok Sabha. Second, it would enable seamless reservation of one-third seats for women with the additional 272 seats being reserved for women out of the enlarged house of around 816 seats.

However, such an increase has its share of challenges. Firstly, the current strength of Rajya Sabha is 245 that results in a ratio of 2.2:1 between the total strength of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. An increase in Lok Sabha seats by 50% without altering seats in Rajya Sabha would skew this ratio to 3.3:1.

In the event of disagreement between the two houses on any bill, there is a mechanism for Joint Sitting under the Constitution to resolve the deadlock. Though used rarely in the past (only 3 times since Independence), this increased strength in the Lok Sabha runs the risk of rise in such joint sittings to push through Bills. In such a scenario, it would diminish the role of the Rajya Sabha as an effective check and balance on the Lok Sabha. Secondly, considering that the Lok Sabha sits for only around 60 days in a year, there would hardly be any meaningful time for each MP to raise their issues in the house. The purpose of the house would then be reduced to mere numerical representation rather than meaningful deliberation.

Finally, the increased cost to the exchequer because of additional MPs including allocation for the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) funds needs to be

borne in mind.

Harmonious reconciliation

The issue arises as the democratic and federal principles seem to be at loggerheads in the delimitation exercise as currently envisaged. However, they can be harmoniously reconciled by giving equal importance to both. The main work of a Member of Parliament is to legislate on the 'Union List' subjects such as defence, external affairs, railways, telecommunication, taxation etc. and hold the Central government accountable. A majority of the schemes of the Central Government are implemented only by the State governments. Hence, the number of MPs in Lok Sabha may be frozen at the present number of 543, which would ensure no disruption to the current representation of various States. This would maintain and uphold the federal principle. One-third reservation for women can be provided out of the existing 543 seats. The number of MLAs in each State may be increased in line with the current population to address the democratic representational requirement. (Rangarajan R. is a former IAS officer and author of 'Courseware on Polity Simplified'. He currently trains at Officers IAS Academy. Views expressed are personal.)

THE GIST

▼ The Union government introduced the Constitution 131st Amendment Bill in April 2026 to increase the maximum number of Lok Sabha seats from the existing 550 to 850.

▼ The Tamil Nadu Assembly recently passed a resolution urging the Centre to permanently freeze the number of Lok Sabha seats at 543 and maintain the present State-wise distribution of seats.

▼ The ratio between the current number of seats and the projected population of States as of 2026 does not satisfy the principle of 'one person, one vote, one value'. However, increasing the number of seats based on current population would put smaller and less populous States at a disadvantage.

CACHE



Digital trail: How exactly the watermarking technology works for Claude text is not yet clear, but users have expressed concerns. REUTERS

Understanding Anthropic's move to watermark Claude AI content

While many regulators want AI content to be more clearly labelled, Claude users worry about their written work being flagged as AI; although watermarks provide a reliable way to verify the origin of images and videos, accurately detecting AI-generated text is uncharted territory.

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far:

As part of its measures to comply with the European Union's AI Act, the Google and Amazon-backed Anthropic announced that Claude content in the future will carry a machine-readable marking to better enable AI content labelling.

Adding a watermark to AI images and videos is not a new concept. However, the update that made waves was Anthropic announcing that it would add a watermark to Claude text as well, potentially forcing millions to reconsider their use of AI tools. This update will be globally implemented.

What is the new watermarking system by Anthropic?

The new policy was introduced after Anthropic signed the EU AI Act's Article 50(2) Code of Practice on Transparency of AI-Generated Content.

In order to better identify content that Claude has generated and/or processed, Anthropic is set to add watermarks embedded in text content, as well as signed provenance metadata attached to supported files in formats such as .svg, .png, or .jpg.

Regarding the text-based watermark applied at the model level, users will not be able to see it and Anthropic has confirmed that it will not affect Claude's response.

However, one statement in particular

caught the attention of AI users: "Because the watermark is part of the text, it will travel with the text when it's copied and pasted elsewhere, and may persist through some editing."

In essence, this update forces millions of Claude customers to entirely reconsider their use of AI tools. Professional emails, personal messages, school assignments, workplace deliverables, and other types of written content that could once be passed off easily as human-made, may soon come with an AI watermark – even if Claude's involvement was close to negligible.

How exactly the watermarking technology works in the case of Claude text is not yet clear, as the rollout announcement did not reveal the full technical details.

Furthermore, Anthropic is still working on letting external parties detect the Claude AI markings. More information is expected in the future.

Output from the Claude Platform (API), Claude, Claude Code, Claude Cowork, and Claude Tag are set to get the embedded watermarks. The same applies when Claude models are accessed through AWS, Google Cloud, and Microsoft Foundry.

Why are Claude users and non-users concerned?

While some praised Anthropic's marking policy in the hopes of seeing more clearly labelled AI-generated content, critics argued that adding a watermark even to lightly edited text could put

reputations at serious risk.

For example, if a human-made file is proofread, translated, summarised, or even converted by someone else using Claude, the final output could still carry a mark, according to Anthropic's update. Naturally, this has put both AI users as well as non-users on edge.

Anthropic also warned about the possibility of false positive and false negative results: detecting a Claude mark does not confirm that the work was created by AI, while the lack of a mark does not mean the work was 100% human-made.

Some factors that can throw off results include short text lengths, content changes after Claude processing, metadata being stripped by converting the file format, and the use of a Claude offering that does not yet support AI marking.

In the days following Anthropic's announcement, multiple dubious websites claiming to offer Claude AI watermark "removal" or "clean up" services have come online.

These concerns are not new. The earlier rise of a market for AI text detectors – and subsequently, AI text humanisers designed to deceive these same detectors – has resulted in multiple authors and bloggers being accused of passing off AI content as original creations.

Despite AI text detection tools being experimental, fallible, and prone to errors, they have been involved in cases that led to cancelled book deals and social

media trolling.

Claude users now fear that their own AI tool could end up damaging their credentials.

Are watermarks effective at stopping fake AI content?

Watermarks certainly help simplify the jobs of regulators, fact-checkers, and journalists by giving them a reliable way to verify the origin of an image or a video and even trace it back to a specific provider. But accurately detecting AI-generated text is uncharted territory.

What's more, AI-generated content often travels far and can be circulated thousands of times on social media unchecked, as content moderation rules have been loosened across Mark Zuckerberg's Meta family of apps and Elon Musk's X.

The average internet user distractedly scrolling through media on their phone often misses even visible AI watermarks, let alone invisible markings.

Tech providers and regulators will need to work hand-in-hand to make sure that the AI watermarks lead to a tangible reduction in misinformation, deepfakes, or AI content being passed off as human-made.

For now, however, Claude users are rethinking their workflows and debating at what point human content turns into AI content. Anthropic's watermarking initiative for AI text is an intriguing concept, but it is too soon to tell if this approach to labelling will lead to more clarity or create more confusion.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

The college's science lab is antiquated

The Principal received a shoal of petitions to replace the equipment

S. Upendran

What is the difference between 'old fashioned' and 'antiquated'? (Anil Surana, Jaipur)

One of the meanings the two words have in common is 'not modern', 'outdated'. Unlike 'old fashioned', 'antiquated' carries with it a very negative meaning. When you say that a gadget is antiquated, it suggests that the gadget in question is so outdated, that in today's world, it serves no purpose. It has been replaced by something much more efficient. You are being critical of it. For example, today the old audio compact cassette tapes and floppy discs would be considered antiquated – nobody uses them anymore. They are no longer fit for the purpose for which they were originally designed.

The Government hospital is planning to replace the antiquated X-ray machines.

We need to change some of our antiquated laws.

When you refer to something as being 'old fashioned', it does not always have a negative connotation. For example, when one talks about 'old fashioned values', it suggests they are something which you are nostalgic about; something which you truly value. Unlike 'antiquated', 'old fashioned' suggests that something is charming. Something that is antiquated, usually needs to be replaced; old fashioned dresses can still be worn today. They may look dated, but are functional.

Whenever Hema visits her grandmother, she jots down some old-fashioned recipes.

These old-fashioned houses are so cool during the summer.

What is the meaning of automania? (Banu Varma, Kochi)

The term has two very different meanings. In everyday contexts, we often shorten the word automobile to 'auto'.

When used in this manner, 'automania' refers to someone who is crazy or excessively enthusiastic about cars and driving fast.

As a teenager, Karthik had a severe case of automania.

The word 'auto' has another meaning as well; it can be used to refer to oneself. A person who has 'automania' is obsessed about himself; he is an egomaniac. He believes he is the most important person wherever he goes. He is very self-centred.

What is the meaning of 'shoal of fish'? How is the word 'shoal' pronounced? (Kavitha Kumar, Vellore)

The 'sh' is like the 'sh' in 'ship', 'sheep' and 'shy', while the following 'oa' sounds like the 'o' in 'go' 'so' and 'no'. The word rhymes with 'pole', 'hole' and 'mole'. According to scholars, 'shoal' comes from the Old English 'scolu' meaning 'crowd of fish'. Today, a large group of fish swimming together is frequently referred to as a 'shoal of fish' or a 'school of fish'.

We saw several shoals of fish when we went snorkelling.

'Shoal' can also be used with people. One can describe a large group of people as a 'shoal of people'. We can use the word with things as well.

A shoal of the star's fans made their way into the court.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on Indonesia, as the Asian country observes its Independence Day today

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

Indonesia is the largest of this type of political entity, with over 17,000 islands between the Indian and Pacific oceans under its control. What type of state?

QUESTION 2

Name the first president of Indonesia from 1945 to 1967 and his daughter who also held the office between 2001 and 2004.

QUESTION 3

Name the invisible biogeographical boundary – running between Bali and Lombok, and between Borneo and Sulawesi – that separates Asian and Australian wildlife zones within Indonesia.

QUESTION 4

Name the Indonesian textile art using wax, that was given a UNESCO Intangible

Cultural Heritage status in 2009, and made famous by the type of shirts that Nelson Mandela sported frequently.

QUESTION 5

What is Indonesia's National emblem, which gets its name from a bird from Indian mythology and the 5 principles of the country's national ideology.

QUESTION 6

Indonesia is relocating its capital away from Jakarta to a purpose-built city in Borneo. What is it called?

QUESTION 7

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Buddhist temple, built in the 9th-century in Central Java, with nine stacked platforms and thousands of relief panels. Name this UNESCO World Heritage Site.

QUESTION 8

Name the real-life couple who gave Indonesia its first-ever Olympic gold medals in 1992 and in which sport?



Visual question: Name this creature, considered the largest extant lizard, which gets its name from an Indonesian island to which it is endemic. AFP

Questions and answers to the previous daily quiz:

1. Name of the organisation that Fidel and his comrades started to commemorate the failed attacks on the Moncada barracks. **Ans: 26th July Movement**
 2. Name of the speech (the English translation) that Fidel gave in the trial following the Moncada barracks attack. **Ans: History will absolve me**
 3. The boat that carried Fidel and 81 of his companions from Tuxpan in Mexico to Playa Las Coloradas. **Ans: Granma**
 4. The record for the longest speech in the UN belongs to an Indian diplomat/minister. Name him. **Ans: V.K. Krishna Menon**
 5. Name of the brigade of medical professionals, established by Fidel, that was deployed across the world during health crises. The claim to fame of the person after whom the brigade was named. **Ans: Henri Reeve Brigade, named after a New York born American who participated in the Cuban war of independence from Spain**
- Visual: The three comrades of Fidel – second from left (standing), fourth from left (sitting). **Ans: Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Raul Castro and Juan Almeida**
- Early birds: Siddhartha Viswanathan| Prem Nath Tiwari| Sumana Dutta| Nairah Hussain| Lalchand Bhutani

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

Word of the day

Decadence:

the state of being degenerate in mental or moral qualities

Synonym: degeneration

Usage: The leader's decadence became evident in his abuse of power.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/decadence

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /ˈdeɪkədəns/

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

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

In youth-driven Viksit Bharat, celebrate 'dimag'

IN HIS speech marking the 80th Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi returned to themes he has eloquently outlined earlier — and sought to connect them to a new motif. As he has done often, he divided the nation's journey into two, before and after 2014, with everything, from poverty alleviation to the embrace of new technologies, picking up pace in the last 12 years. "Yeh rahat, yeh vistar", this speed and this scale, he said, was visible for the first time since Independence. Several by-now familiar keywords and exhortations were embedded in his picture of a nation on the move, guided by "shakti ki saptaadhar", a seven-point reform vision — "atmanirbharata", "innovation hub", "vocal for local", "start-up India", "reform express". He framed the nation's trajectory against the backdrop of mounting global crises, from the pandemic to the weaponisation of resources amid wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. What was new at the Red Fort, however, was the PM's invocation of "yuvva shakti", or youth power, and his attempt to link it to the goal of "Viksit Bharat". In a speech that comes on the heels of a student movement that drew national attention to the education and employment crises, the Prime Minister sought to reclaim and relocate the "youth" — from the image of the protester on the street, ranged against government and establishment, to the driving force of the India reform story, who is also its prime "labharthi" or beneficiary.

The youth received special attention from the PM. He announced a programme for AI training and free online coaching classes for competitive examinations. He spoke of the Innovation Fund, and promised to bring together "aapke sapne", especially Olympic dreams, with "sansadhar" or resources. The young, said the PM, could also help official enumerators conduct the ongoing Census exercise more accurately. With echoes of the upsurge at Jantar Mantar still in the air, these evocative mentions of the youth, the invitation to them to join a nation-wide project, were an attempt to restore and retrieve, and take the edge of the moment.

But the speech had a sharp edge of its own. Talking about his government's successes in tackling the scourge of Naxal violence, the PM articulated a remaining challenge — while "hathiari" Naxals (armed insurgents) have been defeated, there is a need to remain wary of the danger posed by "dimagi" Naxals (those with Maoist thinking). The latter, he said, must be identified and isolated so that the youth can be brought together to build a developed country. The questions the PM made in this formulation — his equation of an armed insurgency with ideas/dissent/ideology, and his linking of both to the young — are troubling. For, there is no equivalence between "hathiari" and "dimagi", and the bogey of the enemy within is at odds with the country he paints in the rest of his speech. There is no place for isolating or targeting anyone on the basis of their ideas — their "dimag". The PM is right when he says yuvva shakti will fuel the journey to Viksit Bharat, but that calls for celebrating the power of thought and freedom from fear, so that questions are asked and there is an unafraid search for answers. Only that can shape and refine what it means to be viksit.

Attack on Sukhbir Badal deepens Punjab unease

THE ATTACK on Shiromani Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal in Nanded is reprehensible. The investigation will shine more light on this disturbing episode, but in Punjab, it can be said to be the latest in a recent series of developments that have deepened a sense of unease. In no particular order: Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann called on the Governor to seek a 10-day parole for Jagtar Singh Hawara, one of the convicts in the 1996 assassination of former Chief Minister Beant Singh; *Satlok*, a film that streamed for only a few hours, has revived memories of Punjab's dark decade of militancy; a march to Chandigarh by the Shiromani Akali Dal (Wara Punjab) led by the release of its jailed leader, Khadoor Sahib MP Amrinderpal Singh, and other prisoners of the militancy era, the Bandi Singhs.

It is striking that a state confronted by a host of pressing challenges, be it drugs, gangsters, a faltering agricultural economy or the continuing exodus of its young, should be spending so much political energy looking backwards. The renewed tension around the Bandi Singhs, particularly among the young, shows how unresolved history can travel across generations. Issues rooted in the panthic imagination can be recast for a generation that did not experience the violence but has inherited its unanswered questions. Political parties must take the blame for turning such issues into electoral instruments, but failure to resolve several longstanding questions has handed them this ammunition. Chandigarh, the sharing of river waters and the status of Sikh prisoners are unresolved legacies that have allowed to fester for decades. It's time to confront these issues rather than repeatedly reduce them to election time.

The question of Punjab's river waters must be settled through constitutional processes. The cases of Sikh prisoners, including those convicted in high-profile assassinations, must be considered through the framework of law and justice, though the passage of time has added another layer to the debate. The perception of discrimination. Political parties must understand that emotions cannot be turned on and off, come elections, at will. Once unleashed, they acquire a life of their own and can overwhelm the very political actors who sought to harness them.

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



The Editorial Page

Bring back E10 for older vehicles. Work out food versus fuel trade-off



V ANANTHA NAGESWARAN
AND AKASH POOJARI

A COMPLAINT has been travelling fast online that the government's E20 petrol wrecks engines and empties the tank faster. The charge is loud, but it is also, on the main point, wrong. However, dismissing it outright would be a mistake because beneath the noise lies a real problem and a much larger question.

Start with the engine, and the evidence does not support the fear of damage. Ethanol carries about two-thirds the energy of petrol, so a litre of E20 takes you a little less far, but the loss is small and does not signal any malfunction. Ethanol is only a fifth of the blend, so the energy penalty is around 6 to 7 per cent, not the 30 per cent doing the rounds. Carbon monoxide and unburnt hydrocarbons actually fall, which is good for the environment. On durability, which is the primary point of contention, the record is reassuring and counters the online narrative. The US, one of the global leaders in ethanol blending, had the Oakridge National Laboratory run 86 vehicles for a cumulative total of nearly 10 million kilometres on blends up to E20 and found no increased wear in cars not rated for E20. India's own testing by ARAI, the petroleum institute, and Indian Oil reached the same conclusion. Thus, social-media worries about engine damage do not hold up.

However, one exception is genuine, that is, India has roughly 75 to 80 million older two-wheelers built before BS4 that run on carburettors. A carburettor cannot sense the extra oxygen in the blend and adjust for it, so on E20, the engine draws in too little fuel for the air it draws in and runs hot. Further, older rubber seals that are not rated for ethanol are a separate problem, as they degrade on contact with the fuel regardless of engine temperature. Retrofitting these seals with ethanol-compatible ones is cheap. Still, it happens one vehicle at a time, and covering 75 to 80 million two-wheelers that way will take years, even if every workshop starts today. The original roadmap anticipated this and requested that a lower-blend fuel remain on sale for these vehicles, but that fuel quietly vanished from the pumps and needs to return. Restoring a lower blend at the pumps, say, E10, alongside the option to buy E20 would calm most public concern, lower total ethanol use instead of raising it, and protect the existing fleet while the retrofit programme catches up.

With the engine argument settled, one must also ask the harder question that nobody is shouting about. How much further should blending go? Moving from E20 to E27 or E30 is a different decision altogether because that is where fuel begins to crowd out food.

Consider the two import bills India is trying to shrink. The crude oil bill is huge, around Rs 11-12 lakh crore a year. The edible oil bill is far smaller, roughly Rs 1.6 to 1.75 lakh crore. Ethanol at E20 trims only 3 to 4 per cent of the crude bill. The edible oil gap looks less daunting and is far more closeable. India already produces about 40 per cent of its cooking oil and aims to reach

72 per cent by 2030-31. A gap that the government can not only close fully but also stop subsidising is worth more than one you can only nibble at forever.

The feedstock has shifted, and that turns a distant trade-off into a direct one. Maize now supplies about half of India's ethanol, and grains together nearly 67 per cent. Maize competes with soybean, groundnut and mustard for the same fields. Two forces pull land towards it. First, ethanol from maize is procured at a fixed price well above the sugarcane route, which keeps the crop attractive, whatever the market says. Second, the leftover grain from distillation is sold as animal feed, undercutting soybean meal. Weaker meal prices, in turn, drag down soybean prices. The oilseed farmer loses twice.

Similarly, water needs a clearer eye too, especially when it comes to the headline figures, that is, thousands of litres of water used for every litre of ethanol. The figures generally quoted mix two very different things. Green water is rain that the crop would have received anyway. Blue water is drawn from rivers, canals, groundwater pumps and wells. It is the blue water that is scarce, and cane in Maharashtra and Karnataka draws heavily on already-stressed sources. So the water rule should target blue-water use, not the frightening total.

Even the climate case is unsettled. Any blending beyond E20 would come almost entirely from grain, and Indian life-cycle studies do not agree on whether grain ethanol is cleaner than the alternatives once cultivation and processing are counted. The green argument for going further may not withstand closer scientific scrutiny.

That is not to say that the ethanol programme has not delivered

material gains. It has cleared sugarcane dues, lifted rural incomes and built an assured market. On the flip side, holding on to E20 also carries its own costs. These include distillery capacity built for more, loans taken against expected demand, and a sugar surplus that ethanol helps absorb. These belong in the reckoning too, and like most public policy dilemmas, the honest course of action is to weigh both sides carefully.

Here is the principle that should guide the choice. Some instruments can be changed within a season and reversed if the evidence turns, such as the procurement price, the protection fuel, the water rules and the import duty on edible oil. However, the blend level cannot. Once land and water are committed to fuel, and distilleries and cropping patterns are built around it, pulling back is bound to be slow and painful. When some moves are easy to undo, and others are not, prudence says to move the reversible ones first and hold off on the irreversible ones until a thorough cost-benefit analysis is done.

In this context, the recommendation is modest. Bring back a lower blend, such as E10, for the older fleet of vehicles. Fix the price and water distortions that unintentionally favour maize over other crops, look at the import duty on edible oil to support the push towards domestic self-sufficiency, and hold at E20 until India has thoroughly costed the food-versus-fuel trade-off, rather than assuming it away. The engine row we witnessed was never the real argument. The real one is about what we choose to grow, and what we will not be able to take back.

Nageswaran is Chief Economic Advisor to the Government of India and Poojari is a consultant, Department of Economic Affairs. Views are personal

The historian who didn't lose hope



CLAUDE MARKOVITS

SUMIT SARKAR, who passed away on August 13 at the age of 87, was that rare combination of a great historian and a lovely human being. I leave it to others, more competent, to appraise in detail his considerable contribution to the history of modern India. I will dwell instead on my personal memories of him. I was privileged to get to know Sumit through a personal connection: My wife, Piyali Chakravarty, was a childhood friend of his till the end, a friendship I shared.

Although we met first in Calcutta, and later in Oxford, where Sumit and his wife Tanika were spending a year, we really became friends in the late 1970s when they spent some time with us in our Parisian flat and we had long chats in the evenings, very much in the tradition of *adidas*, while listening to records of French revolutionary songs. When it was our turn to spend a year in Delhi, this friendship grew and we were constantly in and out of each others' homes.

I have particularly fond memories of the few days Sumit and I spent together in Paris in the late 1980s. I was then trying to learn Bengali and, as a beginner, was finding my way through the famous primer written by Rabindranath Tagore, *Shuklo Path*.

In between visits to Parisian historical landmarks, about which Sumit was often more knowledgeable than an old Parisian like myself, we would spend time reading together through the text. Sumit was vastly amused at some of the stories recounted in the book, and at what it revealed of Tagore's view of society. He even said it was worth having a closer look at the text, although he does not seem to have pursued that project.

Talking to him on any subject, whether history, politics or literature, was always enlightening, as he had a vast store of knowledge on a variety of topics, and was never boring. He did not take himself too seriously, the way many academics tend to, and always applied a good dose of his particular brand of humour to even the most serious questions.

Raised in a Brahmo milieu with strong communist leanings, his father Professor Susobhan Sarkar being a stalwart of the

Bengali intellectual left and a hugely influential teacher, Sumit remained a Marxist throughout his life, despite the growing unpopularity of that school of thought in India and elsewhere. An original contributor to Subaltern Studies with their then Thomsonian project of "history from below", he parted ways with the group when they fell under the spell of postmodernism and postcolonialism. He wrote a famous article about the decline of the subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*, which his former co-authors preferred to ignore rather than attempt to refute. He still believed that some form of "history from below" was a feasible project, although he had lost some of his illusions about the possibilities of recovering the voices of the downtrodden.

For him, as for many progressive intellectuals worldwide, the collapse of the socialist bloc and more generally of the Left was painful to digest but he did not take refuge in nostalgia. He retained a hope that things somehow would correct themselves at some point, which they did not. He was particularly alarmed at the growth of the Hindutva brand of Hindu nationalism and the threat it posed to Indian society and democracy.

He wrote about this threat in a series of pieces that were polemical but lucid, and did not become invectives. He was alert to the fact that, by undermining belief in the existence of historical truths, postmodernism had unwittingly helped in the growth of Hindu historiographies of India which had little consideration for facts.

The last years of his life were darkened by a host of physical ailments which he bore with courage and stoicism, helped by the care of Tanika and their son Aditya, both fine historians. The last time I met him was in Leamington Spa in England, where Tanika and he were spending a holiday with Aditya. He was frail, but still lucid, taking full part in the conversation, and still capable of laughing at the absurdities of the world. He will be sorely missed by us, and we share the grief of Tanika and Aditya.

The writer is a French historian of India. His latest publication is *India and the World: A History of Connections*, c. 1750-2000

Those before us had less. But they gave more



MANPREET SINGH BADAL

KARTAR SINGH Sarabha was 19 years old when the colonial rulers hanged him at the Lahore Central Jail. He had already crossed an ocean, printed a newspaper, and come home knowing exactly what was at stake. Bhagat Singh was 23 years old, sent to the gallows were farmers' sons from the villages of the Majha, Doaba and Malwa regions who could not have told you the first thing about political theory. They decided that some things were worth more than a life.

I want to begin there today because we have got into the habit of thanking our freedom fighters in the abstract — as though they were a category in a history textbook rather than young men with names, families and dreams, born in villages that many of us still drive past. Punjab paid a heavy price for this freedom. At Jallianwala Bagh, in the Ghadar trials, on the Komagata Maru, in the ranks of the INA, and then again in 1947, when the freedom we had bled for arrived as a line drawn across our own house. Millions were uprooted; families broken; a province cut in half, and its people made to walk out of homes their ancestors had built. And here is the part we do not say often enough: They did not become bitter. They arrived in Amritsar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, and Ferozpur with nothing and started again. They ploughed, traded, drove trucks and sent their children to school. They fed this country during the Green Revolution, and guarded it on the borders. Not one of them asked what the nation was going to do for them.

So let me ask the uncomfortable question. Somewhere between that generation and ours, we changed the relationship. We stopped treating India as something we built, and started treating it as something that owes us. We queue at consulates. We take our grievances to the street before we take them to the classroom or the field. We measure a government by what it hands out, and we measure ourselves by very little at all. I do not say this as an accusation against our young people, but as an admission by my generation. We inherited a Punjab that had been rebuilt once, and we did not build on it. We let our water fall, our soil tire, our industry drift, and our best young minds board flights. That failure is ours, not theirs. But here is what gives me hope. The restlessness that took Sarabha to California and our soldiers to Gallipoli and Kohima and our farmers to Rajasthan's desert is still in us.

So to the young men and women of Punjab, and of India, I want to say this. Be revolutionaries again, but choose your revolution well. Wage it against your own limits first. Learn a skill so well the world has to come to you. Finish the degree. Stay off the poison taking our boys one by one. Look after your body and mind. Then go to your street. Teach one child who is falling behind. Save one field's worth of water. Employ one person. Build something — a business, an institution — rather than assuming everything worth building has to be built somewhere else.

That is not a smaller revolution than the one Sarabha fought. We are not yet the country our freedom fighters imagined. We are closer than we have ever been. Whether there is not a question for the government. It is a question for the 23-year-olds. Those before us had less, but they gave more.

The writer is a former finance minister of Punjab

40 YEARS AGO August 17, 1986



Art 249 extended to J&K

THE CENTRE has extended the operation of Article 249 to J&K. This was done secretly a fortnight ago by amending the Presidential Order of 1954, which extended the Constitution to the state. Since the state legislature is suspended, the amendment was approved by Governor Jagmohan.

Scattered riots in Pakistan

WITNESSES SAID the police wounded 12 people in Karachi during a third day of scattered riots when protesters attacked govern-

ment buildings, burned vehicles and clashed with authorities. Around 1,000 were arrested in Thatta district. Protesters also marched to demand the release of jailed opposition leaders, including Benazir Bhutto.

Car-bomb blast in Iran

ELEVEN PEOPLE were killed and about 100 injured when a car-bomb exploded in the holy city of Qom, in Central Iran, Radio Tehran reported. The radio said pilgrims, women and children were among the victims. It accused "agents of the United States" of responsibility for "shedding the blood of innocents".

Andhra villages inundated

GODAVARI FLOODWATERS entered Dowlaismaram town in Andhra Pradesh where many houses and office buildings were submerged in five to six feet of water by noon. Water from the swollen river first began leaking through a big hole in the wall by the side of the barrage. The crack widened and floodwaters poured in, submerging the town. As water began entering Dowlaismaram town, a large number of people carrying their belongings could be seen climbing the Kothapeta Hill by the side of the town. Five thousand people were evacuated.

India's sweet revolution depends on this: Safeguard the bee, sustainability is key



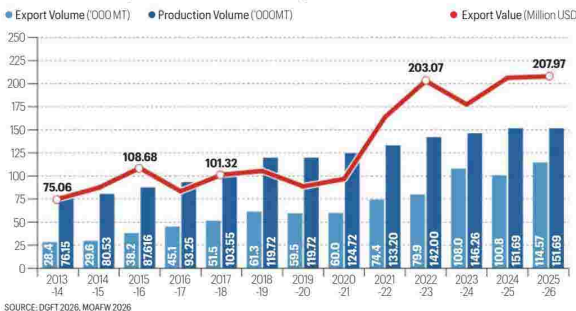
ASHOK GULATI, SUVANGI RATH, AND TANMOY ADHIKARY

INDEPENDENCE DAY this year coincided with the US's National Honey Bee Day. A honey bee is a small insect that can sit on a fingertip. Why is it accorded such importance in the US? According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the quiet role of bees as pollinators is responsible for almost one-third of global crop output. It enhances yields for 87 of 115 leading food crops.

Bees do more than improve yields. They enhance the nutritional quality of farm produce. If India has to make its agriculture productive and nutritious, bees must be treated as farmers' best friends. While passing by the mustard fields of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan or the apple orchards of Himachal Pradesh, one realises what these insects can do. They have helped India emerge as the second-largest producer of honey in the world, after China, and the third-largest exporter of honey after China and New Zealand in value terms.

Beyond the pollination service, bees have helped farmers augment their incomes through apiculture (honey bee farming). India's honey production has nearly doubled over the last decade, from about 76,000 tonnes in 2013-14 to roughly 1,51,000 tonnes in 2025-26, signalling real scale in supply and capacity. Interestingly, almost 70 per cent of India's honey production is exported (\$208 million in 2025-26), and India accounts for around 8.4 per cent of global honey exports. However, the export basket remains highly concentrated: The US absorbed about 76 per cent of India's exports (\$157.8 million) in 2025-26. Such concentration carries risks for India's export

India's Honey Production and Export Trends



SOURCE: DGFT 2026, MOA/FW 2016

markets, a taste of which was felt when the US suddenly imposed high tariffs on goods imported from India. It was a big blow to Indian honey exporters and farmers, but the turnaround was also very swift in terms of diversifying export markets.

India's response was pragmatic. Shipments to countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Israel have started reflecting a shift toward markets that value natural, sustainably sourced honey. At the same time, EU consumers are willing to pay a premium for traceable and environmentally responsible products, traits that India's multioral and organic honey varieties can uniquely offer.

However, India's domestic market remains limited despite its large population. India's per capita honey consumption remains low (about 37 gm per year) — this suggests enormous potential that's yet to be tapped. As awareness of its health benefits spreads and retail penetration improves, a do-

India must look beyond honey exports and recognise bees as an essential, unpaid agricultural workforce

mestic market can help stabilise producer incomes while supporting premium-quality exports.

This diversification mirrors a classic economic lesson: Trade barriers often compel resilience and innovation. Rather than being confined to one large buyer, India's honey sector is now spreading its wings across geographies, reducing dependence on a single market and building stronger foundations for long-term export growth. However, unit value realisation remains a constraint: Indian honey's unit value is about \$1,858 per tonne, well below the world average and far from premium categories like New Zealand's Manuka. Upgrading quality, traceability and branding is therefore essential. Also, price realisation can improve if exports are in branded retail packs rather than wholesale unbranded volumes.

Reforms and investments will determine whether this moment becomes a structural transforma-

tion or a reprieve. At the same time, investment in NMR (Nuclear Magnetic Resonance) capable testing labs, cluster-based processing, GI branding for unique floral varieties (Sundarbans, Ramban Sula), and turning farmer organisations into FPOs will lower compliance costs and enable entry into premium EU, Japanese and East Asian markets. The global bee products market (beeswax, propolis, royal jelly, pollen) is already sizeable — it was valued at roughly \$12.7 billion in 2023 and is projected to grow, offering India a high-margin diversification route beyond bulk honey.

Sustainability should be at the centre of the efforts. Expanding exports cannot come at the expense of bee health. Scientific beekeeping, pesticide management, and support for pollination services will protect both yields and ecosystem services that agriculture depends on. Initiatives under the National Beekeeping and Honey Mission and APEDE's export support are steps in the right direction, but scaling them requires sharper targeting, labs, cluster grants, export promotion, and large-scale consumer campaigns ("Honey for Health") to grow domestic demand.

Every rupee of honey export rests on a far larger, unpriced service — the pollination that fills the orchard, the oilseed field and the vegetable plot quietly underwrites the food on our plates. The real measure of India's sweet revolution, then, will not be how much honey we sell, but whether we learn to protect the tiny worker that makes both the honey and the harvest possible. Safeguard the bee, and prosperity follows. Lose it, and no amount of policy will buy the loss back.

Can our policymakers give due priority to these silent workers that pollinate without a charge and enhance rural prosperity? Can they set a target to double honey bee colonies in the country by 2030, and double India's share in the global market by that year?

Gulati is a distinguished professor, Rath is a fellow, and Adhikary is a research assistant at ICRIER. Views are personal

Note to Bar Council: Disagreement is part of justice



MAYANK MAKHLIA AND NAMAN SHARMA

IN THE legal drama *I2 Angry Men*, about the deliberations of a jury during a murder trial, one juror insists that before sending a young man to his death, they should at least examine the evidence, despite 11 others disagreeing. It is a reminder that disagreement is a necessary part of justice. The Bar Council of India's (BCI) decision to withdraw its order stopping the enrolment of 2026 graduates of NALSAR University of Law is welcome. But it raises a more fundamental question: Can the regulator of the legal profession use its statutory authority to punish law students for expressing disagreement with a constitutional functionary?

On August 13, the BCI chairman directed State Bar Councils not to enrol NALSAR's 2026 graduates until further orders, following reports that some students had opposed Chief Justice of India Surya Kant's proposed participation in the university's convocation. The BCI sought details of those who initiated or organised the campaign. Later that day, the BCI said that the vast majority were innocent and consequently allowed all 2026 graduates to enrol with the State Bar Council of their choice.

The original direction deserves constitutional scrutiny because it concerned not merely professional regulation but the use of professional power in response to dissent. A law student does not surrender constitutional freedoms merely because he or she intends to become an advocate. Article 19(1)(a) guarantees citizens the freedom of speech and expression. Article 19(1)(b) protects peaceful assembly. These rights are not absolute, but the Constitution identifies the grounds on which speech may be reasonably restricted. Disagreement with the conduct, view, or public actions of a constitutional office-holder is not, by itself, one of those grounds.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* is instructive. The Court struck down Section 66A of the IT Act because its vague and overbroad restrictions on expression could not be justified under Article 19(2). The judgment reaffirmed that the state cannot suppress speech merely because it is inconvenient, unpopular or offensive to some person or authority. The Court has

also repeatedly recognised the constitutional importance of peaceful protest. In the Ramliya Maidan Incident case, the Court described freedom of speech and peaceful assembly as basic features of a democratic system and warned against arbitrary state action that frustrates these freedoms.

The Advocates Act, 1961 sets out the functions of the BCI. The Act does not give it unlimited power to punish conduct it considers objectionable. Section 24 specifies eligibility for enrolment, while Section 24A prohibits disqualification by executive instruction when Parliament has prescribed the conditions for enrolment. If particular students cross the line into misconduct, they should be individually identified and proceeded against under the appropriate mechanisms. The Karnataka High Court's 2024 decision in *Sri S. Basavaraj v. Bar Council of India* is significant. While dealing with the BCI's supervisory powers, the court held that general supervision and control over State Bar Councils does not automatically confer power to issue "stop orders". If the BCI cannot use general supervisory power to silence advocates, it is difficult to justify an even broader use of that power against students who have not yet entered the profession.

There is an irony in the episode that should not be missed. Law schools teach students to question authority, while lawyers are expected to challenge executive action, question administrative decisions and defend unpopular causes. A profession that treats disagreement as evidence of unfitness risks teaching the wrong lesson. The BCI's responsibility is not merely to protect the "dignity" of the profession; Section 7 of the Advocates Act also requires it to safeguard the rights, privileges and interests of advocates and uphold constitutional standards.

That responsibility should encourage constitutionalism, not conformity. The BCI's withdrawal is a reminder that regulatory power has limits. For a country governed by the rule of law, the test of institutions is not how they respond to obedience. It is how they respond to dissent. If tomorrow's lawyers are punished for disagreeing with today's authorities, we should not be surprised when tomorrow's courts have fewer lawyers willing to disagree. A democracy needs lawyers who can say "no" to power and still be allowed to practise law.

Makhlia is a Supreme Court lawyer and former special public prosecutor for the Enforcement Directorate. Sharma is a final-year student at Maharashtra National Law University, Nagpur

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Our nationalism

PERFORMATIVE NATIONALISM — shuffling off the flawed reality — refuses to fade from the theatre of Indian politics ("The nationalism that evokes pride, the nation we are," *IE*, August 16). Deriving instant gratification from empty rhetoric, along with cutting corners, is a primary cause of India's substandard socio-economic standing. The more performative the declarations are, the less tangible the groundwork. Dignified human existence for a vast populace has yet to materialise, rendering the vision of a Vaisht Bharat by 2047 more of a hollow platitude. India will only truly arrive when the dignity of a good life reaches the hands of its hardest workers, for true national pride is anchored in the souls of its citizens.

Raghvi Sharma, Sunam

Women's freedom

CONCERNS ABOUT women's safety, freedom and equal opportunity remain relevant despite progress ("An I-Day wish for my daughter," *IE*, August 16). Families and schools must teach boys respect, consent and shared responsibility from an early age. Public spaces need better lighting, transport, policing and swift action on complaints. Women should not have to restrict their choices for safety. Progress will come when institutions work, and social attitudes change, allowing women to study, work, travel and participate in life without barriers.

A Senthil Kumar, Kaniyur

Test for new law

THE QUESTION is not merely whether the previous policy was perfect or whether its replacement was necessary. It is whether the process of replacement itself has become a means of politically distancing the present governance pattern from both the failures and the achievements of the one before it ("What was promised by NREGA's new version, where it falls short," *IE*, August 13). A policy may be replaced, but the history of governance through which it operated cannot simply be erased. The test of VB-CGRAM G will lie in its ability to show whether it has genuinely corrected the failures that justified its introduction.

Agnishikha, Gurugram



ARUNJIYOTI SANKIA

IN THE third week of July, several south-bank rivers of Upper Assam rose with terrifying speed, unleashing torrents that swamped low-lying fields and grazing lands and swept through villages and towns. Several districts, once strangers to such catastrophic floods, found themselves engulfed in a disaster beyond imagination.

Assam's growing vulnerability to floods is rooted in a long history of shrinking safety margins in a landscape that, for centuries, enjoyed stability. In July, Upper Assam felt the brunt of the disaster even before the Brahmaputra swelled to its highest. Relentless rains pounded the Naga Hills and Arunachal Pradesh, soaking the slopes and unleashing sudden torrents into the southern tributaries. Many pointed to the region's land use — stone and boulder extraction from riverbeds and hillsides, a common sight in both highlands and lowlands — as a culprit that hastened the rainfall's journey, turning it into catastrophic floods downstream.

Cushioned between the Eastern Himalaya to the north, the Patkai and Barail ranges to the east, and the Bay of Bengal to the south, Assam is shaped by multi-layered environmental forces that have worked together for millennia. The southwest monsoon weaves together highlands, flood plains, billions of tons of sediments, and the ever-shifting channels of hundreds of rivers, creating a living, interdependent system. Each year, the monsoon decides whether Assam will sink in gentle rains or battle devastating floods. The July

Assam floods are not only story of a river's vagaries

flood brought this reality into sharp focus: Rainfall far beyond Assam's borders unleashes waters that surge across its land. The highlands of Nagaland and eastern Arunachal Pradesh, which feed the rivers of the south bank of Upper Assam, have undergone dramatic land-use transformations in recent decades. Driven by growing populations, cultivation cycles have become shorter and more intense. Where once a colonial system of extraction dominated, today small-scale coal mining, woven into the fabric of local economies, and which competes with the highland agrarian economy, thrives through complex networks of speculators. Such pressure on uplands, along with relentless logging and expanding infrastructure, erodes the land's ability to absorb rainfall.

The south-bank districts of Upper Assam, at the heart of the recent flood, were once among the Brahmaputra valley's most resilient regions. Thick forests, scattered settlements, and a safe distance from the Brahmaputra's main channel defined these lands. But in the mid-19th century, this calm began to unravel as these areas drew the attention of colonial tea planters. Where rain once vanished quietly into the forest floor, the land was transformed into sites of plantations, mineral extraction and farms that could no longer hold back the water.

The loss of forest deepened when, in the mid-20th century, a techno-bureaucratic campaign to build embankments set out to shield floodplains from floods once seen as predictable and nourishing for agriculture

nourishing for agriculture. These barriers interrupted the flow of sediment. By 1988, even after thousands of kilometres of embankments had been built, two-thirds of the valley still lay open to flooding. During the July floods, embankments along the southern tributaries gave way before the main river crested, unleashing sudden breaches and a fall of water on an unembanked plain.

This inherited vulnerability has now deepened, as shown by new evidence that the monsoon is fast transforming. Meteorologists report that India's rainy season has become more unpredictable, marked by sudden downpours separated by long, dry spells rather than simply more rain overall. Studies focusing on Northeast India echo these findings. The gap between intense rainfall and weakened landscape paints a fuller picture of the flash floods than only focussing on the quantity of rain.

The flooding in Upper Assam is not just a seasonal misfortune but the outcome of vulnerabilities built over two centuries. Unfortunately, the state's ecology has been treated as a puzzle for engineers and each crisis has been seen in isolation and the deeper ecological story given scant respect. Assam's environment is inching closer to its tipping point, but it is not yet beyond repair. We need to understand and restore the intricate connections between highland and lowland, water and land, forests and floodplains, and accept that the resilience lost over generations cannot be rebuilt by technology alone.

The writer is a Guwahati-based environmental historian

Just a housewife: What counts as work, who decides



MOANA BHAGABATI

A FRIEND recently remarked that my current work as a life coach was "just for pocket money". The comment lingered, not just because it stung, but because it revealed something larger about how we view women's work. Why is it that when a woman begins a new career later in life, especially after years devoted to family and caregiving, we instinctively assume it must be a hobby, a way to stay busy, a bit of extra spending money, rather than a serious professional choice made on her terms?

The question feels especially urgent given the Supreme Court's recent judgment describing homemakers as "nation

builders", and assigning a notional value of Rs 30,000 per month to unpaid domestic labour while calculating compensation in a motor accident case. The judgment has opened a national conversation that resurfaces every few years and then fades, about what counts as work and who gets to decide. For generations, women have been told their work at home matters, while being treated as though it does not count. A woman may spend decades managing budgets, caring for children and parents and in-laws, providing emotional support, solving crises, and creating the stability that lets everyone else pursue their ambitions. Yet she is often met with the phrase: "Just a housewife". That single word "just" reveals the problem. Stepping away from paid work to care for family is not an absence of work. The labour remains. The pay cheque disappears

and with it, somehow, the recognition. I experienced this directly. For more than two decades, academia was not merely my profession; it was my identity. Then family responsibilities pulled me away. The years that followed were filled with caregiving, problem-solving, emotional labour, logistics, and support. Alongside, there was continuous work of a voluntary nature supporting people in need

Women are first undervalued for the unpaid years they give to family and society. Then if they try to return to paid work, especially later in life, they are undervalued again

of emotional anchor. They were demanding and productive years but left no line on a resume, or a figure a salary slip could capture. That is where the judgment and this kind of experience meet. Women are first undervalued for the unpaid years they give to family and society. Then if they try to return to paid work, especially later in life, they are undervalued again. The same "just" that shrinks a homemaker's labour also shrinks a 50-something woman's profession into something done "for pocket money".

Both judgments rest on a narrow idea of what counts as real work, who is allowed to do it, and when. Caregiving years build judgement, patience, crisis management, and emotional intelligence. A woman who returns to paid work after this is not starting from nothing. She is starting from years of practice, carrying capabilities that no intern-

ship or entry-level role could have taught her. The ruling matters because it forces a legal reckoning with her contribution. But the real test will be whether it follows it into more ordinary places. An employer who treats unpaid years as a liability and age as a ceiling isn't just unfair to one woman. They are discarding a deep reserve of skill the country can't afford to waste. The years women spend caring for others are not empty or irrelevant. They are years of labour, growth, and quiet expertise. Recognising that has to mean more than a single judgment, however welcome. It has to change how resumes are read, how interview panels are trained, and how society finally decides that beginning again, at any age, for any reason, is never just about pocket money.

The writer is a life coach

13 MAJOR AGRARIAN STATES INCURRED OVER RS 1.3 LAKH CRORE IN FARM POWER SUBSIDIES IN FY25

States ring-fence agri losses to ease DISCOMs' financial stress

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, August 16

AMID FALTERING efforts to resolve the solvency of electricity distribution companies (DISCOMs), state governments are increasingly resorting to an easier fix: hiving off agricultural consumer load into separate entities and freeing up the rest of the utility from the burden of agri-subsidy losses. At least three states, Telangana, Maharashtra and Haryana, are pursuing plans to segregate agricultural consumers from existing DISCOMs and create separate entities for one of the power sector's most heavily subsidised categories.

While Telangana and Maharashtra have created separate agriculture DISCOMs, neither is fully operational. Haryana's proposal for a dedicated agricultural DISCOM was deferred after opposition from power sector employees.

Agriculture accounts for nearly one-fifth of electricity consumption and is the sector's most heavily subsidised consumer category. With tariffs often below the cost of supply, DISCOMs rely on state subsidies and cross-subsidies from commercial and industrial (C&I) consumers, making them vulnerable to delays in subsidy payments — which can strain working capital and constrain investment in network up-

grades, affecting reliability and power supply quality.

According to the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, state governments spent nearly Rs 1.9 lakh crore on energy subsidies in 2024-25, mainly to support DISCOMs and provide subsidised electricity to farmers and households, making power the largest component of their subsidy bill. The 13 major agrarian states, accounting for 99% of India's agricultural electricity sales, incurred over Rs 1.3 lakh crore in farm power subsidies in FY25, as per a report by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water.

Most state-owned utilities continue to incur losses and rely on borrowings to fund operating shortfalls and accumulated liabilities. Public sector DISCOMs have accumulated losses of Rs 6.77 lakh crore and borrowings of Rs 7.11 lakh crore. Telangana, Maharashtra and Haryana's DISCOMs are also loss-making, with thousands of crores in debt.

A new DISCOM, old liabilities

In its December order last year, the Telangana government attributed the creation of this third DISCOM — Telangana Rythu Power Distribution Company Ltd — to the deteriorating financial position of the state's two existing distribution companies: the Southern Power Distribution Company of Telan-

• SUBSIDY DELAYS SQUEEZE DISCOMS

AGRICULTURE ACCOUNTS for nearly one-fifth of electricity consumption and is the power sector's most heavily subsidised category

WITH TARIFFS often below cost of supply, DISCOMs rely on state subsidies and cross-subsidies from C&I consumers

THIS LEAVES them vulnerable to delayed subsidies, straining working capital and limiting network investment and supply reliability



gana Ltd and Northern Power Distribution Company of Telangana Ltd, whose combined accumulated losses stand at Rs 69,741 crore against a borrowing of Rs 59,230 crore.

In March, the new entity was created to supply electricity to agricultural and select water-sector consumers. Subsequently, over 29 lakh agricultural consumers, along with several hundred others, were transferred to the new utility.

Liability, too, moved with load. The new entity would be liable for Rs 26,950 crore in payable to state-owned power-generating companies and a working capital loan of Rs 9,032 crore. Against this, the state government infused Rs 5 crore in equity, along with assets — agricultural distribution transformers worth Rs 2,792 crore and agricultural low-tension lines

valued at Rs 2,137 crore.

However, without commercial and industrial consumers, the financial viability of agricultural-focused DISCOMs remains uncertain, with fears they could become heavily dependent on government subsidies. "These DISCOMs will become exclusive government subsidy-based agencies. If you mop up all profitable areas, where is the financial state of these DISCOMs? The purpose of these DISCOMs is to segregate losses and enable privatisation of profits," said K Ashok Rao, patron at All India Power Engineers Federation.

Cleaning up the balance sheet

In Maharashtra, MSEB Solar Agro Power Ltd was carved out of state-owned Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company Ltd (MSEDCL) as a

subsidiary of its parent, Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) Holding Company, to function as a deemed distribution licensee and retail supplier for agricultural consumers, including billing.

Under the restructuring scheme notified in May, Rs 32,679 crore of MSEDCL's Rs 59,527 crore in pending agricultural dues will be written down, with the state government assuming an equivalent liability through government securities. MSEDCL will create a corresponding reserve to write down the agricultural receivables, despite carrying Rs 90,659 crore in borrowings and an accumulated loss of Rs 35,671 crore.

Shrinivas Bobade, President of Maharashtra-based Subordinate Engineers Association, said the entire exercise is nothing but paperwork to clean up the balance sheet of MSEDCL, as it seeks to go for an IPO. "If MSEDCL's balance sheet shows such huge receivables from the agricultural consumers, who would like to invest? So, they created this agricultural DISCOM to make their books better," he told The Indian Express.

Queries sent to the state governments, MSEDCL and MSEB Holding Company, and Telangana Rythu Power Distribution Company remained unanswered till the time of filing this report. **FULL REPORT ON** WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

How Trump's plan to sell faster access to Truth Social is doing

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, August 16

MORE THAN 10 customers, primarily high-frequency trading firms, have signed agreements with US President Donald Trump's media company to receive its fastest available feed of posts from Truth Social, turning his social media activity into a potentially lucrative financial-data business.

The customers are paying between \$60,000 and \$100,000 a month for Truth API to Trump Media & Technology Group (TMTG), according to the company's interim chief executive Kevin McGurn, who disclosed details of the service during an earnings call.

At the upper end of that range, 10 customers alone could potentially generate around \$12 million in annualised revenue. That is significant for a company which reported revenue of just \$1.7 million in the June quarter, and a loss of \$238 million between April and June.

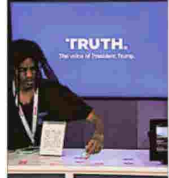
TMTG is now looking well beyond trading firms. McGurn said it was in discussions with hyperscalers, large news organisations, and developers of large language models, while also exploring licensing its data to prediction markets. A retail-trading version of the product is also being worked on.

What is Truth API?

An application programming interface, or API, essentially allows one computer system to automatically obtain information from another. Truth API packages publicly available posts from some of Truth Social's most influential accounts into a structured, machine-readable stream that computers can consume almost instantly. All this results in those with access to the API receiving posts on Truth Social milliseconds before regular users.

TMTG launched the product on August 1 after announcing it in July as its first data-licensing business. The feed covers posts from influential Truth Social accounts, provides round-the-clock access, and includes a historical archive going back to 2022. The crucial selling point is speed.

Instead of a trader manually refreshing Trump's Truth Social notification, or waiting for a phone notification, an algorithm can



The customers are paying up to \$100,000 a month for Truth API to TMTG. REUTERS

ingest a post through the API within milliseconds, interpret what it means, and potentially place trades automatically. Although that difference may sound negligible to an ordinary user, in high-frequency trading, where computers routinely compete to execute transactions fractions of a second ahead of rivals, it could have commercial value.

Of course, Trump himself would be responsible for creating much of that value. His posts are particularly important because he has increasingly used Truth Social not merely for political commentary but to make or signal decisions on tariffs, foreign policy, and individual companies.

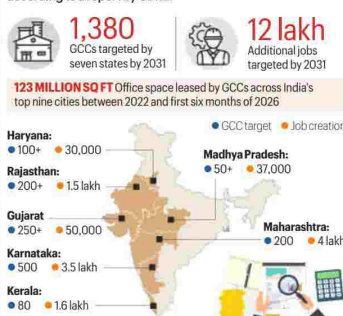
Why is it controversial?

At the heart of the controversy is a key question on whether investors who can afford tens of thousands of dollars each month receive faster access to statements made by the sitting US President that could move financial markets, even if it is just a matter of milliseconds. The posts themselves are public. TMTG has stressed this distinction, with McGurn saying the company's customers only receive "published and publicly available posts fractionally faster". Commercially licensing real-time public data, it argues, is commonplace across technology, media, and financial-information businesses.

And selling faster data feeds may not in itself be unusual or necessarily illegal. Lawyers cited by Reuters have pointed out that technology platforms can offer different speeds of access to public information even if that leaves some market participants at a disadvantage. **FULL REPORT ON** WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

• 7 STATES TARGET 12 LAKH GCC JOBS BY 2031

Seven states have come up with dedicated policies to set up Global Capability Centres (GCCs), aiming to create more jobs, according to a report by CBRE.



"The speed at which state governments have moved to formalise dedicated GCC policies is unprecedented in India's commercial real estate landscape." — ANSHUMAN MAGAZINE, CHAIRMAN AND CEO, INDIA, SOUTH-EAST ASIA, MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA, CBRE

SOURCE: CBRE REPORT: THE POLICY ADVANTAGE: POWERING INDIA'S GCC GROWTH/PTI

Govt aims to clinch 5 BITs in 2-3 months

Prasanta Sahu
New Delhi, August 16

THE GOVERNMENT is aiming to finalise new bilateral investment treaties (BITs) with the European Union (EU), Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Oman and the Maldives in the next two to three months, offering enhanced flexibility to foreign investors including a shorter timeline to exhaust domestic remedies before initiating international arbitration.

Simultaneously, the Cabinet will consider the proposed BIT 4.0 regime, which revises the model text for a better balance between sovereign interests and foreign investment as well as creates a flexible framework for future negotiations. A flexible model would allow India to tailor provisions based on the partner country's strategic importance and investment ties, sources said.

FE reported recently that

NxtGen takes cloud services overseas

New Delhi: Indian sovereign cloud and artificial intelligence infrastructure provider NxtGen has launched SpeedCloud Global, taking its managed cloud and AI services to international markets as competition intensifies among cloud providers to serve growing demand for AI compute.

The company said the service would offer general cloud workloads at 39-48% lower cost than leading hyperscalers, with deployments possible in as little as 48 hours. It did not identify the overseas markets it would initially target or disclose investment details for the expansion.

"India is no longer only the back office of global technology; it is now building world-class cloud infrastructure and competing on performance and cost, on its own terms," NxtGen MD and CEO A S Raigopal said. **ENS**

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Gen Z's buy-now, pay-later habit fuelling unsecured loans, worrying regulator

Aanchal Magazine
New Delhi, August 16

• Non-food bank credit, outstanding personal loans (March-end)

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Personal Loans	34,66,075	41,82,767	53,46,691	59,71,696	69,39,750
Consumer Durables	17,834	20,985	23,445	23,201	21,962
Housing*	17,38,473	19,91,164	27,18,712	30,10,477	33,55,963
Education	83,693	96,482	1,19,380	1,37,456	1,55,824
Vehicle Loans	4,04,756	4,87,597	5,73,391	6,22,793	7,38,678
Loans against gold jewellery	74,738	89,370	93,301	2,06,284	4,61,373
Other	9,01,595	11,62,345	14,27,872	15,35,197	17,31,838

NOTE: FIGURES IN RS CR. SOURCE: RBI * (INCLUDING PRIORITY SECTOR HOUSING)

While India's household debt has surged in recent years, financial sector regulators are particularly concerned about the composition of that debt. Non-housing retail loans — largely used for consumption — now account for more than half of household borrowings, and have grown faster than housing, agriculture and business loans, a trend flagged in internal discussions among policymakers.

As of March 2026, non-housing retail loans — primarily the consumption segment — constituted 58.4% of households' total borrowings, up from 54.9% of total household debt in March 2025. Average outstanding debt per borrower rose to Rs 4.78 lakh as of March-end 2025, from Rs 3.41 lakh as of March-end 2018, according to Ministry of Finance data. The sharpest increases have come in some personal borrowing categories. Outstanding loans against gold jewellery jumped to Rs 4.61 lakh crore as of March 2026, while other personal loans' outstanding stood at Rs 17.32 lakh crore as of March 2026 compared with Rs 9.02 lakh crore in March 2022, data shared in Parliament on Monday (August 10) showed.

While the risks to the Indian financial system from household lending remain contained, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has flagged household debt accumulation, particularly among lower-rated borrowers, as a "close monitoring" risk. Gross NPA ratios stood at 0.7% in secured retail loans at end-March 2026. "The exposure to these sectors requires close monitoring as

risks to asset quality could increase, especially if overall economic conditions weaken due to the West Asia conflict and impact borrower cash flows", the RBI had said in its latest Financial Stability Report.

Unsecured personal loans remain a particular vulnerability. In the small-ticket personal loan segment of less than Rs 50,000, fintech firms have gained a higher 56.8% market share, after strong 41.6% credit expansion, well above the overall segment growth of 20.1%. Delinquencies stood at 6.4% as of March 2026. About 70.5% of fintech loan books are unsecured, with roughly half of these loans extended to borrowers under 35. As per the latest CIBIL TransUnion data, the share of India's credit-eligible population that is credit-active has risen from 1% about a decade ago to around 28% now.

Of the credit-eligible population of 890 million, close to one-third have, over the last year, taken a loan or have a loan running, or are paying EMIs or credit card bills. Almost half of this credit-active population has a consumption loan — credit card, personal loan, or consumer durable loan — while nearly 10% have an entrepreneurial loan or business-oriented loan.

The number of credit-active consumers with consumption loans and business loans grew fourfold and tenfold, respectively, between 2017 and 2024, TransUnion CIBIL data showed. Consumption borrowing has been driven substantially by younger consumers, including Gen Z, often with repayment tenures of less than three years. "What we need to continu-

ously monitor is that while encouraging credit growth, are we incentivising need-based credit. The other thing is the ability to pay, especially in certain segments such as younger borrowers where the leverage has gone up. In the case of consumption loans, for instance, the lender cannot be in a position to fully qualify income information and if on account of the increased leverage, the consumer is in a situation to pay or not," an executive with a credit bureau said.

The share of over-leveraged consumers rose threefold — from 5% in FY17 to 18% in FY24 — before easing marginally to 15% in FY26 after industry intervention, with excessive borrowing concentrated among younger consumers. Their share in the country's credit-active base has increased from 33% in 2017 to 39% in 2026.

Even as unsecured retail lending has moderated — it forms 25% of retail loans and 8.3% of gross advances — its asset quality has weakened relative to the overall retail portfolio. Its gross non-performing asset ratio stood at 1.8% vis-a-vis 1.2% in March 2025, with stress particularly visible in private sector banks.

The trend suggests a growing propensity to incur debt for immediate consumption rather than asset creation. Outstanding credit card debt crossed Rs 3 lakh crore last fiscal, while delinquencies — payments overdue by more than 90 and 360 days — rose more than 40% year-on-year, as per the data from CRIF High Mark, an RBI-registered credit bureau.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

DRI uncovers

Rs 2,500 cr area nut import racket

New Delhi: The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) has dismantled a network involved in importing South-East Asian area nuts into India by falsely declaring them as Bangladeshi origin and fraudulently availing concessional duty benefits under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).

The finance ministry said an investigation by the DRI has so far revealed a potential revenue loss of more than Rs 2,500 crore. Nine persons have been arrested. The import of area nuts into India attracts customs duty of 100%. However, eligible imports of area nuts under the SAFTA agreement are fully exempt from customs duty. PTI

• BRIEFLY

Govt sets LPG output targets for refiners

New Delhi: The Centre has for the first time fixed maximum cooking gas LPG production targets for individual public- and private-sector refineries and upstream firms, as it seeks to build a domestic supply buffer after the West Asia conflict. The Petroleum and Natural Gas Ministry, in an August 13 order, specified maximum LPG production levels for 21 refineries and upstream firms, with combined production potential set at 63,810 tonnes a day. PTI

RBI may incur \$9-12 bn in FCNR hedging costs

Mumbai: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) could incur \$9-12 billion over five years in hedging costs if foreign currency non-resident (bank), or FCNR(B), deposits mobilised under its special swap window reach \$70 billion, with economists estimating annual hedging costs at 2.5-3.5%. The RBI has already received \$52.3 billion through FCNR(B) deposits as of August 13, which would translate into a five-year hedging cost of about \$6.5-9.1 billion at the same range of annual costs. FE

• A RECENT CAG REPORT FLAGGED THAT E.COLI BACTERIA WAS FOUND IN STATIONS DRINKING WATER

Railways orders filtration system at stations after CAG report

Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, August 16

AFTER THE Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India flagged poor drinking water quality at the railway stations and even said that total coliform bacteria, including E. coli bacteria, were found during its testing, Minister for Railways Ashwini Vaishnaw on Sunday directed some immediate corrective measures like a new 'tank to tap' water filtration system at around 20,000 locations, including water coolers.

The officials said regular water testing at the source and outlet points will be conducted.



E. coli bacteria was found in drinking water samples collected from taps in eight railway stations out of 49 stations. REUTERS

From now onwards, the water quality of stations will be monitored at the board level. There will be scheduled cleaning and maintenance of storage tanks. Progress and water quality reports will be published periodically to ensure transparency. This action is part of a larger drive to address all CAG observations and improve the overall travel experience," said a senior railway official.

In a recent report titled Passenger Amenities and Sanitation at Non-Suburban Railway Stations in Indian Railways, the CAG said E. coli bacteria was found in drinking water samples collected from taps in eight railway stations out of 49 stations. These stations are Coimbatore, Palakkad, Hyderabad, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, Bhiwandi Road, Kalyan, Lon-

"Inspection of the water supply systems was not carried out as per prescribed periodicity. There was shortfall in testing of drinking water for residual chlorine, bacteriological analysis and chemical analysis," said the national auditor.

The CAG also found that out of the 512 stations inspected, 458 stations or more than 89% were deficient in one or more Minimum Essential Amenities (MEAs), including drinking water, seating, toilets, platform shelters, fans, water coolers and signage. Even the bigger stations of high-revenue and high-footfall exhibited significant shortfalls. The audit was conducted for the period 2019-20 to 2023-24.

The sanitation infrastructure was found to be deficient, marked by nonfunctional toilets, inadequate facilities in pay-and-use and continued existence of unauthorised entry points affecting cleanliness and safety, said the auditor.

"A review of 395 passenger amenities works undertaken during 2019-20 to 2023-24 showed that 55% of works were delayed, with delays ranging from one to over four years, and only 41% completed within stipulated timelines," it said.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Idea Exchange

MONDAY, AUGUST 17, 2026

NEWMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

WHY SHUBHANSHU SHUKLA

Shubhanshu Shukla spent 20 days at the International Space Station last year, becoming only the second Indian — the first in over four decades — to travel to space. His journey stirred the imagination of an entire generation of youngsters for whom space travel might not be as remote a possibility as it was for their elders. After his return, Shukla has taken on the role of a space ambassador, motivating students to reach for the sky. Currently, he's on ground zero, preparing for the Gaganyaan Mission planned by Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). His book, *The Second Orbit*, details the experiences of his space journey.

Amitabh Sinha: Your book, *The Second Orbit* (Penguin), starts with 14-year-old Shubhanshu Shukla writing to his future self. And he wants his future self to reply to him. Could tell us about how this idea of the book came about?

The book idea was suggested by many people, even before I went on the mission. When I was in the US, I was advised that I should keep track of what is happening and journal it. The idea of a book was not in my mind at that time. After the space journey, I have been meeting and talking to many people. It was then that it was suggested that I should write a book. I also realised that it's not possible for me to be everywhere, in every school, in every college. So, a book is a good way to do this. I was able to relive those moments. If I had not done it at this point, then probably some of them would have been lost.

Amitabh Sinha: Tell us about the year-long process of training that you went through, the excitement, the anxiety, the sheer scale of achievement.

To become an astronaut, the sheer number of disciplines that you need to train in increases significantly. When you are up in space, there is nobody else. You have to be the pilot, commander, your own doctor, researcher, scientist, plumber, mechanic, everything has to be you. I learned microbiology, medical procedures, it was fascinating.

As for the scale, in hindsight, it is even bigger than what I probably had in mind. But when you are in training, you cannot let your mind think like that. If you do, you start taking the pressure of the enormity of it, then it has a crippling effect and you don't function very well. I don't function very well. It was only when I was in space did I realise the enormity of it — something larger than life, and something you never thought would happen.

Amitabh Sinha: From the launch (on June 25) till your return, were there any crisis moments that were completely unexpected?

Going to space is a managed crisis. Life should not exist in space. There is nothing that supports life, no air, no water. It is a harsh environment. The sheer energy and force that you experience when you are escaping the pull of gravity from Earth, it is phenomenal. So, just to give an analogy, imagine you are strapped to a seat and the seat is sitting on top of 500 tons of propellant and then you light it on fire. It is not a normal thing, but it is managed very well. That is why there are so many people re-viewing these things.

When you reach space, everything is actually unexpected. You are taught very well, you are trained very well, but the environment that you experience when you reach there, that cannot be simulated on the ground. Microgravity is the new element which actually changes everything because things don't behave the way they behave when you are on the ground. Everything is new, everything is a delta that you have to navigate and experience only when you are there. There is a saying in the space flight community that you are ready for a space flight when you finish one.

Amitabh Sinha: The Gaganyaan is yet to happen. Were you selected for it, this was just before Covid and Axiom was not on the horizon. There were many delays. At any point, did you think that probably this is not going to happen?

Yeah, that is what was happening. Even in well-established programmes, like the United States and the Russian ones, the average time before an astronaut flies to space is around five to six years. Some astronauts have been selected and never flown. That also happens. So, there is no certainty that you will get to fly. Anything can change in a moment. That is why it was important to enjoy what you are doing when you are not flying.

Even now, after this flight has happened, I do not know when the next one is. If you look at the career of an astronaut, they probably fly two to three times to space, and if they are flying from the US, it is for six months at a time. So, about three times in 1.5 years. Now, for a career that spans 40 years, 1.5 years is the time that is spent in space. The rest 38.5 years is on the ground. So, if you do not enjoy that, then it is very difficult.

Amitabh Sinha: Our Gaganyaan programme is scheduled in the next year or two. Have you transformed into a trainer of sorts for your colleagues?

Not for my colleagues because we all went to Russia together, we were trained there. They, too, are experienced pilots in the Air Force. Actually, I am the junior most among the four of them. One of them came to the US as well for the Axiom Mission and underwent training. But yes, there are lessons to be learned.

The primary objective of doing the Axiom Mission 4 was to learn as much as we could and then how do we use that experience to enable our own mission. That is a major exercise that we are doing right now.



ON HIS LEARNINGS FROM AXIOM

I learned the importance of being a follower. Everywhere, even at the IAF, we are taught to be leaders. But, it is important to listen to others, learn from their experiences and unlearn a few things of your own



ON AN ASTRONAUT'S CAREER GRAPH

An astronaut flies two to three times in his life. From the US, it is six months at a time. About three times is 1.5 years. For a career of 40 years, the rest 38.5 years is on the ground. So, you have to enjoy what you do

'Today's kids are brilliant... you have to be with a dream for a long time, work on it, only then will it happen'

Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla on training for space travel, how the process and working at Axiom Space is different from working on the Gaganyaan Mission with ISRO and why the vastness of the space was overwhelming. The session was moderated by Amitabh Sinha, Climate and Science Editor, *The Indian Express*



Astronaut and Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla (right) with Amitabh Sinha, Climate and Science Editor, *The Indian Express*, at the Noida office last week. RENUKA PURI

Amitabh Sinha: Do you see any difference in the way Axiom was preparing itself and the way ISRO has been doing it? Are there any noticeable differences?

Axiom Space is a private company which was coordinating missions to space. It didn't actually own any hardware for the missions. The International Space Station is owned by NASA and its international partners. The vehicle in which we flew to space was SpaceX's Crew Dragon vehicle and the rocket was Falcon 9. So that was owned by SpaceX. Axiom did not own any hardware. What ISRO is doing is we are trying to make our own hardware: the capsule, the spacecraft in which the astronauts will go. So it's a very different nature of work. Here, we are trying to make it in-house and launch Indian astronauts on our own vehicle and in our own capsule. This is heavy engineering work, and robust processes and review mechanisms are being set up. So, it can't be compared.

Anonna Dutt: What are the learnings from your journey that have brought in changes to processes in the Gaganyaan Mission?

These are such complex processes that it is very difficult to put a finger on something. I travelled to space but there was a team from ISRO which was also there to see how things were happening. We witnessed this end-to-end execution of the entire mission. ISRO has launched many successful missions in the past but human space-flight is something that we are attempting for the first time and it requires a different ecosystem. We were able to see the scale of operations and what the different disciplines are that we need to address before we actually send people to space and bring them back. That is the biggest learning. There are obviously more segmented, pointed, objective lessons that are being applied, there are so many.

P Vaidyanathan Iyer: How do you

look at life on Earth from space?

When you look back at Earth, from that perspective, it does change something in you. Even in aviation, you never see Earth as a whole. The first feeling that I got — everybody may have different experiences — but the first feeling that I got in space was that this felt like home. The planet felt like home. It really gave me that perception that I am from here. I am not pinpointing India. I am saying that I am from Earth. That was a very strong feeling I had.

The second thing, the vastness. Earth is massive. We know the dimensions but we have not seen it. So when you see that, it feels very big. But if you think about it, it is not the biggest planet. You can fit 1,300 Earths in Jupiter. And our solar system is not the biggest one in our galaxy. And our galaxy is not the biggest in the cluster that we are in. The cluster is not the biggest in the supercluster. So you can go on and on till the end of the universe. So your position, actually where you are, is very average, there is nothing special about this. So, the thought of the vastness of space is overwhelming.

Amitabh Sinha: Most of us were very young when Rakesh Sharma went to space, and we heard his famous line, 'Sare Jahan Se Achha'. Was it at the back of your mind that you also had to come up with something which everyone remembers?

Yes, of course it was there, and even today when I speak to Sir (Rakesh Sharma), I tell him that he made my life so difficult by saying something so profound. When I was speaking from space, I was aware of the enormity of the situation. I had written a few lines but sometimes those moments are so overwhelming that you forget everything. I just spoke whatever was coming to my mind. There was no competition to say something as profound as him, but the primary feeling was this: It has taken us 40 years to reach here but this time it is different. It won't take us this long to be back in space again. India has changed a lot from

WHAT EARTH FELT LIKE FROM SPACE

The first feeling I got in space was that this felt like home. The planet felt like home, that I am from here. I am not pinpointing India on the planet. I am saying that I am from Earth. That was a very strong feeling



what it was in 1984, our position has changed, things have changed.

Amitabh Sinha: You mention in your book that the stay at ISS was very busy and you seldom had time to enjoy the view. Are there certain things that couldn't do on the Gaganyaan flight?

Several things, but the nature of the mission will also be very different. The ISS mission was known, established, doing experiments and coming back. Gaganyaan will be a prototype mission. It will be more about proving the technology, testing out systems and communicating with the ground. But yes, if there is time and things that can be planned, I would definitely do a lot of things very differently.

Amitabh Sinha: More photography?

Absolutely. And I would not plan the mission during monsoons because you don't get to see India at all.

Anuradha Mascarenhas: The NDA (National Defence Academy) is known for physically and mentally demanding exercises. Were there any particular drills that you disliked as a cadet but today you are grateful for?

There are two types of fun in life. There is Type A fun and Type B. Type A fun is when you are having fun in the moment, and later when you think about that experience, you still enjoy it because it was so memorable. Type B fun is where when you are doing it, you absolutely hate it. But when you look back, you really enjoy it. The NDA experience is Type B fun, most of it. It prepared you for life. That is what actually takes you to the extremes of being a thinker is possible.

Jayashree Narayanan: What is your message for Gen Z and Gen Alpha who are watching you?

The kids, from what I have seen, are bril-

liant. The way their thought process works, there are no restraints on them. There are no boundaries within which they feel they have to think. That is why they have been able to break free. And that is very important for us as a nation because the first step to achieving something big is to dream about it.

The second part of it is that dreaming is just one aspect. You have to really be with that dream for a long time and work on it, then only will it happen. It doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen in one or two days. Whatever they want to do or achieve, they will have to give it time and they will have to give it effort for a sustained period.

Divyanshu Dutta Roy: The younger generation is often said to be chasing instant gratification. Would you make a case to children and teenagers to follow your path instead, which is a path of rigour, diligence and discipline?

I think everyone understands what it requires to get to the place where you want yourself to be. You have to like what you are doing. Then it doesn't feel like a burden. Sometimes, you might not like certain things but are forced to carry on. That is where discipline comes in.

Instant gratification is probably one of the biggest challenges that the current generation is facing. Patience levels are dropping. It happens to us also. In our times, the challenge was of scarcity. Things were not available. Today, the problem is of abundance. Everything is available. So, there is a lot of distraction, and the challenge is to focus on your goals. That is a skill that has to be developed. You saw the Skyroot launch which happened recently. This work has been happening for the past decade. Those 10 years are very important for this exciting time. You have to invest time, there is no other way. You can temporarily become famous overnight, but that is not going to sustain. You have to do something meaningful for a long time for it to be really effective.

Shalini Langer: Once you've seen space, what do you think of God?

I've always believed that there has to be some sense to what is happening around us. For instance, you don't realise as we are sitting in this room, you are moving at a speed of around 30 kilometres per second. Your solar system is probably moving at around 700 kilometres per second at the same time. Now, this entire thing is explained by science. But even that understanding is limited because science itself is evolving. So I believe that there must be something which is making all this happen, and we should be grateful for what we have, and that is what makes you life peaceful and good. The experience of space definitely has strengthened my belief in the things that I used to believe even before going to space.

Shalini Langer: What about people who are paying to go to space, space tourists?

I hope more and more people go to space and the cost comes down so that more people can experience this — going out and looking at Earth from the outside. Because fundamentally, things do change when you have that perspective and change for the better. Change in the sense that you really feel that you are all in this together — this is your planet and you have a responsibility towards it. So, if you are able to get that perspective, if 100 people can get it, great. If 1,000 people can get it, even better. So it should happen. But again, you have to be very responsible in doing it.

Karishma Verma: After your mission, your mother's reaction went very viral. So what was that conversation after the mission that you had with your mother?

She could not come to Delhi because of health reasons. When I went to Lucknow for the first time (after my return), the first words that came out of her were: 'Beta ab ho gaya hai. Dobara mat jaana' (It's done, don't go again!).

Shiny Varghese: Space technology has given us carbon water filters and GPS systems. What new technology did you wish you could have back home?

The water reclamation system on the International Space Station recycles about 98 per cent of the water. And so you really don't have to carry a lot of water to space. This would be something that if we can scale it up and use it on Earth as well, it would be a huge benefit to all of us. Conserving water and using it more resourcefully, that is something that we can do with a lot more of.

Amitabh Sinha: You have worked in teams at the IAF. How was working with the Axiom team different, given that everyone was from a different country? What were your learnings?

I learned the importance of being a follower, and to learn from others. At IAF, and everywhere else, we are taught how to be leaders. And that is good. But I think, it is important also to be able to listen to others, learn from their experiences and probably unlearn a few things of your own.

Puzzling policy

Premature ending of FCNR (B) swap raises questions

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday surprised financial markets by announcing that it would end the swap facility for foreign currency non-resident (bank) — or FCNR (B) — deposits, a month ahead of schedule. On June 5, the central bank had announced swap facilities for banks on FCNR (B) deposits, along with certain external commercial and overseas foreign-currency borrowings. Other schemes were to continue till the end of the year as announced. According to the latest RBI data, foreign currency worth \$56.85 billion was mobilised till August 13, with the dominant share of FCNR (B) deposits at \$52.3 billion. The central bank stated in its announcement that the FCNR (B) swap facility was being stopped due to an encouraging response. The decision raises several uncomfortable questions.

From the turn of events, it would appear that the scheme was not adequately thought through. India's foreign-exchange reserves were at about \$680 billion when the scheme was announced, and it was unlikely to face any difficulty in meeting immediate external obligations. However, the rupee was under pressure due to a variety of factors. The Iran war had pushed up the prices of crude oil, and most economists expected the current account deficit (CAD) to expand, though not to alarming levels. Pressure was also coming from the capital account because of persistent selling by foreign portfolio investors, partly because of global uncertainties. Thus, the swap schemes were interpreted as an attempt to further bolster foreign-exchange reserves to help stabilise the currency market. Sometimes sharp currency depreciation can become a self-fulfilling spiral. Higher reserves usually discourage speculators betting on sustained declines. But foreign-currency reserve accumulation also has costs.

Since the RBI has decided to close the scheme after getting a little over \$50 billion, it is not clear what the expectations were. Analysts were expecting \$80 billion to come under various swap windows. Did the RBI not expect similar levels of flows? Banks were incentivised to raise deposits and were offering substantial leverage. It is not clear if the objectives have been met. Besides, what would have been the downside of accumulating more foreign-exchange reserves? A much higher reserve could have artificially pushed up the rupee exchange rate. Liquidity in the system would have significantly also gone up. But could the central bank not anticipate or manage such after-effects? Further, it was indicated in the last post-monetary policy press conference on August 5 that there was no proposal to close the scheme prematurely. What changed over the next nine days? Both the announcement of the scheme and its premature withdrawal indicate a lack of proper policy planning and do not augur well for a large central bank like the RBI.

At a broader macro level, as this newspaper has argued, irrespective of the fund mobilisation, the scheme will not solve the fundamental problem. India runs a CAD and needs foreign savings to push up investment. Foreign direct investment (FDI) is considered the most stable form of overseas capital. But the flow under this head has not been as desired over the past few years. Outward FDI by Indian firms and repatriation by foreign firms have affected the net balance, which is important for the balance of payments (BoP). After witnessing a BoP deficit over the past two years, the first quarter this financial year also remained in deficit with a gap of \$8.1 billion. Net FDI was at \$7.8 billion during the quarter. India certainly needs to do much better to get the external account under control, which will also impart stability to the currency market. However, not much has happened over the past few months on bringing in stickier long-term capital.

Renewed reform push

India must speed up its growth to meet emergent challenges

In his 13th Independence-Day address from the Red Fort, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid emphasis on fast-tracking reforms to accelerate the country's growth trajectory as it confronts external challenges, not least from the war in West Asia. Mr Modi stated that reforms were not a compulsion or a buzzword for his government, but were born out of conviction. Towards that end, he invoked the *Sapta Dharma*, or seven streams, on which the government intended to focus to boost growth: Manufacturing; agriculture and food production; technology and innovation; seamless and fast connectivity; defence power; green and blue economy; and soft power. These are expected to help India become a trusted hub for global supply chains, safeguard its economy against emergent threats like cybersecurity and the disruptive impact of artificial intelligence, protect its biodiversity, and project its cultural power to the world.

There has been a noticeable sense of urgency in the government's recent pronouncements, coming as they do against the backdrop of the increased global uncertainty triggered by the war in West Asia and the resultant energy price shock. As the finance ministry recently told the parliamentary standing committee on finance, the continuance of the conflict could exert pressure on economic activities this financial year, and if oil prices remain high, it could result in a higher fiscal deficit than the target of 4.3 per cent of gross domestic product. Besides, as Mr Modi highlighted in his speech, talk of globalisation has receded the world over and countries are increasingly weaponising the resources available to them: From crude oil, to critical minerals, to semiconductor chips. Given this situation, it is hoped that the *Sapta Dharma* can push India towards a higher growth trajectory. The focus on trade and manufacturing in the speech will hopefully lead to faster reforms in these areas. Notably, he also talked about the government's welfare policies, including the fertiliser subsidy. Some of the expenditure in these areas needs to be rationalised.

That a significant portion of the speech was on harnessing the potential of the youth and reminding them of his government's achievements over the past 12 years, is noteworthy. Given the context of the student protests, an ameliorative measure announced by the Prime Minister on Saturday was the provision of free coaching classes for those preparing for competitive exams. This is expected to lift the pressure of coaching classes and lessen the financial burden on households. To be sure, the government has undertaken other measures too, like setting up a task force headed by Infosys cofounder Nandan Nilekani to suggest reforms in the testing system. Providing free coaching classes could bring significant relief if a high standard is maintained, considering the increasing costs that parents incur to ensure their children stand a chance to succeed. However, this is not a lasting solution. The government must focus on strengthening primary and secondary education. To assuage the anxieties of the youth and children, the country must broaden the avenues for gainful employment available to them and reduce the unemployment rate among graduates. Of course, this cannot be the government's duty alone, as Mr Modi pointed out, but it has to take the lead. Speeding up the "reforms express" through the *Sapta Dharma* could help accelerate the economy to the required growth rate that may answer some of these concerns.

The cost of exchange rate policy

What is the price of controlling the rupee?



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY

In the decades following Independence, mainstream Indian economic thought accepted the necessity of price controls. The consensus held that the state must manage prices of things such as steel, cement, electricity and wheat. State intervention was seen as the path to economic stability. Over time, the costs of interfering in the price system were better understood. The Indian policy community realised that economic growth was found through prices that fluctuated. That realisation came from a dispassionate assessment of costs and benefits. That shift in knowledge, in thinking, was the essence of Indian progress.

And so it is with exchange rates. When the central bank controls the dollar/rupee exchange rate, there are immediate beneficiaries. Firms engaged in international trade receive subsidised currency-risk management. Exporters and importers experience artificial stability in their cash flows. There are also less visible costs, dispersed across the fiscal map, macroeconomic stability, state capability, and the behaviour of private firms.

1. The first category of costs is fiscal. When the central bank intervenes in the currency market, some costs are passed up to the Ministry of Finance. In the past, the "Market Stabilisation Scheme" directly imposed interest costs for the implementation of currency policy upon the exchequer. Borrowing through foreign currency non-resident (bank) deposits props up the rupee today, but it imposes fiscal costs. When the central bank supplies a currency hedge to banks, future losses on this hedge reduce the dividend paid to

the government. If the dollar/rupee moves by ₹10 on a position of \$50 billion, this induces a cost of half a trillion rupees to the seller of the financial derivative. The Ministry of Finance bears this cost through smaller dividends from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

2. Beyond the exchequer, there is a cost to macroeconomic stability. The legal mandate of the RBI is to deliver an inflation rate of 4 per cent. Exchange rate management introduces a conflict of interest. The policy rate required to defend a specific currency level is often different from the policy rate required to achieve the inflation target. When the central bank prioritises the exchange rate, it departs from the inflation target. This induces instability in inflation. This elevated macroeconomic instability is the price the economy pays for price control on the exchange rate.

3. This connects to the problem of accountability. The path to state capability is paved with accountability. When an agency has two objectives, such as inflation targeting and exchange-rate management, accountability breaks down. It is then possible to blame the failure in one area on the necessities of the other. If the inflation rate deviates from the 4 per cent target, the agency points to the burdens of trading on the rupee, dollar market, and vice versa. The emergence of state capability in India requires agencies with a single objective and no place to hide. This would create the pressure of accountability.

4. There is the cost to institutional credibility. Credibility is the trust the market places in the state. A cen-

tral bank that acts as a large trader in the market, attempting to force the exchange rate to a desired value, loses credibility. Policy statements are made and then violated in the dogfights with the market. Consider the premature closure of the FCNR(B) window. The central bank announced a closing date, but then altered it. Each such action reduces the currency of policy credibility. In the future, the market will believe policy announcements a little less. A clean inflation-targeting central bank, free from conflicts of interest, builds respect over the decades.

5. Finance is the brain of the economy. Economic growth requires a financial system that processes time and risk, and controls resource allocation. When the central bank runs a price-control system for the dollar/rupee, its use of powers in financial economic policy is attenuated through an ulterior motive to damage market development. To help maintain control over the currency, the state stunts the liquidity and efficiency of the bond-currency-derivatives nexus. The state runs a system of capital controls, which harms the cost of capital. These interventions restrict the ability of the financial system to solve problems in the real economy, and harm the project of Indian economic growth.

6. For the private sector, the non-market environment for the rupee creates a complex risk-management problem. There is a stop-start pattern. The dollar/rupee rate remains sleepy for long periods. This gives a false sense of calm. Inevitably, the sleepy period ends. A bout of big price changes follows. This environment makes business planning difficult. It is harder to execute currency hedging under these unexpected periods of turbulence and calm than it is under a pure market-exchange rate. The private person faces a volatile environment where the volatility is suppressed and then released in bursts.

7. This dynamic breeds moral hazard. When the state supplies free-currency risk management, firms take more unhedged foreign-exchange exposure. This builds up systemic risk. Parts of the private sector divert themselves to gathering intelligence about the target exchange rate to extract value from the government's price control. This is a poor use of the intellectual power of the private sector. Indian growth is maximised when firms devote themselves to customers, technology and management.

The transition away from some price controls was a milestone in Indian economic history. It was achieved by looking past narrow desires in price control and understanding the consequences of price controls for Indian economic growth. The management of the dollar/rupee exchange rate requires the same maturity. The costs encompass fiscal burdens, inflation volatility, stunted financial markets, systemic risk, and degraded state capability. Exchange-rate policy is not a narrow concern of monetary-policy strategy. It is a fundamental choice about the broader economic-growth strategy. India requires a modern financial system, a capable state with high accountability, and a private sector focused on innovation rather than government arbitrage. The path to Indian economic success begins with a full reckoning of the costs of exchange-rate management.

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SNAKES & LADDERS
AJAY SHAH

Economics of oilseed production

Going by the vegetable-oil industry's assessment, the import bill for edible oils may swell to an unprecedented ₹1.72 trillion in the current oil year (November-October). This is 9 per cent above the previous peak of ₹1.61 trillion touched last year. The major reason for cost escalation is higher imports to bridge the ever widening demand-supply gap, though factors like the spike in global prices due to the West Asia crisis, reduced availability of palm oil in Indonesia because of greater diversion to biofuels, and the depreciation of the rupee have also contributed to it. The unabated uptrend in imports has, indeed, deepened misgivings about achieving the long-cherished goal of *amantriharta* (self-reliance) in edible oils in the near future.

The genesis of the persistent rise in imports of edible oils, regardless of steady increase in indigenous production, lies in the demand growing faster than the supplies. Most bids made over the past decades to address this issue have fallen flat. More than half the requirement of edible oils is still met through purchases from abroad.

Such heavy dependence on imports for a mass-consumed essential item like cooking oils is unwarranted. It is also dicey because the bulk of the imports comprise palm oil and its derivatives, sourced from just two countries — Indonesia and Malaysia. Any disruption in supplies from these countries, for whatever reason, can turn out to be a problem for India, the world's largest importer of edible oils. Besides, vegetable oils are not something that cannot be produced locally in sufficient quantities.

Indian agricultural scientists have, in fact, already developed the technology needed to make the country self-reliant in edible oils. More than 1,000 high-yielding

varieties and hybrids of oilseed crops have been evolved for cultivation in different agro-climatic zones. These have lifted the average productivity of oilseed crops from merely 4.8 quintals a hectare in the 1950s to around 14 quintals now. But there still is a huge disparity between the national average yield and the potential yield of new crop strains, which is as high as 20-25 quintals. Bridging, or even appreciably narrowing, this gap can bring self-sufficiency in edible oils within reach.

However, agricultural pricing policies would need to be suitably tweaked to make oilseed crops economically as rewarding as their alternatives. Only then would the farmers be incentivised to expand the area under oilseeds, adopt new seeds and agronomic practices, and, most importantly, invest in yield-enhancing inputs like irrigation, fertilisers and plant protection chemicals. The existing pricing and procurement policies have tended to encourage farmers to grow relatively lucrative food and commercial crops on good-quality lands, pushing oilseed cultivation, in general, to the less fertile, non-irrigated lands. Nearly 75 per cent of the area under oilseed crops lacks irrigation facilities.

India is fortunate to have a vast diversity in vegetable oils, unmatched in the world. Apart from nine main oilseed crops, including groundnut, rapeseed-mustard and soyabean, there are also perennial crops, such as coconut and oil palm, and some minor tree-based oilseeds grown mostly in tribal tracts. Besides, there is plenty of scope to augment supplies by extracting oils from non-conventional sources like cottonseed and rice bran, which are available in abundance. Some of these off-beat oils are far healthier than palm oil.

Focused efforts to achieve self-sufficiency in edible

oils began way back in the mid-1980s with the setting up of the Technology Mission on Oilseeds (TMO) in 1986. This mission was made to jack up production to quite close to the requirement by the early 1990s. The main mantra for this success was to let domestic prices fluctuate within a reasonable range that protected the interests of both producers and consumers. The government's intervention by way of increasing or decreasing import duties was restricted to situations when the domestic prices tended to breach the upper or lower limits.

However, this phase, termed ambitiously "the yellow revolution", did not last long. One of the key reasons for that was the gradual erosion of the unbundled authority given to the TMO to formulate policies concerning pricing, imports, and exports of vegetable oils. Besides, the TMO was overloaded with additional responsibilities of promoting other crops, including pulses and maize. By the mid-1990s, the TMO was disengaged virtually to a broadsheet scheme for promoting oilseeds, pulses, oil palm and maize. Unsurprisingly, therefore, none of these crops could get the kind of concentrated attention that was needed for their development. Though several avatars of oilseed technology missions have come into being since then, none of them could deliver the expected results for want of adequate autonomy and empowerment.

Thus, the real bane of the edible-oil sector is not the lack of technological breakthrough but the imprudent agricultural pricing and procurement policies. Unless the economics of oilseed cultivation is improved to let these crops be as remunerative as their potential competitors, the dependence on edible oil imports is unlikely to diminish.

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Personal branding up close



ALEXANDRA JACOBS

The email arrived after midnight, from an older friend whose intellect and literary taste I respect deeply.

"Why didn't you 'like' my post of [names of his children and pets redacted]?" he wrote in apparent sincerity. "I know you're sort of opposed to people putting kids on there, but I also know you've posted photos of [names of my children and pets redacted] (and I 'like' them...)".

Abashed — for him, for myself, for our children and pets, for society at large — I opened Instagram and delivered the digital valentine.

Then I opened *The Story of Your Life*, by Kathryn Jezer-Morton, which helps explain how two pals could end up in this terrible, time-wasting, thumb-numbing place.

Jezer-Morton writes "Brooding," a thoughtful newsletter in *The Cut* about family and its digital discontents. She has a doctorate in sociology for which she researched millennials, the 21st century's re-tort to Tupperware party hostesses.

The Story of Your Life, her first book, has kind of a Tupperware aspect itself, sorting the dank stew of social-media behaviour into separate container-chapters with titles like "Vacations" and "Politics." It's sealed with a kiss of memoir: The story of her life.

Ms. Jezer-Morton was raised on a commune in southern Vermont once called Total Loss Farm. Failed ventures there included a grain collective — the state's soil is generally too rocky for wheat — and commercial maple

sugaring. Her first encounter with social media was a group journal written in a spiral notebook; "in a lot of ways, it was an analog Facebook," she writes. Friendster, Myspace and real Facebook followed.

All was sweet innocent fun for a while. Then the algorithm came along and ruined everything. Actually, the trouble had started sooner, in the late 1990s, when the term "personal branding" ballooned in public discourse (as balloons, being Instagrammable, have since ballooned at parties) after a cover story in *Fast Company* magazine.

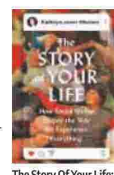
Ms. Jezer-Morton writes that the college students she teaches, digital natives who grew up with smartphones and avatars, have trouble even understanding "personal branding" as an isolated concept. "It's like asking them to describe the particular characteristics of the air they've been breathing their whole lives," she writes.

Older academics like Jonathan Haidt and Sherry Turkle have published thundering best sellers about the deleterious effects of screens, leading to changes in policy and behaviour.

To Ms. Jezer-Morton that horse has left the barn, galloping away with not only our attention spans but our sense of identity, both individual and collective. Her tone is less prescriptive than breezily inquisitive.

"What if social media narratives enclose us in versions of life that can feel claustrophobic and unsatisfying?" she wonders. "What if these narratives have undermined our sense of ease and belonging? What if these narratives — many of which appear perfectly harmless — are linked to some of the biggest challenges we face around social justice and equity, our ability to affirm our kids' identities, and the mental health of adults and children alike?"

It may quote Charlie Brown and his

The Story of Your Life: How Social Media Shapes the Way We Experience Everything by Kathryn Jezer-Morton
Published by Viking
272 pages \$30

cohort: "Aaugh!" Ms. Jezer-Morton tips toes, by my lights, a little tentatively into the field, interviewing a fashion influencer in Scottsdale, Ariz., who colour-coordinates her family beach trips shot by professional photographers. She drops into a Sugar Factory restaurant where the service is choreographed and food prepared, including a hamburger cooked in gold leaf, to maximise digital engagement. She investigates (by phone) increasingly over-the-top Nigerian wedding culture and talks to a practitioner of "noctoxic living" with

200,000 followers — "I'll call her Carolyn!" — in Texas. Head-scratchingly, she gives the majority of her subjects pseudonyms "for privacy reasons." How is it that people so out there online are spooked by the old-fashioned technology of appearing between covers?

But what *The Story of Your Life* lacks in reportorial ferocity, it makes up in intellectual generosity. Ms. Jezer-Morton regards online habits as part of a humanistic continuum that includes picture postcards, scrapbooking and epic poetry.

Her book contextualises our new memes and online community enactments alongside old rituals like the shivaree, when newlyweds were dragged from their beds by neighbours, and the wassail, aka singing to trees in the winter, which Jezer-Morton enacts with her own family every year. Most notably, she offers long, beautiful passages on ambivalence, one of the shady human emotions that social media — with its bright performative hits, its "journeys" and its insistence on redemption — falls to capture.

Her book is hopeful and unscolding. It will make you think twice about putting in the extra work on vacation to show your Close Friends just how happy and relaxed you are.

The reviewer is a *Times* book critic and occasional features writer

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CONTRAPUNTO

For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever
—TENNYSOON, The Brook

Cry Me A River

In retreat, Rhine and Danube are exposing Europe's past. But also a future where the world's parched

Some crises are 'best' seen from space, others up close and personal. Europe's drying rivers look scary both ways. Satellites show dramatically shrunk waterways, things feel extraordinary at individual eye level too. People are walking where they kayaked all their life. Record low water levels have laid bare sunken Nazi ships, an unexploded 700kg British bomb, centuries-old "hunger stones", even the remains of an ancient mammoth. As if the retreating rivers are exposing Europe's past, alongside a frightening future.

Rhine, Danube, Elbe...are also shipping lanes, industrial cooling systems, agri grid, sources of drinking water and energy. They are continental infra. As Europe's relics meet a harsh sun, so do the assumptions beneath its prosperity. Turns out rainfall, rivers, groundwater, fertile fields...are not permanent geography but variable ecological phenomena. When world leadership pretty much binned the 1.5°C goalpost to head towards 2°C above pre-industrial levels, it was never going to be without consequences.



And for all the fear factor of dried rivers, the groundwater story that people cannot see may be worse. Obviously, none of this is a Europe-only problem.

It's no longer about one drought year, but about grim goings-on even in good rain years. University College London scientists have used satellite data to show that vast swathes of Europe's water reserves have gotten depleted between 2002-24. Similar red flags abound in India. 2025's Dynamic Groundwater Resources Assessment found the national extraction rate at 61% of assessed recharge. But there are huge regional differences, where many areas are beyond the 70% threshold, considered a critical limit for sustainable usage. A Punjab Agricultural University study reports, tellingly, that between 1998-2005 the state's average pre-monsoon water table has dropped from 7.8m below ground level to 21m.

A do-nothing lot are always harking on the cost of solutions. Consider that many of India's water-parched cities are coastal. So, investing in desalination now, no matter how expensive, like Chennai is doing, makes more sense than leaving it to zero-water day. Where we should get serious about counting costs is how a "development" project impacts the water ecosystem, and greenlight it only if it comes out blue at the end. Europe to India, we can no longer assume that any of our water supply is "permanent". That means we have to effectively build a second water system to keep the one that Nature gave us alive. We have to "make" water from the sea, sewage, wastewater. And when we get rain, we have to catch it before it runs away.

Whose War Is It?

Both Iran and Ukraine show war is still old people talking & young men dying

The extended deployment at sea of American aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln has not just exposed the logistical challenges of US's war against Iran, but ugly realities of war itself. The Lincoln has been almost nine months at sea, and is about to break the record for the longest trip away from home port for a US carrier since Vietnam War. That record was set by another ship, USS Gerald R Ford, just months ago. Reports have surfaced of low crew morale and even suicidal tendencies among crewmen on the Lincoln, with family members of the deployed navymen lambasting the military leadership.



The Lincoln's predicament exemplifies the manner in which US has carried out this war—without any clarity and constantly shifting goalsposts. This has completely messed up logistics, and left navymen and their families in limbo. Naturally, the psychological pressure is immense—an open-ended war, combined with no port calls for months will lead to serious mental health issues. No wonder two sailors on the Lincoln jumped overboard in recent months. But Trump has batted away criticism. Which isn't surprising. War, after all, is old men talking, and young men dying. It is this realisation that galvanised anti-war protests during Vietnam, finally compelling Washington to hightail it from that theatre.

But old people in power never learn. Whether Trump with Iran, or Putin with Ukraine, they continue to send young men to die to satisfy their own egos. But, in this hyperconnected world, it is slowly becoming difficult for the high and mighty to constantly pull the wool over people's eyes. Trump's approval ratings have plummeted following the Iran war. Putin recently banned the only anti-war party, Yabloko, from upcoming parliamentary polls in Russia. Internal resentment will only grow if young men continue to die in senseless wars. Old folks in authority must course-correct, or face trouble.

Cheques and balances

Some of us will miss that piece of paper

Jug Suraiya



It was a small rectangle of paper, perhaps six inches by three. I gazed at it with reverence due to a priceless work of art.

It wasn't a work of art, but for me it was priceless. It was the first cheque I'd ever received, for the princely sum of ₹300, which was my first month's salary as a feature writer for the *Junior Statesman*, the youth magazine that *The Statesman* newspaper was launching.

The avuncular Company Secretary, PT Dastoor, took me to Accounts Department, where a Chatterjee Babu guided me through the intricacies of opening a bank account and obtaining a cheque book of my own.

That cheque was a milestone in the journey of my life, representing transition from feckless youth to financially employed adult.

I recalled my first cheque, and the transformative impression it made on me, when I read a recent press report that cheques as instruments of commercial negotiation are being phased out by more up-to-date forms of give and take, such as credit and debit cards, digital payment platforms, and bank transfers.



Endangered species, cheques now generally provide photo ops when outsized examples of them, denoting very large amounts, are ceremoniously handed over for commercial or charitable purposes.

The increasing disappearance of cheques in relation to bank balances has its advantages, mainly those of financial rapidity. Cheques could involve time-consuming procedures, particularly when withdrawing money. You handed the cheque to a cashier who gave you a numbered brass token that you clutched in your hand while waiting for your number to be called, doing time-pass chit-chat with fellow waiters, also holding brass tokens. Instant-use ATMs have replaced brass tokens, but aren't given to time-pass chit-chat.

Cheques have a chequered history that now draws to a close, and have been part and parcel of our own annals, our personal rites of passage. And, in hindsight, I wonder if that first cheque of mine was perhaps not a work of art, but at least a piece of memorabilia worthy of being framed and put on the wall as a portrait of the writer as a newfound man.

Gold-Rich, Capital-Starved

India would have a current account surplus if it didn't import gold as hungrily as it does. We have some 35,000 tonnes of it. Here are four ideas to convert this cache into liquidity and strategic strength

Nishesh Shah



India sits on a conservatively estimated 35,000 tonnes of gold, valued at well over 15% of GDP. We are the only country in the world with this distinction, yet we behave like Kasteri Migir—the musk deer that searches frantically for a scent that lies within itself. We chase external capital through FDI, FPI, and borrowings like FCNR B deposits, while the real treasure remains frozen in our own *tijoris*.

This paradox has turned gold from a cultural and valuable asset into a vulnerability. Over the past eight years, India's cumulative current account deficit stood at approximately \$251bn. Gross gold imports during the same period reached \$553bn. When we add net imports of silver, pearls, diamonds, smuggled gold, and the gold jewellery travellers bring in through the green channel, net outflow on precious metals and stones comfortably exceeds gold jewellery exports. Had India not imported so much gold, it would have been a current account surplus nation.

In the first 25 years of this century alone, net gold imports totalled around \$507bn, which is more than the net FDI or FPI India received in this period.

On average, the country imports about 1,000 tonnes of gold annually and exports roughly 300 tonnes, resulting in persistent net imports of 700 tonnes. This demand keeps international prices elevated and drains foreign exchange reserves at a time when India's economy needs every dollar for productive investment.

Last year net FDI and FPI flows (combined) turned negative and put pressure on the rupee. A capital-starved nation cannot sustain high growth while effectively exporting its savings.

We must ask, when the world's largest buyer of gold decides to sell, who will buy and at what price? Today's global context offers a narrow but powerful window of opportunity. Central banks purchased 3,500 tonnes of gold in the last four years, pushing gold prices higher. Monetising just 10% of India's holdings would match that entire volume.

It's time to convert our frozen savings into a strategic strength. To this end, here are four out-of-the-box ideas.

● First, physical gold can be digitised to provide liquidity, while positioning India as a leader in the emerging world of tokenised assets. Indian institutions should launch a gold-backed crypto with UPI-level settlement efficiency, fully backed by physical gold held in Indian custody. They can also introduce gold-backed stablecoins where gold price movement remains with the issuer. Such instruments would attract foreign flows while keeping gold within the country.

El Salvador-based Tether has around \$3bn in AUM. We should empower our institutions to target \$80bn AUM, offering a credible hard-asset backed alternative to Bitcoin and other cryptos.

● Second, a revamped Gold Monetisation Scheme. Past efforts suffered from design flaws that led to low uptake. A new version must draw lessons from



jewellers and refiners who successfully run "old gold for new jewellery" exchange programmes. By leveraging NSE's Electronic Gold Receipts platform and eliminating double GST on recycling, the scheme can formalise and scale existing informal practices.

Goal is to recycle idle household gold kept in bullion and bars, and thereby diversify and neutralise a tiny portion of the annual 700-tonne net import demand. Gold Monetisation Scheme should launch a gold borrowing and lending market pan-India, to create a win-win situation for gold holders, jewellers, and intermediaries.

● Third, innovatively hedged gold bonds issued at global/dollar price parity. Unlike earlier schemes such as the Sovereign Gold Bond, which exposed gold to gold-price risk, this structure envisages full hedging.

Indians already invest heavily in gold bullion and bars. GOI should launch Gold Bonds offering coupon rates similar to SGBs, potentially saving up to 4% on

their existing borrowing costs. RBI should be instructed to hedge the liability by purchasing equivalent gold internationally from its FX reserves. This gold, instead of lying in private *tijoris*, would bolster RBI's FX reserves. On maturity, RBI can sell the gold and transfer any market-to-market gains to government. These bonds should be issued at international dollar parity prices to make them attractive.

Investors would effectively receive about 18.45% more gold through these bonds, as import duty and GST would not apply. They would also gain protection against future import duty reductions and rupee depreciation via dollar-parity settlement.

● Fourth, a well-structured Gold Disclosure Scheme. This can bring in necessary tax revenues for a govt walking a tightrope on fiscal prudence, especially because of the West Asia war and the eighth pay commission.

This scheme's success will depend on both push and pull factors. Push through simplicity, jeweller-led trust-based outreach, and flexible options tailored to different needs. Pull through a first-come, first-served structure with limited quantum, and a minimum 10-year cooling-off period. Taxpayers could either pay an upfront tax or exchange their gold for "Viksit Bharat Bonds". Such issuance should be at global dollar parity price. GOI will have to commit that such disclosure will have immunity from all regulatory proceedings.

These measures are not isolated fixes, but an integrated strategy. Govt gains through lower borrowing costs and maintaining fiscal prudence. RBI strengthens FX reserves and rupee stability. Households obtain liquidity and superior risk protection. Jewellers benefit from formal business growth and lower cost of gold mobilisation. Most importantly, the nation reduces its dependence on foreign capital and enhances economic sovereignty.

A high-level task force involving RBI, fintech, practitioners, and jewellers should be constituted to work out the nuances. Pilots should be launched with clear timelines, to test these ideas. Some may fail, some may succeed, but we must be willing to experiment. India doesn't lack capital or imagination. But it's poor at risk-taking. The best time to experiment was yesterday but better late than never.

The writer is Managing Director, Kotak Mahindra Asset Management. Views are personal.

Assam Floods: Engineering A Solution

Overflowing Brahmaputra is not a disaster, but poor planning, ageing infra, and shrinking drainage make it one. Predictive infra management, rather than periodic repair, is the solution

Siddharth Roy



Assam's floods are often described as inevitable. From a civil engineer's perspective, that is an incomplete diagnosis. Brahmaputra and its tributaries will overflow during extreme monsoon events, but flooding becomes a disaster when intense hydrological forces meet vulnerable settlements, ageing infra, inadequate drainage, and poorly planned development. This year's floods have once again exposed a gap between the natural behaviour of rivers and the way humans have engineered the landscape around them.

As of Aug 15, the flood death toll had reached 104, with nearly 1.4L people still affected across seven districts. Earlier in the season, the crisis had affected more than 7L people, particularly in Upper Assam, including Sivasagar, Charaideo, and Jorhat. The numbers are staggering, but they should not be viewed simply as another annual disaster statistic. They should be treated as evidence that Assam needs a fundamental redesign of its flood-resilience strategy.

The first engineering reality is geographical. About 31,500 sq km, or 39.6% of Assam's geographical area, is classified as flood-prone—almost four times the national proportion. The state records an average annual flood-affected area of about 9.3L hectares. River erosion is an equally formidable problem: approximately 4.3L hectares have been eroded since 1950, at an average rate of about 5,600 hectares annually.

No embankment network can make such a landscape completely flood-proof.

For decades, Assam's flood-management architecture has relied heavily on embankments. They remain necessary for protecting densely populated areas and critical infra, but they cannot be treated as permanent barriers against rivers. Overtopping, seepage, piping, toe erosion, bank migration, and foundation instability can all compromise them. The state's own water resources department identifies overtopping and bank erosion among the causes of embankment breaches.

The engineering response must, therefore, move from periodic repair to predictive infra management.

Every major embankment should have a digital structural-health record covering its age, design parameters, crest elevation, soil characteristics, drainage structures, previous breaches, and vulnerable stretches. Drone surveys, satellite imagery, LiDAR, and ground sensors can identify deformation, seepage, and erosion before failure. Assam already uses GIS and satellite-based mapping; the next step should be converting these datasets into an early warning and maintenance system.

The second priority is river morphology. Brahmaputra is not a fixed channel. It is a highly dynamic, sediment-laden braided river. Its banks migrate and channelise. Treating every erosion site with the same concrete solution can merely transfer the problem downstream. Anti-erosion measures should, therefore, follow detailed reach-wise



morphological studies. Depending on local conditions, engineers can deploy geotextiles, launching aprons, guide bunds, spurs, and bioengineering techniques while allowing controlled river migration where human assets are not immediately threatened.

The third issue is floodplain management. Engineering cannot compensate for inappropriate land use. Hospitals, schools, electrical substations, warehouses, and housing should not be permitted in high-risk zones without rigorous flood-risk assessments. Where critical infra must remain in vulnerable areas, its plants, electrical systems, access roads, and evacuation facilities should be designed for flood conditions.

Urban Assam requires a separate strategy. Guwahati's recurring waterlogging is aggravated by wetland loss,

rapid construction, impervious surfaces, and blocked natural drainage. The solution is not simply bigger drains. Cities need interconnected stormwater networks, retention ponds, restored wetlands, permeable surfaces, and strict protection of natural drainage channels.

Climate change makes these reforms urgent. Designing insouciantly from historical rainfall records is increasingly risky, when extreme precipitation patterns are changing. Updated rainfall intensity-duration-frequency curves and climate projections should inform the design of bridges, culverts, roads, drainage systems, and flood-control structures.

Tech can also transform preparedness. Real-time river gauges, satellite rainfall data, and hydrological models can provide location-specific warnings. Assam's PANEE application, which allows citizens to report embankment erosion, points towards a useful model of community-assisted infra monitoring. Such reports should feed directly into district control rooms and trigger defined inspection protocols.

But engineering solutions must also recognise the ecological role of floods. Wetlands store excess water; rivers transport sediment, and seasonal inundation sustains ecosystems. The objective cannot be to "defeat" Brahmaputra. It must be to reduce the destructive consequences of its natural behaviour.

That requires a shift from flood control to flood resilience.

Assam should establish a long-term, independently audited flood-resilience programme, combining river science, structural engineering, land-use regulation, wetland restoration, climate modelling, and community participation. Infra projects should be evaluated not merely on construction cost, but on their lifecycle resilience and failure risk.

The 2026 floods should, therefore, be treated as an engineering warning, not merely a humanitarian emergency. Assam cannot prevent every flood. But it can reduce exposure, strengthen infra, preserve natural buffers, and anticipate failure before it becomes a catastrophe.

Brahmaputra will continue to rise. The question is whether Assam's infra will continue to fall with it. The answer should be no.

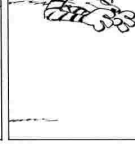
The writer is a civil engineer.

Calvin & Hobbes

BOY, OUR FAMILY WOULD SURE BE IN TROUBLE IF YOU WERE BRINGING HOME THE BACON!



I AM NOT BACON!



I AM NOT BACON!



I AM NOT BACON!



I AM NOT BACON!



Sacredspace

Laughing at the universe liberated my life. I escape its weight by laughing. I refuse any intellectual translations of this laughter, since my slavery would commence from that point on.

Georges Bataille

What Is Your Relationship With Guru?

Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

Can you ever be alone when you have a guru? The moment a soul is born on this planet, relationships begin. Before birth, you are unmanifested. You are pure spirit. The moment you are born, you have a mother and a father. Then all the other relationships follow.

Where does the guru stand among them? Our scriptures say, "Gurur matru pita guru bandhu sakha", meaning the guru is the mother and father. The guru gives you a second birth. He delivers you into a new world and gives you a new relationship with yourself, with the Divine and with the whole creation. The guru is mother, father, friend, companion and guide. When you have a guru, you can never be an orphan.

The loneliness that people experience disappears when they realise that the guru

is their *sakha*, their eternal friend. The guru fills whatever may be lacking in every other relationship. Every worldly relationship has its limitations. Sometimes it becomes sweeter, and sometimes it turns sour. At times, your relationship with your father or mother goes wrong. The same can happen with one's children and with one's spouse.

But take one step forward. Move beyond all these relationships and ask yourself, "What is my relationship with myself? Who am I to myself? That is your relationship with the guru."

Who you are to yourself is what you are to the guru. A spoonful of sugar is limited. But when it dissolves in a glass of water, it expands and becomes one with the whole. In the same way, when the individual self dissolves into wisdom, it

becomes free. The guru is love. People often ask, "How do I open my heart?" This very effort to open the heart creates more confusion. There is nothing to be done. You already are love. When you have a guru, you do not crave liberation. Having a guru itself is freedom. If you notice closely, the human mind is always looking for someone to lead it. Life is full of choices, and choices can become a burden.

People come to me with so many questions. I simply tell them, "The choice is yours. The blessing is mine." The guru is a unique leader. He leads silently from behind, without asserting his leadership. He gives you the freedom to choose yet takes away the burden of choosing. Without inner silence, every choice becomes difficult.

That is why the word 'nath' means

'lord' or 'master'. 'Anath' means one who is without a master, without support. The guru is nath, one who brings freedom.

We are already imprisoned by our own minds. The guru Tatva releases us from that bondage. The mind is like a crowded marketplace. The guru brings harmony and symphony into that chaos. Noise becomes music. Misery becomes celebration.

Sometimes people ask, "Am I connected to the guru?" This very question is an illusion.

Whether you know it or not, whether you want it or not, you are already connected. Love is not merely an emotion. Love is your very existence. If you see the guru only through the limited relationship of master and disciple, there will be expectations, demands and disappointments. Go beyond that. Then disappointment cannot exist.

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MONDAY • AUGUST 17, 2026

Slicing it right

5G network pathways need sensible regulation

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India's attempt to put guardrails around 5G network slicing is welcome. The issue at hand here is whether slicing, or creating distinct network pathways, can distort network neutrality. In principle, it does not — and there is a global consensus here. Yet, 5G slicing deserves regulation, but not one that is self-defeating.



Network slicing allows a single physical network to be partitioned into logically isolated slices, each optimised for different requirements — high data rates for enhanced mobile broadband, massive connectivity for devices, or ultra-low latency and high reliability for applications such as industrial automation. TRAI recognises that slicing enables service providers to align network performance with specific use cases. The problem arises when slicing is monitored by using an 80 per cent Physical Resource Block (PRB) threshold. A PRB is the basic unit through which a 4G or 5G cell allocates radio resources. Higher utilisation indicates that radio resources are being heavily used and can signal congestion. TRAI proposes to monitor cells during the Cell Busy Data Hour and introduce a benchmark under which no more than 1 per cent of cells should have daily PRB utilisation above 80 per cent. If utilisation exceeds 80 per cent on five days in a month, the operator must augment capacity; if it cannot bring utilisation below 80 per cent within a month, the cell must be removed from network slicing. The intention is that premium slices should not be created by allowing ordinary users to suffer congestion.

TRAI should regulate the impact of slicing on users, not simply the percentage of radio resources being consumed. But PRB utilisation measures how much of the radio resource is being used, not who is using it or how that resource is being allocated. A cell operating at 75 per cent PRB utilisation could still allocate resources in a manner that gives disproportionate advantage to a premium slice. Conversely, a cell crossing 80 per cent does not necessarily establish that ordinary subscribers have suffered a material deterioration in their quality of service. This makes the 80 per cent rule a useful congestion indicator, but a weak standalone fairness test. The better test is whether ordinary internet access actually experiences degradation because of slicing.

A technology-neutral and outcome-based approach would protect network neutrality while allowing India's 5G networks to deliver differentiated services. European regulator BEREC, UK's Ofcom and France's ARCEP have accepted differentiated services, subject to the condition that they do not undermine an open internet. The US communication regulator FCC, too, proposes monitoring slicing to ensure it is not used to circumvent protections against paid prioritisation, throttling or unreasonable discrimination. Operators should be allowed to monetise genuine spare capacity, provided they can demonstrate that premium services do not squeeze baseline users.

As governments and technology companies debate how frontier AI should be governed, the question remains curiously absent from the conversation: who gets to decide which countries are trusted with humanity's most powerful intelligence? The question is usually framed as one of safety, but that is only one part of the story.

Should a small group of countries and corporations become the permanent custodians of the world's most powerful intelligence, while everyone else remains dependent upon them? Every generation has witnessed transformative technologies becoming instruments of geopolitical power. Nuclear technology, advanced semiconductors, satellite systems and cryptography have all become subjects of export controls, strategic alliances and technological denial. Artificial intelligence is rapidly joining that list.

Who determines where the technological frontier should stop, and for whom? Too often, this debate

NAVPREET SAINI
KIRIT PARIKH

India's two energy policy objectives are net-zero by 2070 and inclusive Viksit Bharat by 2047. The recent war in Iran has brought to the fore a third objective of energy security. These require substantial expansion of power generation from clean energy sources, replacing petroleum products and natural gas with electricity and reducing coal use.

What role can nuclear power play in this transition? India's nuclear ambitions are entering a new phase. With approximately 8.8 GW of installed nuclear capacity currently supplying about 3 per cent of the nation's electricity, the government has set a target of expanding capacity to 100 GW by 2047 to replace coal-based power to reach our net-zero objective. Achieving that goal would require more than a 10-fold increase in nuclear generation capacity within two decades, demanding not only unprecedented reactor construction but also a reliable fuel supply.

A critical question emerges: will nuclear growth strengthen India's energy security, or merely replace dependence on imported fossil fuels with dependence on imported nuclear fuel?

Historically, fuel (uranium) shortages affected the operation of nuclear power plants, as they operated at half capacity. A severe uranium shortage between 2006 and 2010 reversed those gains. PLF fell below 60 per cent, reaching a low of 34-40 per cent in early 2009. However, performance has improved considerably since 2010.

The long-term average PLF now stands at around 82 per cent, reflecting better fuel availability and improved operational performance. However, how much dependence on imports does it require? Various scenarios suggest a 100 GW nuclear fleet would require between 18,000 and 20,000 tonnes of uranium annually.

URANIUM PROFILE
Global uranium production in 2025 was approximately 62,000 tonnes of which India imported 250 tonnes. India alone would consume nearly one-third of the current world uranium output if it reaches the 100 GW target.

However, global supply can also increase, the total mineable identified reserve is 5.9 million tonnes. If the annual production is one-fifth of the total reserves, it will be around 1,20,000 tonnes. India will continue to be a substantial consumer of global production.

India possesses an estimated 4,42,000

Nuclear energy's import dilemma

N-PLAN. India's nuclear power target of 100 GW by 2047 will require huge uranium imports. Going ahead uranium imports will become as crucial as crude oil



tonnes of natural uranium reserves. However, most domestic deposits are relatively low-grade and costly to extract and refine, even costlier than importing. There is currently no realistic scenario under which such expansion can occur without large-scale uranium imports. The consequences of fuel shortages are already well documented. Previous uranium constraints directly reduced reactor output. Under a 100 GW programme, fuel availability would become not merely an operational concern but a threat to energy security.

Following the 2008 India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement, India secured uranium supply arrangements with multiple countries, but in recent years India's uranium import came from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Canada, creating a significant concentration of dependence. If we look at the larger picture, it seems like, unlike crude oil, where India sources imports from a broad mix of suppliers including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Russia and the UAE, uranium procurement remains concentrated. A disruption in supplies from Kazakhstan could prove considerably more difficult to replace quickly.

Kazakhstan holds approximately 14 per cent of global uranium resources and

India needs to build a dedicated strategic uranium reserve, secure binding long-term offtake agreements, and acquire equity stakes in overseas uranium mines

produces more than 40 per cent of global uranium output. While this gives the country substantial influence over global uranium markets. For India, this creates an additional geopolitical layer as well as shifting the dependence.

Thorium is being presented as India's route to complete nuclear fuel independence and a way to energy security because the country holds roughly 25 per cent of the world's thorium reserves. However, the thorium cycle is not yet fully self-sustaining because thorium itself is not fissile in nature. Rather, it absorbs neutrons as a blanket around the core of a reactor such as India's recently developed Fast Breeder Reactor (FBR) and is converted into U-233, a fissile fuel.

In principle, this creates a fully domestic and self-sustaining fuel cycle. India's three-stage nuclear programme is designed to harness this advantage. A significant milestone was reached in April 2026 when the 500 MW Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) at Kalpakkam achieved first criticality. Thorium is India's most self-reliant long-term energy option, but it is likely to be constrained by the rate at which we can build FBRs.

ENERGY MIX

From the perspective of diversifying India's energy mix and advancing its Net Zero ambitions, nuclear power is a logical part of the solution. Other strategies also have their own problems. Solar and wind require storage batteries or hydro power, which may be limited. Batteries will need imports of lithium from China; biofuels require land and compete with other crops for water.

India's target of 100 GW of nuclear

capacity by 2047 will require vast quantities of uranium every year, while the technology that promises genuine fuel independence — the thorium-fast breeder cycle — remains decades from commercial maturity. Until then, uranium procurement must be treated with the same strategic importance as crude oil.

That means building a dedicated strategic uranium reserve, securing binding long-term offtake agreements, and acquiring equity stakes in overseas uranium mines. Hence, India influences production decisions during supply disruptions. Uranium can be stored with some precautions against leakage. It also means ring-fencing funding for the fast-breeder and thorium programme, ensuring that the long-term energy-independence project is not sacrificed to meet short-term reactor construction targets. Every year of delay in scaling the PFBR-to-thorium pathway is another year of compounded exposure to uranium imports.

The true test of India's nuclear strategy is not how often policymakers speak about thorium, but how seriously they manage uranium security over the next 15 years. A level of dependence on a single supplier that would be unacceptable for crude oil should not be accepted for the fuel expected to help replace it. India should also have concerted R&D to develop cheaper batteries than Lithium-ion ones, as also on economic technology for cellulosic ethanol. Energy independence is not a single decision; it is a carefully sequenced transition.

Saini is Senior Research Analyst, and Parikh is Chairman, IRADE

Why the world may need an AI stewardship treaty

Should a cabal of countries and corporations become permanent custodians of the world's most powerful intelligence?

GBS Bindra
Rahul Patwardhan

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming a foundational capability, one that will shape economies, militaries, scientific discovery, healthcare, education and governance. The countries that master it will enjoy enormous strategic advantages over those that merely consume it.

As governments and technology companies debate how frontier AI should be governed, the question remains curiously absent from the conversation: who gets to decide which countries are trusted with humanity's most powerful intelligence?

The question is usually framed as one of safety, but that is only one part of the story.

Should a small group of countries and corporations become the permanent custodians of the world's most powerful intelligence, while everyone else remains dependent upon them? Every generation has witnessed transformative technologies becoming instruments of geopolitical power. Nuclear technology, advanced semiconductors, satellite systems and cryptography have all become subjects of export controls, strategic alliances and technological denial. Artificial intelligence is rapidly joining that list.

Who determines where the technological frontier should stop, and for whom? Too often, this debate

proceeds from the unstated premise that today's technological powers are naturally the world's most trustworthy stewards. Why should the rest of the world simply accept that proposition?

The post-war international order has produced extraordinary scientific and economic progress. Yet it has also witnessed repeated interventions by major powers in pursuit of their own strategic interests.

Recognising this reality is not an argument against any particular country. It is an argument against concentrating unprecedented technological power in the hands of a few. This matters because AI differs fundamentally from previous strategic technologies.

AI is becoming the cognitive infrastructure upon which economies, governments and societies will increasingly depend. The same foundation models that accelerate scientific discovery can improve healthcare, education, manufacturing, agriculture and climate resilience.

Restricting access to frontier AI therefore shapes far more than national security. It determines who can innovate, who can compete, who creates economic value, and ultimately who prospers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

For countries such as India, the implications are profound. India is no longer merely a consumer of global technology. It possesses world-class engineering talent, globally admired



AI. For the benefit of all

digital public infrastructure, a thriving start-up ecosystem and growing frontier research capabilities. Yet if access to the most capable AI systems remains controlled by a handful of foreign governments or corporations, India and many other capable nations risk becoming permanently dependent on technologies that will underpin every sector of their economies.

None of this implies that frontier AI should simply become freely available to everyone. Legitimate security concerns must be addressed. The world does need robust safeguards against catastrophic misuse.

But preventing misuse is fundamentally different from preventing capability. If AI is becoming global public infrastructure rather than merely another strategic technology, then its governance cannot be modelled solely on arms-control regimes. It must also address questions of equitable access, institutional legitimacy and shared stewardship.

The appropriate precedent may therefore not be a single treaty but a

hybrid framework.

One element could draw from the logic of the Chemical Weapons Convention: establishing internationally agreed prohibitions against clearly harmful applications of artificial intelligence, together with verification mechanisms and independent oversight. Another could borrow from international regimes governing domains of shared global importance such as the Law of the Sea and the Outer Space Treaty, which recognise that resources of profound significance require cooperative governance rather than exclusive control by a small number of states.

Such a framework would distinguish between restricting malicious uses of AI and denying responsible nations access to frontier capabilities. Safety, equity, accountability and international legitimacy would become complementary objectives rather than competing ones.

A genuinely multipolar AI ecosystem, involving the United States, Europe, India, China and other capable innovation centres, may ultimately prove more stable and equitable.

Perhaps what the world actually needs is an AI Stewardship Treaty: one that prohibits harmful uses of artificial intelligence while ensuring that its transformative benefits remain safe, equitably and legitimately accessible to all responsible nations.

The writers are Distinguished Fellows at the Avium Foundation

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

BY JEFFREY H. MILLER

A Crisis in U.S. Naval Readiness, Revealed

This week's report on the USS Abraham Lincoln, the aircraft carrier deployed for 250 days, much of it supporting President Trump's military action in Iran. This is a new level of chutzpah from the party that won't pass a bill to finance military operations, and the causes of declining readiness aren't new. Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal wrote the Defense Department this week expressing "serious concerns" about the Lincoln. The press is publishing accounts from family members about working and living conditions on the ship. "They're pushing our service men and women to the limit," Democratic Sen. Ruben Gallego posted online, and Democratic leader Chuck Schumer called for Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to be fired. NEW YORK, AUGUST 14

讀賣新聞

THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Efforts to Maintain Peace Must Be Preserved

The National Memorial Ceremony for the War Dead was held at the Nippon Budokan hall in Tokyo on Saturday to mark the anniversary of the end of World War II. We pray for the repose of the souls of the 3.1 million people who lost their lives for their country during the war. It is important to continue making efforts to ensure that the memory of the tragedy is not forgotten, while also redoubling efforts toward peace. More than half of the bereaved family members attending the memorial ceremony since last year were born after the war. Elementary school-age children from the bereaved families played a role in distributing flowers to attendees of the ceremony to be used as offerings. It is essential to pass on the commitment to peace to younger generations. TOKYO, AUGUST 16

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

Transparent lending

This refers to the Editorial 'Lending transparency' (August 15). As lending is one of the key functions of banking, the pricing of products relating to it needs to be transparent and easily understandable to the buyers. Right now the lenders' interest rate models are only partly transparent. The borrowers must be made aware

of all details about loan products and the price to enable them to make the right choice. Therefore, the RBI must enforce strict regulations to ensure fairness in interest rate policy across the industry.

VSK Pillai
Changanassery (Kerala)

Depositor safety

While the demand for issuing fresh

licences to Urban Cooperative Banks (UCBs) is understandable, the RBI should also selectively consider the requests of well-performing UCBs seeking conversion into Small Finance Banks (SFBs).

At the same time, as the custodian of public trust and the regulator responsible for safeguarding depositors' interests, the RBI should ensure that any fresh licensing of

UCBs is accompanied by stronger protection for depositors. In this context, Section 21 (3) of the DICGC Act should be suitably amended to provide full insurance cover for bank deposits, instead of limiting protection to the present ceiling of ₹5 lakh. This limit appears increasingly inadequate, particularly when DICGC premiums are collected on the entire insured bank deposit

base. Furthermore, the regulatory framework governing UCBs should be strengthened and brought broadly at par with that applicable to Public Sector Banks (PSBs), particularly in areas concerning governance, prudential regulation, supervision, and depositor protection.

Rajiv Magal
Halekere Village, (Karnataka)

Struggles of starting up

Inside stories of founders who stayed the course

BOOK REVIEW.

Ramasamy Jayaprakash

Starting a business is a dream everyone would have had sometime in their lives. Some act upon it and then take a step back. Self-doubt, family and societal expectations and pressure, roadblocks, setbacks creep in.

But for a few, entrepreneurship becomes their passion, purpose and calling. Perhaps even their obsession. They don't give up. They don't accept defeat at the first sign of trouble. They don't take a nasty blow on the body from a rogue bouncer and walk to the pavilion. They hold their end without giving up even after taking repeated blows. They are like Vihari, Pujara, and Ashwin in India's 2020-21 cricket series Down Under.

This book is about 10 such entrepreneurial ventures, their co-founders and their partners, who kept going even when the going was tough. Among them BlueStone, TaxiForSure, MobStac, Taxis Networks, HyperVerge. Each story is different and teaches something unique. But these stories have many similarities as well. The unstoppable urge to build something that could outlast them; to build something that would truly make a difference; to change course and pivot when their current path seems a dead-end; are the few things that come to mind.

INSPIRATIONAL IDEAS

The 10 chapters on 10 different companies could be and should be separate books on their own as each story leaves you wanting for more. The chapters lack a deep dive on the companies and their founders but have enough to intrigue and inspire the reader to probe further.

Some of the quotes the entrepreneurs share and are journaled in the book can be enough motivation for someone who aspires to build on her own. For instance, Uniqode's Sharat Potharaju and Ravi Pratap Maddimsetty share a message they received from Accel's Shekhar Kirani: "No difference between you and the CEOs you admire — except they're on the other side of the climb". Their story involves how "someone else's belief at the right time helps them bridge a gap that they couldn't have crossed alone".

What's even more striking and inspirational from many of these



Title: Down But Not Out

Authors: Subrata Mitra and Pankaj Mishra

Publisher: Harper Business

Price: ₹1199

founders is how they handled their early employees whom they had to let go when they had to downsize or pivot to something else. Some ensured they were let go with dignity and respect. Some ensured they were let go after they got a job somewhere else. The entrepreneurs' fixation was not on mere money making. They care about people, values and building trust. The goal was not to make a profitable business; but to make one that would outlast them.

The lines that I kept coming back to were: "Irrelevance is a colder threat than failure. Failure is loud, final, sometimes even clarifying. Irrelevance is slow. It lets you keep moving while closing the space around you." This would apply to almost all jobs and career paths, and not just business. So, anyone picking up this book can learn a thing or two from it and also get inspired to do better in what they do.

This book is a must-read for anyone who has already started a company and needs some inspiration to push through the initial struggles. That's the hardest part. Starting a business is relatively easier than surviving the initial onslaught of unforeseen issues.

Subrata Mitra, Founding Partner at Accel, and Pankaj Mishra, a journalist and founder of FactorDaily, take a dispassionate approach to deliver these stories without any fluff or drama. The stories and the messages the authors want to convey are straight and direct. The book is peppered with graphic illustrations with the visuals taking almost half the space in it. This makes it a lighter read perfectly suited for someone who is new to reading. It will also make a good gift for a friend or sibling with entrepreneurial dreams.

The origins of Indian liberalism

This important book overturns the assumption that Indian liberalism was merely derivative of western ideas

BOOK REVIEW.

TCA Srinivasa Raghavan

Indian history, from about 1970 to about 2010, was bifocal. The established historians either talked about the glories of Mughal rule from Akbar to Aurangzeb or of the freedom struggle under the Congress. The odd historian who broke ranks was hissed off the stage.

But by about 2010 this scam had been pretty much exhausted. And newer historians were not only looking at these two major themes differently, they were also finding new pastures to graze on. Mostly they were discovering neglected source material, comprising letters and documents.

Rahul Sagar is one of them. He got his BA from Oxford and Ph.D from Harvard and has been teaching for the last two decades or so. Although his main area of expertise is political theory, and all that's associated with it, this book straddles political theory and history by sifting through the letters of Mama Parmanand to an Indian ruler. (Mama Parmanand should not be confused with Bhai Parmanand.) This densely written book is one of the best I have read this year. The Introduction runs to 120 pages.

You may well ask, "Mama who?" And that question would reveal the damage done by Left-leaning historians who ran history departments for close to 60 years. We have very little idea of persons who were beyond their 'approved' list.

A THINKER APART

Narayan Mahadev Parmanand was born in Konkan in 1838 and educated in Bombay University (Elphinstone College). He was a highly regarded journalist who thought deeply about political and administrative issues. His

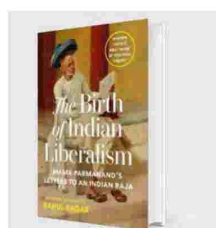
advice was sought by a host of luminaries of the period like MG Ranade, Badruddin Tayebji, Pherozshah Mehta and others.

Sagar shows how Mama Parmanand took it upon himself, amongst other things, to ensure the proper governance of those parts of India that the British did not govern themselves, namely, the 'Princely States'. He makes it clear at the outset that not all of these rulers were besotted by wine, women and song. Several ruled well and were receptive to good suggestions. Their problem, more often than not, was British interference. Sagar thus tells us about a problem that Mama Parmanand identified 150 years ago: what's the role of the representative of the central government in a province or state? He was called the Resident representative then, and Governor as he has been called since 1950.

The problem faced by the Indian rulers wasn't just of good governance; it was also of how to prevent the British from interfering. The entire effort of the British was directed towards showing the Indian rulers who the boss was. All communication with the Big Boss in Calcutta had to go through the Resident who made little effort to understand Indian customs and culture.

To solve this problem of interference, Mama Parmanand came up with an idea, of making the ruler and Resident "co-adjudicators" so that the resident would be responsible for good governance. The idea was to make the Residents "partners rather than mere censors".

Another problem Mama Parmanand tackled was financial probity, not just of the rulers but also of their minions. The crux of the issue was that there was no dividing line between public and private finances. To make sure the subjects got something back, Parmanand suggested a strict dividing line. Rule your provinces



Title: The Birth of Indian Liberalism: Mama Parmanand's Letters to an Indian Raja

Author: Rahul Sagar

Publisher: Juggernaut

Price: ₹900

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rahul Sagar is Global Network Associate Professor of Political Science at New York University Abu Dhabi. He previously taught at Princeton University and Yale-NUS College.

the way the British rule British India, was his message.

The list of reforms suggested is long and detailed. It touched on accountability, abuse of power by petty bureaucrats, panchayati systems, free education for the masses, research into worthy topics, and women's participation, to name just a few. Mama Parmanand was a hundred years ahead of the sort of agendas that have become commonplace for the last 75 years.

Most apposite for current time was his urgings about examination systems. The objective, he said, should be to create a "permanent aristocracy of intellect" by emphasising merit rather than birth. These people would form a barrier between the people and sovereign power.

A BRITISH CONCEIT

It is generally believed that Indian liberalism is actually British liberalism in brown skins. Basically, said the British, we taught these fellows English and they learnt our liberal ways. One of their prime ministers, Ramsay MacDonald, said in his 1910 book called the "Awakening of India" that liberalism is "the only battery of guns which India has captured from us and condescends to use against us".

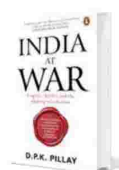
In subsequent decades it became the received wisdom that political liberalism, as opposed to social liberalism, was an imperial boon to India. You are what you are because we made you what you are. That was the burden of the British song.

Sagar makes an important intellectual distinction: the idea of liberalism in British India which is what the critics of Indian liberalism have gone on about, and the idea of liberalism in what was not-British India, which has been largely ignored. Sagar also says in one place that it's important to distinguish between the history of an idea and the justification for it. I only wish he had explained this a bit more rather than leave it as a sort of *obiter dicta*.

The letters written by Mama Parmanand, which Sagar has collected in this volume, illustrate this point admirably. Many of us have sensed this intuitively. This book gives concrete shape to that feeling.

The reviewer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

NEW READS.

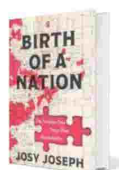


Title: India At War

Author: Col. D.P.K. Pillay

Publisher: Penguin RandomHouse

This book explores how India survived when many empires vanished into history and why its identity endured despite centuries of conflict

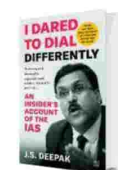


Title: Birth of a Nation: The Twenty-One Days That Made India

Author: Josy Joseph

Publisher: Westland Books

This book follows the work of the newly set up States Department led by Sardar Patel, and its group of determined officials



Title: I Dared to Dial Differently

Author: J.S. Deepak

Publisher: Hachette India

This compulsively readable memoir reads like a masterclass in conscience, courage and governance under fire

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

August 17, 2006

'Markets may see dip in FII flows in 2006-07'

Stock markets in the country could see less foreign institutional investor (FII) interest this year. The Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council (EAC) has projected a marked decline in portfolio flows into the country for the current fiscal, though it is expecting a substantial jump in foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows for 2006-07.

India gets power from Bhutan's Tala project

Power from the 170-MW first generating unit of the Rs 4,124 crore Tala project in Bhutan has started flowing into India from the beginning of the month with the remaining five units of the 1,020-MW project slated for commissioning shortly.

Sugar mill margins may come under pressure

Is the party for sugar over? With international prices crashing and elections to the Uttar Pradesh Assembly due early next year, there is likelihood of mill margins coming under pressure from lower realisations and higher cane prices payable to growers. Globally, sugar prices have been on a roll this year.

Short take

A granular approach to growth and development

Poornima Dore

Every Independence Day invites us to look simultaneously backwards and forwards: at the distance India has travelled, and at the country we still aspire to become. Today, that aspiration has an increasingly clear destination: Viksit Bharat by 2047. But where, exactly, will Viksit Bharat be built?

It will be built in Surat and Jamshedpur, in Coimbatore and Varanasi, in the industrial belts surrounding Pune, in the small towns of eastern Uttar Pradesh, and in hundreds of districts and economic regions whose trajectories rarely make the national headlines. India is one nation.

Economically, however, it contains many Indias. This is now being recognised.

In June, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation released a uniform framework for compiling District Domestic Product estimates across States and Union Territories. Its objective is to bring greater consistency, comparability and methodological standardisation to district-level economic estimates.

The geography of Indian development policy is becoming more granular. The opportunity now is to make our investment plans and development thinking equally granular.

Places often know more about themselves than our formal planning processes allow them to express.

Entrepreneurs know where supply chains break down. Workers know which skills actually command a wage. District administrations know where implementation repeatedly gets stuck. Chambers of commerce know why businesses choose one location over another. Between the national ambition and the individual citizen lies an important layer: the region. Recognising it changes the question. Not simply: Which scheme should come here? But: What could this region become?

And what combination of enterprise, skills, infrastructure, technology, public investment and institutional coordination could help it get there?

The answer cannot be hundreds of static district plans. India needs local and

regional institutions capable of continuously reading their economies, convening stakeholders, identifying opportunities, testing interventions and learning from results.

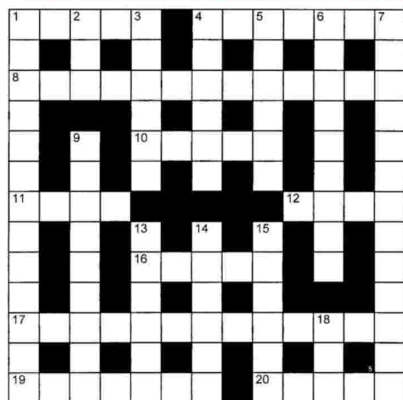
Their starting point would be evidence: increasingly rich administrative datasets, surveys, geospatial information and, eventually, comparable district economic accounts.

As India looks towards 2047, our challenge is not only to grow faster. It is to ensure that our extraordinary diversity becomes an economic strength rather than a source of persistent divergence.

That requires becoming much better at seeing India below its averages.

The writer is CEO of Dorian Scale

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2715



EASY

ACROSS

01. German pistol (5)
04. Bands of colour (7)
08. Hindering; neutralising (13)
10. Plant flowering in spikes (5)
11. Double sulphate of aluminium and potassium (4)
12. To apportion, measure (4)
16. A discussion meeting (5)
17. Given to meditation (13)
19. Blood-sucking worms (7)
20. Irritates, annoys (5)

DOWN

01. Listless, indolent (13)
02. Large antelope (3)
03. A sistrum (6)
04. Draw blade across (6)
05. Of not long ago (6)
06. Convicts (9)
07. Inability to see (13)
09. Plentiful supply (9)
13. Anew (6)
14. Vine fruit (6)
15. Injure, weaken (6)
18. Unwell (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. In this form thin porridge was a weapon in enemy hands (5)
04. Press it out into chevrons (7)
08. Behaving like an antidote to the theatricality of a shopman? (13)
10. Almost pull back in making a flower (5)
11. A compound used for a chimney in Scotland (4)
12. How one may measure flesh for food, one is told (4)
16. Where Romans met the Foreign Office with some spirit (5)
17. Thoughtful way to study paper pattern when about four (13)
19. They were once applied to blood-letting (7)
20. It annoys one, being a bit puerile sometimes (5)

DOWN

01. Listless look of Acacia lad can make silk from (13)
02. Animal doesn't sound as if it's been used (3)
03. It may annoy one, this snake (6)
04. A spot of trouble one may narrowly get by (6)
05. It is about money abroad of late origin (6)
06. Their base is game, they being inside (9)
07. Tess's shingles might produce a condition of blindness (13)
09. One cake at a hop? That's plenty! (9)
13. As he's far out, it's starting again (6)
14. They are fabulously sour, being out of reach (6)
15. It's the devil of a tune that will spoil things (6)
18. Is so chosen, badly, to be off colour (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2714

ACROSS 1. Piper 4. Scented 8. Numerical 9. Bus 10. Inertia 12. Dean 14. Well met 17. Soap 18. Blunder 20. Egg 21. Transport 23. Sleight 24. Dated

DOWN 1. Peniliness 2. Pamper 3. Rarities 4. Sac 5. Eels 6. Tablet 7. Disintegrated 11. Ad lib 13. Repulsed 15. Bangle 16. Adroit 19. Stag 22. Apt

Economy

MONDAY, AUGUST 17, 2026

IN THE NEWS

PM GATISHAKTI:
₹18.7 L-CR INFRA
PROJECTS ASSESSED



AS MANY AS 396 infrastructure projects of different ministries, including roads and railways, worth ₹18.66 lakh crore have been recommended for approval under the PM GatiShakti initiative, according to government data.

ONGC GETS US
LICENCE TO START
VENEZUELA OPS



OIL AND NATURAL Gas Corp (ONGC) has secured a licence from the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), allowing it to resume full operations in Venezuela after years of limiting activity because of sanctions-related risks, a senior company official said.

JSW Mahanadi
settles dispute
with Raigarh Rail



INSOLVENCY APPELLATE TRIBUNAL NCLAT has disposed of an appeal filed by JSW Mahanadi Power Company against Raigarh Champa Rail Infrastructure (RCRIPL) after the two parties reached an amicable settlement, with JSW Energy now controlling both entities.

DRI busts network
of ₹2,500 crore
customs fraud



DRI OFFICERS HAVE dismantled a network involved in importing South-East Asian area nuts into India by falsely declaring them as Bangladeshi origin and fraudulently availing concessional duty benefits under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), causing a loss of more than ₹2,500 crore.

SHIPMENTS RISE SEVENFOLD TO \$369 MILLION IN APRIL-JUNE

Electric car exports zoom in Q1, Europe key driver

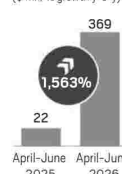
MUKESH JAGOTA
New Delhi, August 16

INDIA'S FLEDGLING ELECTRIC vehicle (EV) exports gained significant momentum in the first quarter of the current financial year, with green passenger cars expanding their footprint across major international markets. Driven by massive demand in Europe, electric car shipments surged 17-fold year-on-year to reach \$369 million in the April-June quarter, according to Department of Commerce data.

In volume terms, Indian automakers exported 10,802 electric cars during the quarter—a 7.6-fold jump compared to 1,309 units shipped in the corresponding period last year. The surge helped lift overall motor vehicle exports by 15% to \$2.87 billion, boosting the share of clean mobility in the country's total auto export portfolio. The stellar performance follows strong exports during FY2025-26, with annual electric car exports surging eightfold to \$701 million from \$77.9 million in FY2024-25. Commerce Ministry officials noted that the figures demonstrate the growing international acceptance of India-made EVs and reinforce the country's position as an

IN THE FAST LANE

India's electric vehicle (EV) exports
(\$ mn, % growth y-o-y)



emerging global hub for sustainable mobility.

Europe drives the boom

Europe has cemented its position as the top region for Indian EV shipments, with Spain taking the top spot. Spain alone imported \$146.4 million worth of electric cars (4,007 units) during the quarter, accounting for nearly 40% of India's total EV exports by both value and volume.

The United Kingdom made a dramatic entry as the second-largest destination, importing \$78.7 million worth of electric vehicles (2,646 units)—up

from just a single vehicle shipped in the same quarter last year.

Several other European economies also witnessed strong growth in imports of Indian electric vehicles. Exports to Germany reached \$25.1 million, followed by Norway (\$21.1 million) and Denmark (\$21.0 million). Additional demand came from Belgium (\$12.9 million), the Netherlands (\$12.0 million), Greece (\$3.8 million), Italy (\$2.7 million), Sweden (\$2.1 million) and Poland (\$1.6 million).

Beyond Europe, India also expanded exports across Asia-Pacific markets. Japan imported \$13.4 million worth

of electric cars, while shipments were also recorded to Israel (\$2.8 million), Australia (\$2.7 million), Singapore (\$1.7 million), Taiwan (\$1.3 million) and South Korea.

While traditional neighbouring markets such as Nepal continued to remain important destinations, with imports worth \$8.1 million, the diversification towards advanced European markets represents a notable shift in India's EV export profile. New opportunities also emerged in Latin America, where exports reached Brazil (\$2.4 million), Colombia (\$1.0 million), Chile (\$0.4 million) and Costa Rica (\$0.5 million).

CHAMOLI BRIDGE COLLAPSE: RESCUE WORK CONTINUES



National Disaster Response Force personnel assess the site during a rescue operation after a bridge connecting Uttarakhand's Niti Valley was washed away by floodwaters, in Chamoli district, on Sunday

Switch to producer index for govt purchases: FinMin

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, August 16

THE FINANCE MINISTRY has nudged all ministries and departments to move to Producer Price Index (PPI) from the current Wholesale Price Index (WPI), for rate escalation and adjustment clauses in future government procurement contracts. The Department of Expenditure, in a communication to all ministries and departments, said that PPI is a more

internationally accepted index compared to WPI used in government contracts to define price escalation.

For the first time, the commerce ministry has started issuing monthly PPI data for both goods and services since June to better reflect price movement at the producer's level, thus paving the way for phasing out wholesale price inflation numbers in the next five years.

"Ministries/Departments are encouraged to adopt Pro-

ducer Price Index (PPI) in place of Wholesale Price Index (WPI) in all price escalation clauses of future contracts, once PPI becomes available," the expenditure department said in an office memorandum dated July 13. The price escalation or rate variation clause in government contracts allows payments to be adjusted in line with changes in the cost of key inputs, such as materials, labour and fuel, during the execution of a project. It helps distribute the impact of

inflation between the government and the contractor. The launch of monthly PPI data is in line with practices adopted by advanced economies and follows the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which stressed that India needs to transition from WPI to PPI. The output (goods) PPI cover all representative goods transacted in the economy. Manufactured items have the highest 69.9% weight in output PPI

(goods), followed by agriculture, forestry and fishing (22.6%), electricity (4.49%), and mining and quarrying (3.42%).

Seven services—banking, securities transaction, insurance, management of pension funds, railways, air (passenger), and telecom—have been covered in the first phase of Service PPI, while remaining services will be covered in the next phase, the Commerce and Industry Ministry had said while launching the PPI data in June.

IBBI proposes tighter curbs to avoid insolvency misuse

MANU KAUSHIK
New Delhi, August 16

THE INSOLVENCY AND Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) has proposed tighter checks by insolvency professionals (IPs) to prevent the misuse of the corporate insolvency resolution process (CIRP), following inputs from law-enforcement and regulatory agencies on instances where the insolvency framework may have been used for purposes other than resolution.

The regulator said CIRP had been misused in a few cases to settle debts, mitigate tax liabilities, close or merge companies without regulatory scrutiny, and avoid investigations, prosecution or ring-fencing of assets.

In a draft circular, the IBBI said IPs, given their access to company books and records and proceedings of the committee of creditors (CoC), have a responsibility to identify signs of possible misuse and bring them to the notice of the adjudicating authority.

The proposed guidance lists several warning signs that IPs should examine. These include companies with negligible operations, revenue or tangible assets, persistently negative net worth, and substantial loans,

EXPLANATORY GUIDELINES

■ CIRP misused in cases to settle debts, mitigate tax liabilities, close or merge companies without regulatory scrutiny, etc

■ IPs must examine qualified audit reports of loans and investments, weaknesses in controls over related-party transactions, IBBI said



■ The regulator has highlighted lender concentration around the initiation of CIRP as potential red flag

advances or investments involving related or group entities.

IPs have also been asked to examine qualified audit reports concerning loans and investments, weaknesses in controls over related-party transactions, and links to regulatory or enforcement cases involving the diversion or fraudulent use of funds.

The IBBI has highlighted lender concentration around the initiation of CIRP as another potential red flag. The draft identifies cases in which debt is assigned shortly before insolvency proceedings to a single creditor that subsequently exercises significant influence over the CoC.

Other indicators include

groups of connected companies entering CIRP around the same time, common promoters or directors, overlapping CoCs, difficulties in verifying assets and limited competition among bidders.

The regulator has said IPs should examine such indicators in detail and form a considered opinion. The proposed circular is aimed at clarifying existing doubts and ensuring consistency in identifying potential abuse of the insolvency framework.

The IBBI has invited comments from stakeholders on the draft by August 24. The regulator has clarified that the proposed circular is explanatory in nature and does not create any new obligations for IPs.

Marine exports get a boost as EU gives nod to more units

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, August 16

IN A BOOST to marine products shipment, the European Union (EU) has approved 21 additional Indian fishery establishments for exports, taking the total units approved for shipment in the last one year to 123.

Sources said that the nod for exports from these units will further boost shipment, especially of aquaculture shrimp and cephalopods to the European market.

With this, the number of EU-approved Indian fishery export units has increased to 625 and these are spread across Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Odisha and Maharashtra.

"There has been a surge in exports of fish meals used as feed and oils due to a spike in global prices, while diversification of shipments to the EU, Vietnam, China and Russia has boosted overall shipments," KN Raghavan, secretary general, Seafood Exporters Association of India (SEAI) told FE.

The EU is the third-largest seafood export destination for India after China, accounting for more than 15% of India's total exports. The major markets for Indian marine products shipments amongst EU member states are Belgium, Spain, and Italy.

The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) trade agreement, coming into force since October 2025, is also expected

ON GROWTH PATH



■ The number of EU-approved Indian fishery export units has risen to 625

■ The EU is the third-largest seafood export destination for India, accounting for more than 15% of total exports

■ Marine product exports to the EU are likely to double over the next few years, say experts

to enhance market access to Norway and Switzerland. Trade officials stated that marine product exports to the EU are likely to double over the next few years; currently, annual shipment is valued at around \$1 billion.

In July 2026, marine product exports rose by 18% to \$0.76 million year-on-year. Marine product shipment, the second biggest item in terms of agri-shipment, continues to surge with overall shipment rising to \$2.88 billion in the April-July period of FY27, an increase of over 11% year-on-year.

India must boost shipping protection, capacity: GTRI

WITH GROWING SHIPPING chokepoints, India must treat maritime insecurity as a persistent trade risk and strengthen its domestic shipping capacity, trade finance, naval protection and alternative transport corridors, economic think tank GTRI said on Sunday.

It said that the Red Sea crisis has completed 1,000 days without a durable solution, showing that military action can intercept missiles but cannot restore commercial confidence.

For India, it said, the crisis has made trade with Europe, the UK, North Africa and the US East Coast slower and more expensive, hurting MSME exporters through higher freight, insurance and working-capital costs.

"As shipping chokepoints are growing, India must treat maritime insecurity as a continuing trade risk and strengthen domestic shipping capacity, trade finance, naval protection and alternative transport corridors," GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said.

The Red Sea is a vital maritime link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, with ships travelling from Asia through the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and Suez Canal before entering the Mediterranean.

The route connects major trading regions, including India, West Asia, North Africa and Europe, and passes close to countries such as Yemen, Djibouti, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

—PTI

FY27 BoP seen in large surplus, estimates pegged at \$40-100-bn

● Large accretion to reserves despite a likely widening of CAD

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, August 16

INDIA'S BALANCE OF Payments (BoP) slipped into an \$8.1 billion deficit in the April-June quarter, but large inflows under the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) three swap facilities are likely to lead to a substantial BoP surplus in 2026-27, economists said. However, they differ on the size of the BoP surplus, with estimates ranging widely from \$40 billion to \$100 billion.

The BoP was in a deficit of \$24 billion in FY26 and a \$5

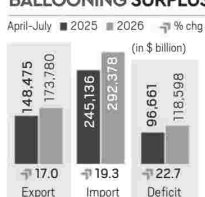
billion in FY25.

While India's current account deficit (CAD) is expected to widen sharply in FY27 to around 1-2% of GDP (up from 0.6% of GDP in FY26), the capital account surplus is expected to rise steeply thanks to the RBI's steps to attract foreign capital.

In June, the central bank announced a special facility to attract foreign currency through Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank) (FCNR(B) deposits, External Commercial Borrowings (ECBs), and Overseas Foreign Currency Borrowings (OFCBs), with the RBI offering banks a three-to-five-year swap facility that effectively covered hedging costs.

The FCNR(B) window has seen strong flows so far, prompting the RBI to close the scheme on August 31, a

BALLOONING SURPLUS



month ahead of the original schedule. The OFCB and ECB schemes will continue to be open till December 31. According to RBI data, inflows under the three facilities totalled \$56.85 billion between June 8 and August 13, of which FCNR(B) deposits

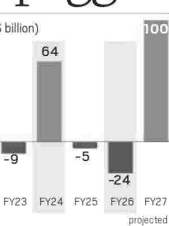
accounted for \$52.3 billion.

"Notwithstanding the early closure of the window, we believe banks could maximise the second half of August 2026 by putting their deposit mobilisation exercise on a hyperdrive. As such, we now expect the special force inflows to

potentially touch \$85 billion by December vs our earlier expectation of \$75 billion," economists at QuantEco Research said.

QuantEco projects the BoP to be in a \$70 billion surplus in FY27, assuming an average crude oil price of \$80-\$85 per barrel. According to latest data, the BoP was in a surplus of \$2.9 billion in June, against a deficit of \$0.4 billion a year ago.

Gaura Sen Gupta, chief economist, IDFC FIRST Bank, projects the full-year BoP surplus at \$40 billion with the September quarter surplus



alone seen at \$44 billion.

"Some part of the dollar inflows will be countered by the RBI allowing existing dollar buy-sell swaps to mature, as these will be replaced by longer-tenure swaps undertaken under the FCNR(B), ECB, and OFCB windows," Sen Gupta said. "Another factor that will counter some of the dollar inflows is spot dollar selling by the RBI to limit depreciation pressure on rupee," she said.

Apart from the boost from RBI's measures, India's external position has also been supported by remittances, which rose 34% year-on-year to \$41.4 billion in the first quarter of FY27. Notably, the pace of rise in net transfers, which include remittances, slowed down to 9% in June. The key risks to the BoP are a rising

goods trade deficit and higher global energy prices.

The merchandise trade deficit rose 23% y-o-y to \$119 billion in the first four months of FY27.

"At the same time, services exports growth has seen a moderation compared with last year, amid ongoing AI-related disruption," ICICI Bank said in a report. Given that oil prices remain elevated, the goods deficit is projected to widen to \$379 billion, with the CAD at \$54 billion (1.4% of GDP), assuming an oil price of \$80/barrel, the report added. Higher oil prices, which have swung between \$70 per barrel to \$100 per barrel since early July, and the uncertainties from the war in West Asia continue to cloud India's external sector outlook, economists said.



Opinion

MONDAY, AUGUST 17, 2026



● FRIEND OF ALL

Union Minister Amit Shah

Neither did he (Atal Bihari Vajpayee) leave his principles while in power nor while in the Opposition. That is why he is known as 'Aajshatru' — a great man who had no enemies

Layers of safety

The Phuket incident is a test of India's aviation safeguards, not of one pilot or one component

THE AIR INDIA Phuket-Delhi incident should not be reduced to either a technical failure or a pilot's positive drug test. The more important question is whether the safety system was strong enough to ensure that one failure did not become a potential catastrophe. On August 4, the Airbus A320neo suddenly lost around 300 feet in altitude, injuring 24 passengers and crew members. Airbus' preliminary analysis indicated that hydraulic pressure was temporarily lost across all three hydraulic systems, leaving key flight controls unresponsive for about four seconds. A post-flight fault log also revealed nine warnings within roughly a minute, involving hydraulic systems, flight controls, and the autopilot. Separately, the captain tested positive for marijuana in a confirmatory test. There is no established causal link between the drug test and the altitude loss. But together, these developments underline the importance of multiple, independent layers of protection in an industry where the margin for error is small.

Aviation safety is built on the assumption that machines can fail, people can make mistakes, and circumstances can deteriorate unexpectedly. Aviation relies on multiple safeguards, from backup systems and crew oversight to flight-control technology, maintenance protocols, and regulatory checks. The purpose is to ensure that a single failure does not cascade. The Phuket incident is therefore about whether each barrier worked as it should. The investigation must establish why safeguards failed, how warnings were handled, whether procedures were followed, and whether pilot screening and intervention were adequate.

That is particularly important because India's aviation industry is expanding rapidly, with airlines adding aircraft, routes, and pilots. In such an environment, safety cannot become a compliance exercise in which airlines simply meet the minimum requirement. Air India has responded by ordering substance screening for all its pilots, going beyond the regulatory requirement for random testing of a portion of flight crew. That is useful, but the larger issue is whether safety systems should depend primarily on random checks after an incident. Substance use, fatigue, and medication involve both safety and individual privacy. Yet the cockpit is not an ordinary workplace. The responsibility placed on a pilot extends to hundreds of lives, making robust disclosure, testing, and intervention mechanisms essential. The same principle applies to aircraft systems; for instance, warnings should trigger the right response and maintenance findings should be acted upon before they recur.

The lesson from the Phuket episode, therefore, should not be that one pilot failed or that one aircraft component malfunctioned. It should be that aviation safety is only as strong as the weakest layer of protection in the chain. The investigation must establish the technical sequence, the role of the crew, the circumstances surrounding the drug test, and whether existing procedures were followed. Airbus has called for inspections of the hydraulic systems, sensors, and wiring, while the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau continues its probe. The initial description of the episode as turbulence also underlines why accurate and transparent communication matters. Air India needs to demonstrate that its safety culture is not a set of manuals and audits but a system that can identify risks before they reach the cockpit. Passengers do not expect airlines to operate without failures. They expect enough safeguards to ensure that when a machine fails, a pilot falters, or an unexpected event occurs, the aircraft does not come close to becoming an accident. That is the standard by which this incident should be judged.

● THE HUMAN FACTOR

Why it's OK if your best people occasionally leave

THERE COMES A point in the career of every successful executive when another promotion, a larger office, and a more elaborate job title cease to have quite the intoxicating effect they once did. The problem is usually arithmetic.

A newspaper report a couple of days ago described a procession of senior executives quitting large, generous employers to set up on their own. The prodigal came varied — a passion for wellness, a longing to "build something" — but buried in the piece was the real trigger: at some point, these people did the maths. However magnificent a firm pays its stars, the stars are still building somebody else's equity. The salary is rent; the asset belongs to the landlord.

What makes this delicious rather than merely sad is the role companies play in engineering their own heartbeat. Consider the modern corporate courtship of the "high-potential" employee. She is identified early, sent on leadership journeys, given a mentor, sponsor, and a coach (these are different people, apparently), and rewarded with accelerated promotions. Above all, she is exhorted, in every appraisal and offsite, to "think like an owner".

She is encouraged to take ownership of problems, of outcomes, of the customer experience, of her own development. The one thing she may not take ownership of is the company. Think like an owner, by all means — just don't expect to appear on the cap table. It is the corporate equivalent of urging someone to fall in love while making clear that marriage is out of the question.

Then, one day, the high-potential employee takes the advice literally. If she is to think like an owner, she reasons, she might as well become one. The company reacts with wounded astonishment; HR convenes a task force on retention; consultants are summoned and someone proposes a "stay interview", which is like an exit interview except conducted while the hostage is still in the building.

The retention machinery then whirs into action, and here the comedy deepens, because everything it produces is a smaller version of the thing the departing star actually wants. She wants equity; she is offered deferred bonuses. She wants autonomy; she is offered a "broader mandate", which means more meetings. She wants her name on the door; she is offered a title with the word "chief" in it, joining a C-suite now so populous that it resembles economy class on a budget airline.

None of this works, because the problem is not emotional but structural. An employment contract, however lavish, has a ceiling. Ownership does not. The executive who grasps this has not become disloyal; she has merely become numerate. Companies that spend fortunes teaching their people financial acumen should not be shocked when the lesson lands.

Which raises the genuinely interesting question: should companies even be trying this hard? The fashionable obsession with retention treats every departure as a failure, to be tracked, regretted, and benchmarked. But if your most ambitious people occasionally leave to build things of their own, that may be the surest evidence that you hired the right people in the first place. A firm that nobody ever leaves to start something is not a talent powerhouse. It is a very comfortable waiting room.

The wisest companies have quietly accepted this. They treat their best people as future alumni rather than lifetime property, stay on warm terms, invest in their best spin-off, and occasionally hire their former stars' start-ups as vendors, acquiring back at a premium the talent they once had on salary. It is an expensive way to learn that the only reliable means of making employees think like owners is to let them own something.

The rest continue to perfect their retention strategies, their stay interviews, and their chief-of-everything titles — solving for everything, in fact, except the arithmetic. And the arithmetic, as every high-potential employee eventually discovers, always wins.



SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR

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W HILE INDIANS CELEBRATED

Independence Day on August 15, the Americans celebrated the third Saturday of August, which fell on August 13 this year, as a National Honey Bee Day.

Honeybees, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, play the quiet role of pollinators, and are responsible for almost one-third of crop output globally, enhancing the yields of 87 out of 115 leading food crops. Moreover, they add to nutritional quality. If India has to make its agriculture productive and nutritious, bees must be treated as farmers' best friends. As you pass by the mustard fields of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan or the apple orchards of Himachal Pradesh, you would realise what bees can do. They have helped India become the second-largest producer of honey in the world, after China, and third-largest exporter of honey after China and New Zealand in value terms. Beyond pollination, they have also helped farmers augment incomes through apiculture (honey bee farming). India's honey production has nearly doubled over the last decade, from about 76,000 tonnes in 2013-14 to roughly 151,000 tonnes in 2025-26, signalling scale in supply and capacity. Almost 70% of the honey produced is exported (\$208 million in 2025-26), and India accounts for around 8-10% of global honey exports. However, India's export basket remains highly concentrated — the US absorbed about 76% of India's exports (\$157.8 million) in 2025-26. And that runs a concentration risk in India's export markets, a taste of which was felt when the US suddenly imposed high tariffs on Indian imports. It was a big blow to Indian honey exporters and farmers, but the turnaround was also very swift in terms of diversifying export markets.

India's response was pragmatic. Shipments to countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Israel have begun, reflecting a shift towards markets that value natural, sustainably-sourced honey. At the same time, EU consumers are willing to pay a premium for traceable and

● FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

INDIA'S TRADE NEEDS TO REMODEL ITSELF AS A GLOBAL SOURCE OF SUSTAINABLE, PREMIUM HONEY

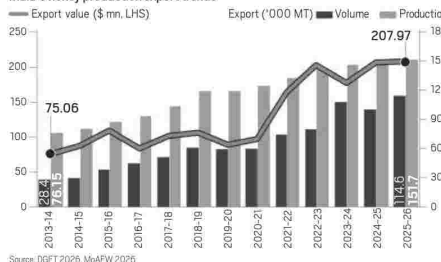
Let's honour the busy bee

ASHOK GULATI, SUYANGI RATH, & TANMOY ADHIKARY

Respectively Distinguished Professor, Fellow, and Research Assistant at ICRIER

BUZZING BUSINESS

India's honey production export trends



Source: DGFT 2026, MAAPW 2026

environmentally responsible products, traits that India's multifarious and organic honey varieties can uniquely offer.

However, India's domestic market remains limited despite a large population. India's per capita honey consumption remains low (about 37 gm per year), indicating that a huge market is yet to be tapped. As more awareness about its health benefits spreads and retail penetration improves, a domestic market can help stabilise producer incomes while supporting premium quality exports.

This diversification mirrors a classic economic lesson — trade barriers often compel resilience and innovation. Rather than being confined to a single large buyer, India's honey sector is now spreading its wings across geographies. However,

unit value realisation remains a constraint — Indian honey's unit value is about \$1,858 per tonne, well below the world average and far from premium categories like New Zealand's Manuka. Upgrading quality, traceability, and branding is therefore essential. Price realisation can improve if exports are in branded retail packs rather than wholesale unbranded volumes.

Reforms and investments will determine if this moment becomes a structural transformation or a temporary reprieve. At the same time, investment in nuclear magnetic resonance-capable testing labs, cluster-based processing, GI branding for unique floral honeys (Sundarbans, Raman Sula), and setting up farmer producer organisations will lower compliance costs and enable entry into the premium Euro-

pean, Japanese, and East Asian markets. The bee product market (beeswax, propolis, royal jelly, pollen) is sizeable, valued at roughly \$12.7 billion in 2023 and projected to grow, offering India a high-margin diversification route beyond bulk honey.

Crucially, sustainability must be central. Scientific beekeeping, pesticide management, and support for pollination services will protect both yields and ecosystem services that agriculture depends on. Initiatives under the National Beekeeping and Honey Mission and the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority's export support are steps in the right direction, but scaling them requires sharper targeting, labs, cluster grants, export promotion, and large-scale consumer campaigns ("Honey for Health") to grow domestic demand.

The Indian honey economy stands at a crucial juncture. The trade, once tethered to a single overseas market, needs to remodel itself as a global source of sustainable, premium honey. This requires the right blend of policy reform, quality assurance, and branding. Only then scale can be converted into genuine value, turning millions of hives into durable rural livelihoods. To mean anything beyond a date, the National Honey Bee Day should remind us that the jar on the shelf is the smallest part of the story. Every rupee of honey we export rests on a far larger, unpriced service — the pollination that fills the orchard, the oilseed field, and the vegetable plot, and quietly underwrites the food on our plates. The real measure of India's sweet revolution, then, will not be how much honey we sell, but whether we learn to protect the tiny worker that makes both the honey and the harvest possible.

Can our policymakers prioritise these silent workers that pollinate our crops and enhance rural prosperity? Can they set a time-bound target of doubling honey bee colonies by 2030, and double our share in the global market? As things stand, the *Viksit Bharat* 2047 vision is too distant and vague to assess its seriousness.

Views are personal

Economix 101 by Prof. René Goscinny



ATANU BISWAS

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AUGUST 14 MARKED the birth centenary of René Goscinny, the French writer who, together with Albert Uderzo, brought *Asterix* to the world. It's a good excuse to return to the books — not merely for the jokes, the puns, and the indomitable Gauls, but for the sharp lessons hidden beneath the laughter. One can learn economics from Adam Smith, Marx, or Keynes. Or, if one prefers economics with magic potions, wild boars, and flying Romans, reading *Asterix* is the solution. Goscinny and Uderzo never set out to write an economics textbook. Yet their little Gaulish village repeatedly becomes a laboratory of economic behaviour. Across the albums, we find bubbles, monopolies, artificial demand, taxation, trade, labour exploitation, real estate, environmental costs, and consumerism. *Asterix*, in its own mischievous way, becomes Economics 101, or maybe Economics 101 — with jokes.

Rome's problem with the Gauls is also an economic problem. Julius Caesar has tried military force, but the village refuses to surrender. War is expensive: soldiers, weapons, food, and administration cost money. So, in *Obelix and Co.* (1976), Caesar's adviser, Caius Preposterus, tries something clever. Instead of defeating the Gauls militarily, he changes their economic incentives. He begins buying Obelix's menhirs at absurdly high prices.

A menhir is a large stone. But once the Romans pay a fortune for it, it acquires something more powerful than usefulness: a price. Prices rise. Obelix becomes rich. Villagers abandon their occupations to make menhirs. Caesar discovers a principle: sometimes you can defeat people by changing what they value.

Preposterus creates demand for something nobody needed before. Romans buy menhirs, others assume they must be valuable; production expands. The menhir becomes a status symbol — a comic-book version of Veblen's conspicuous consumption. Then reality catches up: new producers enter, supply overwhelms demand, and confidence collapses. The menhir is not changed; only expectations have.

The menhir is therefore a joke about bubbles. It could be tulips, shares, or a digital token. While creating demand, Preposterus also discovers the inconvenient sequel: you cannot manufacture confidence indefinitely. And this is what makes Goscinny's economics so striking: written decades ago, the jokes still feel uncannily current.

There's opportunity cost. Every hour spent making menhirs is an hour not spent hunting or producing something useful. The Gauls become richer in money while losing some of the activities that make their community distinctive. Surplus Dairioproducts, in *Asterix and the Golden Sickle* (1962), shows another route to profits. The corrupt Roman prefect controls the sickle monopoly and exploits scarcity to charge inflated prices. This is rent-seeking: making money through control of a market rather than by creating more value. Preposterus manufactures demand. Dairioproducts manufactures scarcity.

Asterix and the Chief of the Shield (1968) adds an economic theme: wealth can outlive its owner and change hands with changing fortunes. The shield carries a history of ownership and power — a reminder that wealth has a way of travelling from one pocket to another, sometimes long after the original owner is gone. But the deepest lesson may lie in what the village doesn't have. There's no stock exchange, advertising agency, quarterly earnings call, or GDP target. They are hardy rich. Yet they have food, friendship, music, festivals, and community. So, *Obelix and Co.* is more subtle than a simple attack on capitalism. Markets are useful; trade creates wealth; entrepreneurship can transform lives. But price and value are not the same thing. A menhir can have a huge price and little practical value; a forest can have a low market price and enormous ecological value; a village feast can be priceless. Goscinny's insight is that once everything becomes a commodity, we may confuse what can be priced with what is valuable.

of attacking the Gauls, the Romans build a housing development beside their village. Residents bring Roman consumption, reshaping the economy and community. Land values and local businesses change; the character of the neighbourhood changes with them. It's a comic-book version of gentrification. And Dogmatix, furious about the destruction of trees, may be the first environmental economist in comics. The builders profit while others bear the environmental cost. Economics call this an externality.

Asterix and the Cauldron (1969) gives us another economic problem: taxation. A neighbouring chief hides money from the Roman tax collector, dragging *Asterix* into the mess. Taxes change behaviour. If people think taxes are excessive — or evasion is possible — they look for ways around the system, creating an informal economy.

Asterix and the Black Gold (1971), *Asterix* and Obelix travel on his ship to West Asia in search of rock oil. Ekonomikristis is a Phoenician merchant connecting markets — and an expert at making exploitation sound respectable. His galleys rowers are called "partners". There is a partnership contract. It sounds progressive, yet he remains in charge. Black Gold also introduces resource economics: oil is valuable because it's scarce and useful, and whoever controls it gains economic — and often political — power. In *The Mansions of the Gods* (1971), Caesar tries economic control. Instead

with changing fortunes. The shield carries a history of ownership and power — a reminder that wealth has a way of travelling from one pocket to another, sometimes long after the original owner is gone.

But the deepest lesson may lie in what the village doesn't have. There's no stock exchange, advertising agency, quarterly earnings call, or GDP target. They are hardy rich. Yet they have food, friendship, music, festivals, and community. So, *Obelix and Co.* is more subtle than a simple attack on capitalism. Markets are useful; trade creates wealth; entrepreneurship can transform lives. But price and value are not the same thing. A menhir can have a huge price and little practical value; a forest can have a low market price and enormous ecological value; a village feast can be priceless. Goscinny's insight is that once everything becomes a commodity, we may confuse what can be priced with what is valuable.

And that's why *Asterix* remains so contemporary. People still manufacture demand, create monopolies, chase bubbles, speculate in property, dress up exploitation in corporate language, and evade taxes. Economies are made not of equations alone but of people — and people respond to incentives, expectations, vanity, imitation, greed, and fear.

So, if someone offers us ten times the usual price for something nobody wanted yesterday, we shouldn't immediately make ten thousand more. We should ask why. And if the buyer happens to be a smartly dressed Roman with a degree from the Latin School of Economics, we should do what Obelix should have done: put down the hammer. Keep the menhir. Go and have lunch with Asterix.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Inclusive growth

Apropos of "Building the middle" (FE, August 15), India's manufacturing push is encouraging, but the real test lies in making smaller firms part of the growth story. Large factories can raise

output quickly, but local suppliers, skilled workers, and service providers determine whether industrial activity spreads. Governments should simplify compliance for MSMEs, ensure timely payments, and improve access to affordable credit and reliable power. Ind-

ustrial clusters also need better roads, logistics, and common testing facilities. Firms must invest in training rather than depend entirely on imported skills and technology. A stronger domestic supply chain will make manufacturing more resilient and create better

jobs. The objective should be a broader industrial ecosystem in which small enterprises grow alongside established large companies across India.

—SM Jeeva, Chennai

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com



OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM



Seven streams of effort: Modi's new call to action

The Prime Minister's emphasis on seven focal endeavours for Viksit Bharat by 2047 offers India a well streamlined set of imperatives. Education has a tributary role to play in each

Successive prime ministers of India have used their Independence Day speech to outline the successes of their respective governments and lay out challenges. In the case of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his speeches have not only featured important policy announcements, like the Swachh Bharat Mission launched by his first speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort in 2014, but also his government's vision for the economy and plans to realize it. His address on Saturday had all those elements. Modi unveiled a seven-point agenda to speed up India's efforts to become a developed country, or Viksit Bharat, by 2047. The 'sapta dhara'—or seven streams—he named to achieve that goal are apparently inspired by the 'sapta Sindhu', a reference to seven ancient rivers whose waters held the vital energy for prosperity, as legend has it, among other bounties. The streams now in focus are the domestic manufacturing sector, agriculture and food processing, technology, Gati Shakti—or infrastructure for logistics—self-reliance in defence, India's green and blue economies, and last but not least, the country's soft power.

This emphasis is not new, with some of these areas of focus having been outlined earlier too. The 'Make in India' programme, for instance, is now etched in the policy framework as part of an ambition to turn the country into a factory for the world. Or, for that matter, the Gati Shakti initiative launched earlier to overhaul India's creaky logistics infrastructure—from ports to airports and roads to highways—so that faster moving goods can help manufacturers compete in all accessible markets. While beginnings have already been made in all seven endeavours, this streamlined list of the Modi govern-

ment's priorities hints at which way public funds will flow in the years ahead. It is a timely exercise. As open markets like America's begin to retreat behind tariff walls and globalization suffers geopolitical reversals, India must rely on itself for key enablers of its economic emergence, especially now that denial regimes are taking shape in plain sight. The same logic applies to national security and autonomy amid US-China rivalry that could raise the costs of neutrality. Today's imperatives explain other streams as well. In technology and innovation, India's stakes are high as these increasingly underpin value generation. All this must go with climate action, so the green use of clean energy and blue-sky hunt for new resources assume priority too. As for soft power, broadly defined as global influence exerted by everything other than the force of arms, the concept has been gaining salience as a policy aim. In India's case, the global promotion of yoga is often cited as an example. Given the fuzzy nature of soft power, though, how amenable it is to a centralized strategy tends to split opinion.

Other notable initiatives highlighted by Modi include a drive to train 10 million youth in artificial intelligence (AI) and a plan to provide free online coaching for students. The former is free of charge, with a larger push for AI diffusion while the latter aims to widen access to career paths opened up by competitive exams. Both seem like a response to last month's student protests. But the long-term aim must be to improve our formal education system. Third-party coaching should not be required at all. Broadly speaking, all seven streams would need tributaries of human talent for them to sparkle, with or without the aid of AI. Education, thus, has a vital role to play.

The Tata Group's future hinges on finalizing a succession plan

Why one wasn't in place is a good question but it's now for Noel Tata to decide who chairs Tata Sons



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Tremors deepening fissures within Tata group boardrooms and its broader corporate ecosystem should be viewed in the light of a striking data-point: apparently only 3% of family businesses survive beyond the fourth generation. The Tata group, among India's oldest conglomerates, has reached an inflection point and all engaged parties within the Tata orbit must decide where they want the group to be: the 3% club or the mortal 97% league. Crucially, outlining a succession plan will actually determine the Tata Group's future.

Rumblings in the group's governance structure came to a head after the surprise resignation letter last week from N. Chandrasekaran, chairman of the Tata Group's holding company Tata Sons. The episode has exposed gaps in the storied group's governance standards. Chandrasekaran has indicated his desire not to seek a third term; he will effectively step down when his tenure ends in February 2027. He has also indicated that his decision may have been influenced by a single board member's reluctance to approve his third innings. No names were mentioned.

There are, however, no prizes for guessing who that is. Noel Tata, director of Tata Sons and chairman of Tata Trusts, controls the majority voting power on the Tata Sons board and past reports have indicated how he has been

engaging with Chandrasekaran over mounting losses at Tata Digital and Air India, among others.

There is another oddity about Chandrasekaran's resignation: he is leaving without having identified a successor. At least in the public domain. A decade spent in the corner office of a large conglomerate should have afforded him time and opportunity to identify and groom a likely successor or construct a short-list of successors for Tata Sons' board members to finalize. There are two possible reasons for this apparent professional lapse: he either thought he would accomplish this particular task in his third term or, more importantly, he probably felt he did not have enough skin in this particular game.

The Tata Group, all said and done, is still a family-run conglomerate. The holding firm's current chairman Chandrasekaran might be a career professional, but he served, truth be told, at the pleasure of Ratan Tata, former chairman of Tata Sons and Tata Trusts. Ratan Tata exercised absolute control over both entities, including providing directions to the Tata Sons board even after he had retired from it; this was evident in how Cyrus Mistry was ousted and replaced with Chandrasekaran, even though the final acts were executed by his appointed nominees. His demise in October 2024 without outlining a viable succession plan has left a governance void and resulted in all-too-public chaos.

Most smooth succession plans in family-run businesses occur during the patriarch's lifetime. J.R.D. Tata retired as Tata Sons chairman and anointed Ratan Tata as his successor in March 1991, a good two years before his death in Geneva. J.R.D.'s contemporary Ghanisham Das Birla also finalized a detailed succession plan for the sprawling Birla Group after his heart attack in 1977; the group had direct control of around 200 companies and indirect control over 700 companies then. Also, five years before his demise in London in 1983, he had

relinquished control as chairman of flagship Grasim Ltd in favour of his grandson Aditya Vikram. Reliance group founder Dhirubhai Ambani's death in 2002 sparked a headline-grabbing sibling row over succession, raising questions over why the patriarch had not left behind a will indicating a succession plan.

The reality is that most succession plans in family-run businesses do not go through the testamentary route. One of the reasons is that a will needs a court probate before it can be executed and is, thus, open to challenge from disgruntled family members. The will route adopted by Priyamvada Birla, leaving M.P. Birla's businesses to their auditor R.S. Lodha, has resulted in a rash of court cases since her 2004 death. The most recent case involves late Sona Comstar chairman Sanjay Kapur, whose putative will is under a three-way dispute, involving his mother, first wife and second wife and their children.

The lack of an identifiable successor in the Tata Group has created a vacuum into which interlopers have jumped, disrupting the group's smooth functioning to further their personal ambitions. Their avowed purpose might be preserving Ratan Tata's corporate philosophy. It is well known that Ratan Tata had differences with Noel Tata, his half-brother. There are also concerns whether Noel Tata is up to the task. But there were similar questions about Ratan Tata in 1991, who had managed only Nellore and Tata Industries till then. Ratan Tata subsequently grew into the job and earned universal respect.

So here is the immutable truth: Noel Tata is now the inheritor of the famous family name and has both the community's support and legal rights, as Tata Trusts chairman, to decide the Tata Group's future. He and the selection committee should have the freedom to appoint a new Tata Sons chairman, which may well be another career professional for now. Good governance requires everybody to respect that.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

What separates developing countries from developed countries is as much a gap in knowledge as a gap in resources.

JOSEPH STIGLITZ

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Why do good things happen in India? Here is a theory

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist and screenwriter. His latest book is 'Why the Poor Don't Kill Us.'

There are raids underway in a few cities to check if the food they store or make is safe for me. They are unearthing factories that make fake milk with shampoo and emulsifier; networks that recycle expired food using counterfeit labels; kilograms of meat covered in fungus and expired milk. I would have mentioned rats in the kitchen if I were writing for a foreign publication.

What surprises me is not any of this, but that there are raids across cities and they are not extortion. They began in Maharashtra because of a government officer who is said to be so honest that he has been transferred 25 times in 21 years. In May, Tukaram Mundhe, who often upsets politicians and courts, and is a rockstar among many Maharashtrais for that reason, took over as Maharashtra's Food and Drug Administration commissioner. He soon had hundreds of food establishments in the state raided, and his influence may be behind raids in Bengaluru too. Restaurants in several cities are surely cleaning up. Some people are calling his actions high-handed.

But that is exactly how I want my food inspector to be. Err on the side of being authoritarian. After all, I do eat out.

I am deeply moved every time someone from the government tries to protect me. I am also confused. Why are they being so diligent? Why do good things happen in India? We spend a lot of time analysing what's wrong with us and all our answers are right. That is the thing about disorder. You can do something wrong in a million ways, probably in every way a human being can do a thing wrong. Thus, every analysis of why there is disorder is probably true. But why do good things happen in the country?

It is the same bafflement that has me transfixed when I see guys filling a pothole or carving out a free left turn (on the sweet assumption that vehicles in the left lane wish to turn left). Why do they do this, who sends them, who benefits apart from the mere public? Maybe there is money to be made by government servants in public works. But then I can show you lanes in the heart of Gurugram where the road has vanished, for months, and nothing gets done about it. If road repairs happen because of commissions, what explains half of Gurugram? So maybe even in corruption, we are badly organized—it's a patchwork of unfolding chaos.

Also, I feel some good things happen because it is important for an administration to maintain bare minimum functionality so as to not draw too much attention. This is among the reasons why some roads are roads and others are puddles.

Amateur Indians, acquainted with the word 'cynicism,' may rebuke me: 'Can't you just accept good things happen?' I try to imagine a meeting in a municipal office in Gurugram where they discuss how to make my life better. I cannot picture it.

In the past, there were food inspections, but the cases I have known were a form of extortion. All indications are that Tukaram Mundhe is not a part of any such system. He is an important anomaly, not only in a corrupt system but in the conventional explanations for why good things happen here.

Many of the explanations that seem obvious are not wrong but not as significant as we are expected to accept. Democracy, for instance, and the notion that politicians want

to impress voters. This is not without basis, but then a whole lot of things that matter to one's quality of life and life itself are not electoral issues because elections are as complicated as human beings, and people don't always vote for what is good for society or themselves. Also, there are non-democracies that appear more humane than India and clearly have a better quality of life.

A less obvious but influential reason is that good things happen here when powerful blocs collide, like when the rich try to take on the richer, middle castes try to bring down upper castes, or defeated politicians attempt to tackle their oppressors through social movements.

Also, a lot of India's visible good occurs because of a peculiar nature of the state. It is big on rescues. India might be the very cause of a tragedy, but once a tragedy has occurred, it is excellent at rescuing. If potholes cause an accident, India works hard to save lives and not much about the potholes; if a child falls into a drain, the government works earnestly

to save the kid, but drains remain open. If there is a landslide because of foolish policies, India does all it can to rescue the trapped. Recall covid. India's response made me think it really wanted me alive. I never get that sense once I stepped onto the road after the pandemic was over. The economic reforms of Manmohan Singh, too, were a rescue from a crisis India could have averted.

Mundhe is not a part of any of these phenomena. He represents the power of eccentricity in a rotten system. India has traditionally benefited from unusual personalities, especially among bureaucrats. He has a record of doing his job well. He has had unauthorized structures demolished, gone after illegal hoardings, made footpaths usable, ensured that villagers get water without having to rely on tankers and tried to fix public transport. Politicians have complained that he doesn't listen to them. But they could only transfer him, as they did 25 times. And in more than one city, ordinary citizens blocked his path to stop him from leaving. Politicians rarely get such love.

When a system is rotten, a diligent person enduring by digging deep into the quirks of his own personality. Some good things happen in India because some people are eccentric.



THEIR VIEW

Dude, where's my recession? The US economy isn't in the clear yet

Various factors have helped America defy gloomy predictions but that doesn't mean the risk of shrunken output has receded

**BARRY EICHENGREEN**

is professor of economics and political science at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author, most recently, of *Money Beyond Borders: Global Currencies From Crousus to Crypto*.

Exhibiting an apparently limitless ability to shrug off bad news, the US economy continues to motor ahead. Real or inflation-adjusted GDP grew at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 2.1% in the first quarter of this year and, according to an advance estimate from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, by 1.5% in the second quarter. Both figures are close to the US Federal Reserve's own estimate of the economy's long-run potential growth rate of 2%.

The economy has appeared resilient despite an exceptional series of adverse shocks, from the April 2025 'Liberation Day' tariffs and ongoing tariff uncertainty to US President Donald Trump's political attacks on the Fed. Meanwhile, US-China tensions have depressed bilateral trade and investment; the US war against Iran has led to on-again, off-again closures of the Strait of Hormuz and spiking oil prices; and the Russia-Ukraine war has increasingly disrupted Russian energy supplies and refining capacity. Topping it all off, global bond, equity and foreign-exchange markets have suffered multiple shocks just in the past few weeks.

So, what explains the resilience? Although Trump's Liberation Day tariffs ranged as high as 50%, his administration soon made multiple tariff exceptions, exemptions and reversals, bringing the effective US tariff rate down to 10-15%, on average, over the last year. While not favourable, this lower level is at least manageable.

The tariff-related uncertainty has been considerable, of course. An index of trade-policy uncertainty created by Fed economist Dario Caldara and his colleagues reached its highest level on record after Trump's Liberation Day press conference. Yet, with an import-to-GDP ratio of only 18%, the US economy was already relatively closed. Whatever the damaging effects of tariff uncertainty, they were always going to be less severe than for more open economies.

Similarly, the share of US imports coming from China has declined to barely 7%, but it had already fallen from over 20% to under 14% in the decade ending in 2024. After surpassing \$100 billion at its peak in 2016, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the US has evaporated completely. Despite these trends, the negative impact on the US economy has been minimized by a rerouting of Chinese exports via Vietnam and Mexico, and by America's continued success at attracting FDI from other sources, notably Germany and Japan.

Then there is the latest energy shock. Crude oil futures spiked from \$60 per barrel at the beginning of 2026 to above \$100. They are now in the region of \$80 and will continue to fluctuate along with prospects for reopening the Strait of Hormuz. More importantly, the 'crack spread', or the cost difference between crude oil and refined products,



ISTOCKPHOTO

has tripled since the start of 2026 as US refineries have been caught wrong-footed by shifting crude supplies. Still, the adverse effect has been limited because the US economy is less energy intensive now than in the past, owing to a broader shift in economic activity towards services.

Finally, insofar as these factors have dampened US economic growth, their negative impact has been offset by strong investment in artificial intelligence (AI)-related data centres, software, and research and development, as well as by consumption spending rooted in a robust stock market.

What could possibly go wrong? In a word: everything. Despite court rulings striking down many US tariffs, the tariff threat remains, with Trump invoking it in response to everything from Canadian wildfires to Brazilian elections. Equally, the prospects for reopening the Strait of Hormuz remain uncertain, and US-China tensions are ratcheting up again, with Beijing slapping trade restrictions on dozens of US entities in advance of President Xi Jinping's upcoming trip to the US.

It is anyone's guess what will happen after that trip is over. Given reports that the US has expended many of the munitions and strategic resources that it would need to deter China from

aggressive action in the South China Sea, an escalation in tensions cannot be ruled out. Although the rise in oil prices has been moderated by draws in Chinese and US petroleum reserves, the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve is now at a 45-year low, and half of what remains cannot be withdrawn without risking a collapse of storage salt caverns.

Above all, there is the potential threat from financial markets. The combination of a richly valued stock market and rising long-term interest rates has historically been a toxic brew. We saw in July how pessimism about the immediate returns to AI-related investments can lead to a sharp drop in AI company share prices, especially when those investments are debt-financed and the cost of capital is rising. If the share-price declines resume, the negative wealth effects on consumer spending could be significant.

We also saw how such share-price movements can wrong-foot investors in the same trendy sectors, with ruinous implications when their bets are backed by leverage, and with potentially serious consequences for banks and others providing the credit. Not every financial crash and crisis has been followed by a recession. But they're the best leading indicator we have.

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MINT CURATOR

Indonesia's central bank chief must be allowed to do her job

Signals of independence will support market confidence in policy

**DANIEL MOSS & KARISHMA VASWANI** are, respectively, a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Asian economies, and a columnist covering Asia politics with a special focus on China.Desy Damayanti has a tough job ahead at the helm of Bank Indonesia. **BLOOMBERG**

Prabowo Subianto's efforts to reshape Indonesia's economy are reaching their limits. Wary of a renewed run on the rupiah, the country's president picked an orthodox economist and monetary insider to helm the Indonesian central bank. It would be to the nation's benefit if he can curb his instinct to interfere and let her do the job—even when painful steps are required.

Last week, Prabowo nominated Desy Damayanti to be governor of Bank Indonesia. Desy was the top deputy to Perry Warjiyo, a respected technocrat who raised interest rates to protect the currency and whom the president ousted last month. The appointment seems like an exercise in damage control. The last thing that markets needed was a fresh reason to sell the country's assets.

There's nothing in Desy's resume or public remarks that suggest she will branch out in a radical direction. She may appreciate the understanding, though, that antagonizing Prabowo is a losing move. Desy needs to at least pay lip service to the president's agenda. Prabowo came to office promising to dramatically accelerate the pace of growth—and harness the power of the state to reach the goal. In his view, all government agencies should row in the same direction, which is laid down by him. Fortunately, there are limits to how much damage the president's agenda can do to the central bank.

It's one thing for Desy to tread carefully. Defying economic logic is another. The reality is that the rupiah and the Indonesian bond market have been under siege, and it will be her job to defend both. Rates can't come down, no matter how much the president wants to juice growth. A further substantial weakening of the currency, which is Asia's worst performer against the dollar this year, will likely mean additional hikes. The price for balking at that would be further capital flight.

Investors would have been unnerved by a different pick. Markets sold off after Prabowo installed his nephew Thomas Djiwandono as a deputy governor in January. Since gaining independence after the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, Bank Indonesia has been a reasonably effective guardian of the economy. It targets inflation of 1.5-3.5%, and the country's clip of price increases has mostly remained within the band, aside from a spike after the pandemic. Djiwandono was widely seen as a threat to that autonomy, so Prabowo was right not to promote him.

Memories of the rupiah's collapse dur-

ing the Asian financial crisis undoubtedly weigh heavily on the president. That era led to the downfall of his former father-in-law and autocrat Suharto, who ruled the archipelago for more than three decades. Prabowo was unceremoniously booted out of the army for disobeying orders, and for a time was banned from the US and Australia for alleged human rights abuses.

Three special forces commanders failed to win an election until he refashioned himself as a cuddly and cute grandfather-type and teamed up with the son of popular former President Joko Widodo in 2024.

Since coming into power, Prabowo has shown far stronger shades of his authoritarian past than many had expected, diminishing confidence in his ability to get the economy back on track. He has tried to seize control of mineral operations, and, last year, fired the respected long-time finance minister, Sri Mulyani Indrawati. Desy's main priority should be winning back the confidence of markets even if it means resisting the president's approach to governance. The rupiah ended four days of declines after last Monday's announcement, but is still down more than 6% against the dollar this year.

There is still plenty that can go wrong. Bank Indonesia recently resumed a contentious practice of helping finance government spending. That's revived worries that the central bank is becoming too close to the administration. After doing something similar during the worst days of covid, officials said then that such an unusual step was a response to an emergency.

There will be lingering worries that officials will tolerate a higher pace of inflation. A forthright reiteration of the bank's autonomy from Desy is thus desirable. The new governor may also have to hike rates to prove her singularity. If Prabowo can tolerate that, it will go some way toward easing concerns.

By all means greet Desy's appointment with relief. She is likely to be tested soon enough, if not by Prabowo, then by the markets. Her instincts will be to do what's necessary to protect the economy and financial system and the president may just have to go along. Like it or not, Indonesia competes for international capital. You can only mess with a monetary authority so many times.

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THEIR VIEW

Risk sharing in oil and gas exploration needs a rethink

VIJAY KELKAR



is vice president, Pune International Centre, and former secretary, ministry of petroleum and natural gas.

India's dependence on imported crude oil remains a significant macroeconomic and strategic vulnerability. Hence, increasing domestic exploration and production is an important policy goal. The government's approval of the Samudra Manthan scheme is welcome in its intent. Its emphasis on modern seismic data, common offshore infrastructure and local oilfield capabilities addresses gaps that markets are unlikely to correct. Geological information and basin knowledge are public goods, and governments have a vital role in creating them.

The programme departs from this logic in its proposal to reimburse up to half the cost of selected exploration wells. This invites a basic question: what makes an upstream petroleum fiscal regime attractive?

Such regimes are not designed merely to collect revenue. Their greater function is to allocate uncertainty. Few industries require investors to commit billions of dollars before knowing whether the asset they seek actually exists. A successful regime allocates geo-

logical and commercial risk between the sovereign owner of the resource and the investor, while ensuring that the public receives an equitable share of economic rent from commercially viable discoveries.

It is against this standard that India's revenue-sharing regime deserves reconsideration. The shift from production-sharing contract under the New Exploration and Licensing Policy (NELP) to revenue sharing under the Hydrocarbon Exploration and Licensing Policy (HELP) was meant to simplify administration and reduce disputes over cost recovery. Whether it improved the allocation of exploration risk is another question.

Revenue is easier to verify than costs. But administrative simplicity is not economic efficiency. Two offshore discoveries may generate similar revenues while requiring radically different investments. A shallow-water field near existing infrastructure bears little resemblance to a deepwater discovery requiring floating production systems, subsea facilities and new pipelines. Their economic value lies not in gross revenue but in the surplus after these investments.

A fiscal regime linked primarily to revenue is inherently insensitive to this distinction. It taxes turnover before establishing whether a meaningful economic rent exists.

This matters most in frontier exploration, precisely where geological uncertainty and capital intensity are greatest.

The proposed reimbursement of exploration wells should be seen in this context. Rather than let the fiscal framework itself respond to uncertainty, the state proposes to socialize part of the exploration expenditure. The subsidy does not address the underlying weakness, but compensates for it.

A well-designed cost-recovery production-sharing contract would reflect upstream economics more naturally. The investor finances exploration and bears the full cost of failure. If it succeeds, legitimate costs are recovered from production and the profits are shared progressively between the investor and the state, whose share can thus rise when rents are high and fall when they are marginal.

The contractual label matters less than this principle. Norway achieves a similar outcome through profit-based petroleum taxation, while Brazil, Malaysia and Guyana

use variants of production-sharing arrangements. Indonesia, after experimenting with gross-split contracts, now permits cost-recovery structures alongside them. Their systems differ, but the principle is the same: the state's fiscal claim responds to project economics and not gross revenue.

Cost recovery, of course, requires discipline. Recoverable costs must be clearly defined, while procurement must be transparent and audits rigorous. These audits need not reside with a technical regulator like the Directorate General of Hydrocarbons (DGH). Determining whether an expense is deductible is an accounting function and could be entrusted to competent specialized entities within the finance establishment, leaving the DGH to concentrate on geology, reservoir management, production oversight and resource stewardship.

A drilling subsidy poses another difficulty. Operators select prospects, design wells and incur expenditure while possessing vastly more geological information than the gov-

ernment reimbursing them. This data imbalance cannot be eliminated through elaborate guidelines or appraisal panels; it is intrinsic to exploration. The government therefore confronts an uncomfortable question. Is it subsidizing wells that explorers would have drilled anyway, or wells they consider commercially unattractive without a subsidy? In the first case, public money achieves little, and in the second, taxpayers assume part of the risk associated with the less attractive portion of an exploration portfolio. Neither is particularly compelling.

India undoubtedly needs greater exploration. But government intervention is most valuable where it creates public goods: geological knowledge, common infrastructure, efficient regulation and stable fiscal institutions. These improve the attractiveness of an entire basin. Subsidizing an individual well does not.

Samudra Manthan has elements of both approaches. Its lasting contribution will depend less on how many wells it subsidizes than on whether it prompts a reconsideration of India's upstream fiscal architecture.

In the field of oil and gas exploration, uncertainty cannot be eliminated. It can only be shared. A successful regime prices risk. Poor ones subsidize it.

{ OUR TAKE }

A road map for progress

The success of the PM's *saptadharma* focus is critical to resolving the immediate crisis of jobs

Like every such address from the ramparts of the Red Fort over the past eight decades, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech to mark the 80th Independence Day combined a short-term actionable road map with the long-term path that the country should embark on.

The PM unveiled the seven streams or *saptadharma* that he believed will power India's journey to the centenary of its Independence in 1947. He correctly identified manufacturing as the first pillar. This newspaper has repeatedly noted in the past that much of India's problems with unemployment and youth discontent is tied to its failure to encourage large-scale manufacturing. But this is easier said than done, especially when a large part of the manufacturing landscape is actually in the informal sector marked by small sweatshops rather than capital-intensive, high-tech factories. Two others, devoting more attention to agriculture and technological innovation cannot come at a more urgent time, when small farmers are the mercy of increasingly volatile monsoons and climate shocks, and the IT industry — once the driver of the Indian economy and middle-class aspirations — has to quickly adapt to a world governed by breakthrough innovations in AI. This government has prided itself on the expansion of infrastructure and therefore it should come as no surprise that Gati Shakti is one of the pillars. But achieving self-reliance in defence will be a tougher goal to meet, given the mixed success of indigenous programmes and the push-and-pulls of defence procurement. The focus on renewables is welcome at a time when the oil crisis has hit the country's finances, and it is always a good idea to focus on soft power to grow India's global influence.

Among the actionables that the PM mentioned, the most important is the free coaching classes that the government intends to run. Coming against the backdrop of sweeping student protests that extracted a rare resignation of a Cabinet member, the step can be seen as an outreach to young people and also an attempt to break the school-to-coaching-class-to-higher-education-institutions cycle that disadvantages many. The intention is laudable but its success will depend both on the quality of the education imparted and the scale of the solution. There is a larger issue: The importance of competitive exams didn't grow in a vacuum but is entrenched in India's political economy that offers few avenues for mobility. The problem, as this newspaper has written before, is of jobs. To resolve this crisis, the success of the *saptadharma* is imperative.

Census as a registry of citizenship

Will the census become a registry of citizens? This is now the biggest question vis-a-vis the 2027 census exercise after the government has added sections to the schedule which seek personal details of citizens, which exist in other official and non-official databases, such as Aadhaar, passport, driving licence and mobile numbers. Such details have never been sought before in a census exercise in India. Once collected, it will make the census closer to a citizens' register than just an anonymous enumeration exercise that it has always been.

The exercise has its administrative upsides and it might allow various government databases to talk to each other. But its privacy and logistical concerns might need to be weighed carefully by constitutional experts. On the face of it, this will turn the census into a registry of citizens rather than an anonymous enumeration whose data are never shared outside the Registrar General of India below a certain level of granularity. What will complicate matters further is the government's repeated insistence on the fact that numerous other government-issued documents such as Aadhaar, voter ID cards, and even passports do not make a sufficient proof of citizenship in India.

Constitutional complexities aside, the move also raises questions from a logistical point of view. Unlike the census — a decadal exercise — most of the other information being sought are more fluid in nature and their count can vary significantly between two census exercises. Because there already exists a count of these documents in the country, the only logical explanation of collecting such data with the personal enumeration part of the census can be to match the two.

In an ideal world, this should have happened after a detailed discussion in parliament and outside it.

{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happyman Jacob



Mecca pact: Interests primary, not alliances

Our reflexive scepticism towards the shifting dynamics in West Asia indicates that certain entrenched habits are still overriding fresh strategic assessments of the region

Lord Palmerston, the British foreign secretary, told the House of Commons in 1848 that Britain had no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, and that only its interests were eternal and perpetual. The line has survived because it is as close to realpolitik as anything can be. But the interests argument is easier made than related policy framed — what makes for national "interest" is not easy to answer, more when it keeps changing. As a result, States and strategic thinkers are poor at identifying national interests, especially during times of geopolitical shifts. So, they go by past experiences, received wisdom and past friendships, enmity and neutrality. Our reflexive scepticism towards the shifting dynamics in West Asia — from the so-called Mecca Pact to Ankara's regional manoeuvring — indicates that certain entrenched habits are still overriding fresh strategic assessments of the region.

Consider how we view two of the

three parties to the pact. Turkey has been designated as an adversary. After all, Ankara backed Pakistan throughout Operation Sindoor, and it has been vocally uncharitable about India in the past — and that is Turkey's fault, not ours. So while our reasons to view Turkey in the "adversary" camp are genuine, doing so may not be in our interest. We may have also put the other signatory to the pact, Saudi Arabia, in the enemy camp due to two reasons. Reason one is Pakistan: Riyadh's relationship with Islamabad is old, solid and predates India's partnership in the region. The other reason is the UAE, around whom we have built our Gulf policy in recent years. With Abu Dhabi, Delhi has a trade agreement, growing investments, I2U2, and so on. And our friendship with Abu Dhabi and enmity with Islamabad have started colouring our relationship with Riyadh.

In ordinary times, New Delhi could afford an imperfect relationship with Riyadh; today, the Mecca Pact makes any diplomatic distance far too costly. For sure, the pact among Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan places them in a military camp opposed to India more as a function of the intentions in Riyadh or Ankara. One can interpret that their declaration that an armed attack on one will be treated as an attack on all three is strategically aimed at, thanks to our intensely adversarial situation with Islamabad. But let's look at the record of such recent pacts, which is

less dramatic.

Recall that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had signed a bilateral version of the same agreement in September 2025. Iran struck Saudi territory repeatedly thereafter. Neither Riyadh sought Pakistani military intervention, nor Pakistan considered itself under attack. Now, after the signing of the Mecca agreement, Houthi forces struck Saudis again, and neither Ankara nor Islamabad did anything. So, I have little reason to believe that if Pakistan is under Indian attack tomorrow, Saudi Arabia and Turkey will come attacking India. There is another reason why I think so. Riyadh has clearly sought to minimise the impact of the agreement itself. On the very day of signing, deputy minister for public diplomacy Rayed Krimly said the agreement was not a military axis, not a sectarian bloc, not linked to nuclear ambitions or an arms race, no threat to any country in the region, and no replacement for existing agreements with other States. That is way too explicit on what it is not.

Ankara has sought to institutionalise the pact even as Krimly played it down. Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan has compared the collective defence provision to NATO's Article 5, discussed a ministerial mechanism and a permanent secretariat in Saudi Arabia, and said the declaration should not remain limited to three countries, with Egypt among the candidates. Notably, he has also said it targets no State.

The one capital that has sought to



Holding grudges is the opposite of geopolitical agility, and they limit our options in a multi-aligned world

play it up is Pakistan and its analysts. Pakistan's defence minister Khawaja Asif called for Muslim nations to unite against Israel, explicitly characterising such an alliance as a NATO of the Islamic world. Deputy PM Ishaq Dar later stated that the agreement was purely defensive and directed at no country. Some Pakistani analysts have gone further even speculating about coordinated command and control.

When it comes to a military pact, the deterrence value is set by its most careful member, which in this case is Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has the money but has the least appetite for anyone else's war. So the capital doing the loudest talking, Islamabad, is not the capital that will eventually make the decision. That is the reassuring half of my argument.

The not-so-reassuring half has got to do with the changing nature of regional geopolitics and military dynamics. At the most basic level, the pact is evidence that West Asia is reorganising itself around the failure of American security guarantees, and that middle powers in the region are now keen on creating their own arrangements. So, we in India should be reading this as a description of the broader strategic environment we operate in rather than as a move directed against us. This takes me back to Palmerston. If

interests are the only permanent thing, then we must identify them, and revise our interests when circumstances change, as they have now in West Asia. Our interests in West Asia are energy, millions of our citizens there, sea lanes, and the potential corridors to Europe. And those interests of ours are hardly served by permanently dividing the region into camps — friendly and unfriendly.

The case I am making is for setting aside old grudges, for reasons arising out of pragmatism and not out of charity. Holding grudges is the opposite of geopolitical agility, and they limit our options in a multi-aligned world where options are more important than ever.

India has spent a decade arguing for a multipolar order, the importance of multilateralism, and for the right of States to hedge against and refuse binary choices. Saudi Arabia has now exercised that right, as has Turkey. This is what our own argument looks like when other countries practise it. The world is multi-aligned today; why shouldn't we be too?

Happyman Jacob is founder and director, Council for Strategic and Defence Research, and editor, INDIA'S World magazine. The views expressed are personal

More autonomy for the IITs will benefit India

There may be no better symbol of independent India's ambition than IIT Kharagpur. It rose from the grounds of the Hiji Detention Camp, where British forces imprisoned freedom fighters and, in 1931, shot dead two unarmed detainees. Less than two decades later, India transformed that site of repression into its first Indian Institute of Technology, turning ground once used to suppress Indian minds into a place that would produce engineers and scientists who helped shape the modern world.

As IIT Kharagpur celebrates its platinum jubilee, that history carries a larger lesson: India does its best work when it has the confidence to trust its own talent rather than wait for the West to define excellence.

The IIT system became one of post-independence India's greatest institutional achievements. Its graduates built domestic industries, helped power Silicon Valley and rose to lead some of the world's most influential technology companies. Yet India still underestimates the scientific and engineering capacity within the IITs and many other institutions of similar calibre.

For decades, Indian institutions have been pressured to mirror Western universities such as MIT, Stanford and Harvard. The prescription is always the same: Spend more on basic research, publish more papers, expand tenure tracks, improve citation counts and climb global rankings.

The American university system has many strengths, and I have spent the latter part of my career in it, but India should not copy its many weaknesses.

American universities spend tens of billions of dollars every year on research and generate huge amounts of intellectual property, yet only a small fraction become companies, products or technologies that reach society. The system is built around professors publishing papers that almost no one outside their narrow fields reads, because publications and citations are what help secure tenure, effectively baby-style lifetime employment. The result is a powerful incentive to optimise for academic recognition rather than for turning knowledge into invention.

That is what makes the changes I am seeing in India so significant: The IITs are beginning to move in the opposite direction.

I have worked closely with IIT Madras, IIT Delhi and IIT Kharagpur and consider directors of all three my friends. What I have seen is a profound shift from when I first began studying Indian engineering education almost two decades ago at Duke and Harvard.

Like their Western counterparts, Indian universities were once insular, suspicious of private industry and assumed that academics alone knew which problems mattered. Today, these institutions actively seek collaboration with industry, encourage translational research, and want technologies to move from laboratories into the real world.

After moving the R&D of my Silicon Valley company, Vionix Biosciences, to the IITs, I have seen firsthand what this new model can make possible. The technical depth, motivation and willingness to tackle extremely hard problems among the faculty

and students I work with across engineering, physics, chemistry, medicine and artificial intelligence are exceptional, particularly at a time when many of the brightest graduates in the West are drawn toward the latest technology fad.

The IITs are delightfully competing with one another to create impact. They want faculty working on important problems, students building things, technologies being commercialised and research becoming products, companies and solutions. Government policy has helped drive this change, as has the determination of the leaders running these institutions.

The biggest constraint I see now is bureaucracy. Layers of mindless approvals, committees and administrative rules inherited from the British Raj still consume enormous institutional energies. Leaders such as Suman Chakrabarty at IIT Kharagpur are pushing hard to make their institutions more entrepreneurial and impact-driven, but they still have to navigate administrative structures that bog everything down.

The government must cut these institutions loose. Give IIT directors greater autonomy, strip away unnecessary reporting and outdated rules, make industry collaboration easier, and give leaders the authority to fight the entrenched bureaucrats who resist change.

India must also stop asking the West what a great research university should look like. It should instead focus science and engineering on the problems India and humanity urgently need solved.

That means going deep into physics, chemistry, biology, materials science, engineering and artificial intelligence to tackle clean water, early cancer detection, affordable diagnostics, energy storage, food security, pollution and advanced manufacturing. These are not lesser forms of research because they begin with practical problems; many demand fundamental scientific breakthroughs.

The strongest modern one in which industry identifies real-world problems, universities provide scientific depth and young talent, and government supports long-term missions too broad for any one company to finance. Making that collaboration easier could become one of India's strongest competitive advantages.

Imagine IITs competing not merely on placement packages, citation counts and global rankings, but on who develops the most affordable cancer diagnostic, cleans the most contaminated groundwater, produces a breakthrough battery, reduces agricultural losses or builds technologies that improve millions of lives.

Let's celebrate the platinum jubilee should therefore be seen as more than an anniversary. It began as an assertion that independent India could define its own future, then became the model for the IIT system that followed. Its next chapter can make an even larger statement: that India no longer needs to imitate the world's great research institutions, because it is capable of creating a better model of its own.

Vivek Wadhwa is CEO, Vionix Biosciences. The views expressed are personal

{ HARIVANSHI } DEPUTY CHAIRMAN, RAJYA SABHA

The Constitution has a provision for delimitation ... you've (different Union governments) postponed delimitation twice



{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



India@79: Much is done, much remains to be done

After the Independence Day euphoria, let's now ponder over some complex issues facing the nation. What are these?

Let me take you back to Uttar Pradesh of the 1950s. My generation was born in this decade. Our democratic values had been strengthened after conducting two general elections and many epoch-making works were initiated.

Cities, at the time, didn't get electricity for hours, and most of the villages were *buni-huni* (without electricity). During this time, India suffered catastrophic droughts and famine. Gangs' flow almost dried up.

I have vivid recollection of ration shops that would shut before many in the long queues could secure their ration. That decade, India and Pakistan got into a war. The exemplary bravery of our soldiers assuaged, to some extent, our deep hurt from the defeat at the hands of the Chinese some years ago.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru too passed away during the decade. His replacement Lal Bahadur Shastri's tenure was short. Indira Gandhi's ascent was the result of Shastri's untimely death. The emergence of dynastic politics can be traced to this. In those times, Dalits couldn't fetch water from many wells and lakes, and couldn't ride a horse for their wedding procession. Muslims were relatively better placed, but were weighed down by the unnecessary guilt of Partition. The country got the first Muslim president and its only woman prime minister (all date) in the same decade. During the same decade, the backward classes' impact on politics in the southern states signalled a change in future political equations.

Baby steps were taken in the field of sports, education, technology, and science. In the 1960 Rome Olympics, Milkha Singh won hearts globally though he failed to secure a medal. It was the golden era of Indian hockey and football. In cricket, India defeated New Zealand under the captaincy of Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi. It was the time when the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) were established. The first rocket was fired from Thumba space centre and the Indian Space Research Organisation came into its own.

Today, India is on its way to become a economic superpower. But disparities remain.

New Delhi has witnessed a string of powerful governments since 2009. Great progress has been made in the field of access to electricity,

health and education. But there's still a wide chasm between government data and the ground reality. We have the world's largest pool of graduates, but 45% of them can't secure a job commensurate with their degree.

Even nature seems to be adversely disposed towards us. The monsoon season is on, but 26 rivers in Bihar are almost dry. Reports from Uttarakhand suggest it has lost 25% of its forest cover. Today, the rains soak the bare hillsides, creating havoc. On the eve of Independence, 14 people are battling for life, victims of debris flow in a tunnel in Chennai.

In such times, I am reminded of those small towns where I grew up. Though electricity or tap water wasn't available in every house, but rains didn't lead to deadly water-logging either. Today, even in the financial capital Mumbai, water-logging becomes a life threatening event for the commuters. While villages are emptying out, tier 2 and tier 3 towns are witnessing a boom in multi-storied apartment complexes.

If we need to maintain a balance in our demography, we must create employment opportunities in the villages. Along with secure borders, we need to ensure social and environmental security with equal sensitivity. Since the economic liberalisation of 1991, we have tried to turn Bharat into India. Economic inequality has gone through the roof. Such inequality led to the demise of the Soviet Union and has redrawn the maps of many European nations.

But there's no need for pessimism. We know how to move ahead, breaking the chains of adversity. Many rulers came to this land and became a part of this country. We learn from everyone and internalised those teachings.

Seventy-nine years of Independence have progressively added strength to the narrative. Today, those born in the 1950s, living in the sixth decade of their lives, draw joy from the fact that we are still a young nation. Opportunities, energy, and youth are complementary to each other. But there's another side to the same story. We will start aging in the next decade. Three decades from now, India will have more aged than young. Are we ready to face that challenge? We'll need to think about it today. Why not begin the process today? We will have to think about how we can bring along those who are left behind.

There can be no better start to the 80th year of our Independence.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

Living through the overwhelming 'sandwich generation' squeeze

A large chunk of India's middle-aged demographic has to take care of both young children and elderly parents.



DEV ASHISH
FOUNDER, STABLEINVESTOR

Luckily, the squeeze phase doesn't last forever. Kids grow up, loans get paid off and people enter peak earning years as they move towards their 50s. And given the increase in surplus during this phase, many people can accelerate retirement contributions meaningfully.

You are neither too young, nor too old. Your children's higher education is just a few years away. Your old parents increasingly need support, not just medical and emotional but sometimes financial. Plus, you are either repaying a loan or two, and trying to save something for your own retirement which, in this era, may happen much before you hit 60.

As overwhelming as this sounds, it is a classic sandwich generation squeeze. The phrase 'sandwich generation' is often used to describe a growing demographic group that needs to take care of both young children and elderly parents. Not just financially, but emotionally and psychologically too. And increasingly, this is becoming the default state for a large chunk of India's middle-aged group.

Sadly, most advice on handling this phase of life is either too vague or too guilt-driven (e.g. 'family-comes-first'). Here is one way to think about it. Not perfect, but one which tries to make this intense phase a little less exhausting.

Label the non-negotiables

First, identify the non-negotiables, and then protect them at all costs. I often tell clients that no one gets a loan for retirement. And it is best after your retirement not to rely on children and become an irritating line in their expense tracker; another way of saying 'your children shouldn't be your retirement plan'.

The suggested strategy is to continue at least the minimum baseline contribution towards your retirement at all times. This includes provident fund, National Pension System and mutual fund systematic investment plans (SIPs).

It is tempting to pause retirement SIPs when other goals shout louder. But once you stop for several years, the compounding lost is very hard to recover. Saving for retirement should be like a noiseless, efficient machine running constantly in background—like a refrigerator.

Maintain a basic emergency fund to take care of 6-12 months of household expenses. It should be large enough to absorb both in come shocks (like temporary job loss) and expense shocks (unplanned, uninsured, unexpected expenses). Ensure that the family, including ageing parents, has adequate health insurance with reasonable top-ups. For some households, a dedicated medical contingency fund may be necessary (if elders' health can't be insured). Also, get yourself a large term life insurance.

Be reasonable on higher studies

Indian parents are known for sacrifices. But for middle-aged people who are already



overwhelmed, the aim should be to save a meaningful share—not necessarily 100% for their children's higher education. Aiming for a reasonable contribution combined with education loans is more sustainable than trying to entirely fund your child's higher studies journey at the cost of goals like retirement.

This doesn't sound great to hear as a parent, but when financial resources are limited, uncomfortable adjustments may be necessary.

At the same time, don't take this as an excuse to not sacrifice for your child's future. Children's higher education is definitely right up there in importance as retirement. So if cutting down unnecessary habits/expenses and working hard (to earn more) can help save more for child's future, then you should do it.

Supporting elders

Have no doubts: your parents are your responsibility. You should do what is right and what needs to be done, just as they did when you were young. But if your parents already have their own savings, investments, pensions, and rental income, then trying to do everything on your own isn't very prudent, even if it's generous and feels right duty-wise as a child.

There is no right formula about this, but do what is right and what helps you balance other priorities. That said, it is extremely important to ensure that elders have proper health insurance, which, if possible, is augmented with a dedicated medical contingency fund.

Sequencing so it gets better later

If you really are running a tight ship and can't save simultaneously for everything, then pretending otherwise would mean none of the goal (or buckets) get funded adequately. A bet-

ter approach might be to sequence things a bit. Money can then flow through goals in a fixed order of importance and lower priority goals get funded only when higher priority ones are getting at least minimum level of funding.

A possible sequence can be emergency fund, health insurances, minimum retirement contributions, essential parental support, and children's education funding.

Luckily, the squeeze phase discussed doesn't last forever. Kids grow up, loans get paid off and people enter peak earning years as they move towards their 50s. And given the increase in surplus during this phase, many people can accelerate retirement contributions meaningfully by redirecting money that was earlier going towards college fees or loan repayments.

Spending is okay

All this can feel overwhelming. And when responsibilities are too many and money is limited, it is easy to start treating every rupee as a problem to be solved. But life cannot only be about solving problems and discharging responsibilities, as Elon Musk once said.

So go on and take that family trip, celebrate small occasions, spend on experiences that create memories without constantly calculating the opportunity cost. Don't try to save it all. Occasional guilt-free spending on what genuinely matters isn't irresponsibility, it is what keeps this long journey worth continuing.

Please send your feedback to
etwealth@timesofindia.com



The final checklist



DOs

- **Reconcile before filing:** Match AIS, Form 26AS, TDS, bank, invoices and broker records
- **Report income correctly:** Disclose salary, freelance/professional, F&O and intraday income under the right heads, in the applicable schedules
- **Pick the right ITR form:** Check presumptive taxation eligibility before choosing ITR-3 or ITR-4.

DON'Ts

- **Misclassify trading income:** F&O is generally non-speculative; intraday equity trading is generally speculative.
- **Ignore mismatches:** Differences with AIS, 26AS, broker, bank or TDS records can invite scrutiny
- **Get loss set-off, carry forward claims wrong:** Speculative, non-speculative losses have different set-off rules.

als such as consultants and freelancers may opt for presumptive taxation under Section 44ADA, while eligible businesses may consider Section 44AD, subject to the prescribed conditions and thresholds," says Baweja.

ITR-4 is meant for resident taxpayers opting for the presumptive taxation regime—those whose total income is less than ₹50 lakh, besides other eligibility criteria, can opt for this form. "Taxpayers with more complex income situations, including detailed business reporting requirements, certain capital gains situations, foreign assets, or those not using presumptive taxation or income above ₹50 lakh, generally need to file ITR-3. Where trading income, multiple business activities and detailed expense claims are involved, ITR-3 is often the more appropriate form," points out Baweja.

"Besides the nature of your business activity, business turnover/gross professional receipts, ascertain whether the presumptive scheme will be more beneficial than claiming actual expenses," advises Surana.

Section 44AD covers resident individuals, Hindu undivided families (HUFs) and partnership firms (excluding limited liability partnerships, i.e. LLPs) carrying on an eligible business. Income is deemed to be 8% (6% for receipts through cheque or digital modes) of turnover/gross receipts under the presumptive taxation scheme. It is available to taxpayers whose turnover is less than ₹2 crore (₹3 crore if cash receipts make up less than 5% of total receipts).

Section 44AE applies to specified professionals such as consultants, accountants, architects, engineers, IT professionals, and other professions notified by the government. Under this scheme, 50% of gross professional receipts is treated as taxable income. It is available where gross receipts do not exceed ₹50 lakh (₹75 lakh if cash receipts constitute less than 5% of total receipts).

Section 44AB applies to taxpayers engaged in the business of plying, hiring or leasing goods carriages, and is generally relevant to transport operators. "The scheme is generally beneficial where expenses are relatively low, and the taxpayer prefers simplified compliance without maintaining detailed books of account. However, taxpayers with F&O trading income, intraday trading income, substantial business expenses, brought-forward losses, or tax audit implications should carefully evaluate whether presumptive taxation is suitable," says Surana.

tions should carefully evaluate whether presumptive taxation is suitable," says Surana.

New code, new questions

ITR forms meant for businesses and professionals come with an added layer of complexity. "The determination of whether a taxpayer carries on 'business' or 'profession', while straightforward in the majority of cases, can be tricky in certain cases—especially where social media influencers are professionals," says chartered accountant Himank Singla, Partner, SBHS Associates.

The question arises whether influencers should be taxed as businesses, with only 6-8% of turnover deemed as income under the presumptive scheme, or as professionals, where 50% of receipts are deemed as income. The presumptive taxation scheme under Section 44ADA is available only to specified professionals. "Social media influencer or content creator is not specifically included as a notified profession under Section 44AA," points out Singla.

However, the tax department introduced a new code, 16021, for social media influencers in the ITR-3 and ITR-4 forms last year. Many taxpayers viewed this as recognition of influencers as professionals. If a profession code exists for influencers, the assumption was that they would qualify as professionals for tax purposes. "Legally, that conclusion is not necessarily correct because the Act itself has not been amended," Singla cautions.

In other words, the inclusion of a profession code in an ITR form does not, by itself, alter the legal position. Chartered accountants believe the tax department should issue a clarification explicitly stating whether influencers can avail of presumptive taxation.

Beware of the common tax traps

Even salaried individuals with fairly straightforward disclosure requirements end up making mistakes, inviting notices from the taxman. Those with multiple income sources need to be even more careful.

"Misclassifying trading income remains one of the most common errors. Many taxpayers incorrectly report F&O income as capital gains when it is treated as business income, leading to incorrect tax computation," highlights Baweja.

Although the AIS now contains detailed information about taxpayers' financial

transactions, some fail to verify the statement with their own records. Failing to reconcile income disclosures with AIS, Form 26AS, broker statements, bank records and TDS certificates can result in mismatches and notices. The tax department increasingly relies on data-driven verification, making reconciliation critical, Baweja explains.

Checking the AIS helps you spot income you may have overlooked, like interest on bank fixed deposits, dividends or investment, redemption, and sale transactions.

As mentioned earlier, selecting the wrong ITR form can lead to your returns being treated as 'defective'. "Incorrectly opting into or out of presumptive taxation can create compliance complications, delay processing and potentially lead to defective return notices. Taxpayers should carefully evaluate eligibility before choosing between ITR-3 and ITR-4," adds Baweja.

Reporting income under the wrong head

is another off-repeated error, say experts. "For example, F&O income, which is generally treated as non-speculative business income, is classified as speculative business income. Incorrect classification can lead to wrong tax computations, denial of expense claims, improper loss set-off, and potential notices from the tax department," says Surana.

He adds that taxpayers in this category incorrectly calculating their trading turnover, income and losses is another common tax trap. "Some end up claiming loss set-offs that are not permitted under the Income Tax Act. These errors can affect the ability to carry forward losses, trigger tax audit implications, or result in incorrect tax liability calculations."

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Next Act

N Chandrasekaran's decision not to seek another term as chairman of Tata Sons is being presented as a succession question. It is more consequential than that. It marks the first major test of who controls the group after Ratan Tata, and what the conglomerate should become without the man who held its competing interests together. Chandrasekaran has not been abruptly removed. He will complete his present term - until February 2027. But his explanation is revealing: a proposal to extend his tenure failed to secure unanimous board support in February and remained unresolved six months later. For the chairman of a group built as much on consensus as on corporate hierarchy, that deadlock was itself the message.

The disagreement matters because Tata Sons is not an ordinary holding company. Tata trusts control about two thirds of it, while Tata Sons in turn exercises decisive influence over the sprawling commercial empire. Ratan Tata could reconcile the interests of trustees, professional managers and shareholders because his personal authority was greater than the institutional tensions between them. His death removed that balancing force.

Noel Tata, who became chairman of Tata Trusts after his half-brother's death, now occupies a pivotal position, reporting on the dispute points to disagreements over capital allocation, loss-making ventures, governance and the future of Tata Sons itself. The question of a possible listing is particularly important. So is the position of the Shapoorji Pallonji Group, which holds a substantial minority stake and has long sought an exit.

These are not technical disagreements. They concern the purpose of the Tata Group. Chandrasekaran's Tata has pursued an ambitious transformation: Air India, electronics and semiconductor manufacturing, batteries, digital businesses and other new ventures require enormous capital before they can deliver returns. That strategy may eventually strengthen the group, but it also increases the risks borne by Tata Sons. Air India's continuing losses and other pressures make the argument over capital allocation harder to avoid.

The alternative is not simply greater caution. It could mean a Tata Group more focused on businesses that already generate dependable returns, with tighter scrutiny of investments and less willingness to pursue grand industrial bets.

That makes the choice of Chandrasekaran's successor unusually important. Tata Trusts has already begun the process of selecting the next Tata Sons chairman. She or he will therefore inherit not merely a portfolio of companies but an unresolved argument about strategy, governance and ownership. There is an irony here. Tata's distinctive structure was designed to protect the group from the short-term demands of ordinary corporate ownership. Yet after Ratan Tata's death, that same structure has become the arena for a struggle over strategic authority.

The real succession battle, therefore, is not over who occupies the chairman's office. It is over which Tata Group comes after Ratan Tata: one that continues Chandrasekaran's expansive transformation, or one that consolidates and exercises greater control over its ambitions. Chandrasekaran's departure does not settle that question. It makes it unavoidable.

The State Test

Colombia's new right-wing president, Abelardo de la Espriella, who took office in July, has shifted beneath his feet. Three days into his presidency, a 7.4-magnitude earthquake struck western Colombia, killing more than 250 people and exposing a problem that no campaign speech can easily solve: the Colombian state does not reach all Colombians with equal force. The disaster has tested the government's ability to mobilise rescue teams, money and machinery. In relatively prosperous areas such as Cali and the coffee-growing regions, the response has been substantial and in Chennai, near the epicentre and Colombia's poorest region, people have complained of inadequate equipment, disrupted services and delayed assistance. The contrast is more than a logistical failure. It is a picture of Colombia's deeper inequity.

Choco is not poor because an earthquake struck it. It was poor before the earthquake, with weak infrastructure, difficult terrain, armed groups and limited state presence. Its predominantly Afro-Colombian and indigenous population has long experienced the Colombian government differently from citizens in the country's richer and better-connected regions.

That makes the earthquake an unusually revealing first test for De la Espriella. His political appeal rested partly on hostility to the established political elite and scepticism towards Bogotá. He had spoken of governing more from his home city of Barranquilla. But a national catastrophe demonstrates why the capital matters. Ministries, specialist agencies, military logistics, international partners and much of the country's institutional expertise remain concentrated there.

The lesson is not that Colombia needs more centralisation. It is that decentralisation without capable local institutions can simply leave the most vulnerable further from effective government. A state that retreats from remote regions without first making them capable of governing themselves does not empower citizens. It abandons them.

De la Espriella faces a similar test of his own making. His transition from the government of left-wing predecessor Gustavo Petro was unusually fraught, leaving the incoming administration without some of the information and institutional continuity normally required when taking charge of a complex state. Under normal circumstances, that might be an embarrassing political dispute. In a national emergency, it becomes a matter of administrative capacity.

The president has also inherited a disaster management system damaged by corruption and financial weakness. Yet his campaign promises included austerity and a smaller public sector. The earthquake therefore presents an uncomfortable contradiction: the government is being asked to spend more, coordinate more and deliver more precisely when its political instinct is to reduce the state.

For De la Espriella, the real test will begin after the rescuers leave. Can his government rebuild infrastructure and public trust in places that have long forgotten? Can he make the state smaller where bureaucracy is wasteful while making it stronger where citizens scarcely experience it at all? The earthquake has not created Colombia's two-tier state. It has merely made it impossible to ignore.

Arithmetic of empty ledgers

The Sixteenth Finance Commission has enlarged panchayat grants and then locked a fifth of them behind a revenue test the villages have no instruments to pass

On the fifth of August, the West Bengal panchayat department quietly withdrew a circular it had issued only days earlier. The standard operating procedure had set the villages a time-bound drive to collect more tax from their own residents, with a schedule for pursuing defaulters: press reports read it as an instruction to raise about Rs 1,200 from every rural household, and the political reaction was sharp enough that the department discovered the figure as "completely false" and took the document back.

The retreat is more telling than the circular. Behind it stands a number the state cannot escape: some Rs 2,521 crore in performance grants it hopes to draw from the Sixteenth Finance Commission in the closing years of the award, money that will be released only if its gram panchayats can show a steep rise in what they raise themselves. A poor state was reaching into poor villages because a national formula had made the reach compulsory - and then flinched.

That formula deserves to be read twice before anyone calls it reform. A gram panchayat that cannot demonstrate own-source revenue of at least Rs 1,200 per household in a year - a sum smaller than a single urban water bill - now stands to lose its share of a devolution pool the Commission has enlarged by 84 per cent, to Rs 4.25 lakh crore for the award period from 2026-27 to 2030-31. Of that pool, Rs 870.48 crore, a full fifth, is a performance grant gated behind exactly this test. The most generous rural devolution the panchayats have ever been offered arrives with a lock, and the key has been cut out for a door most of them do not possess.

The lock would be fair if the capacity to open it existed. It does not, and the reason is structural rather than moral. The Reserve Bank of India's 2024 study of panchayat finances found that own revenue - local taxes and fees together with non-tax receipts - supplies barely 4.4 per cent of what panchayats take in: almost everything else arrives as grants. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's own Expert Committee on own-source revenue put the national figure at Rs 59 raised per person over the five years to 2021-22 - and that average conceals the whole argument. Goa's panchayats raised Rs 1,635 a head; eleven states and Union



territories, Bihar among them, have not so much as framed the rules under which a panchayat may tax at all. A single national floor laid across a range that runs from nothing to Rs 1,635 is not a test of performance. It is a test of geography.

Three failures hold that incapacity in place, and they sit in an order of cause. The first is physical: most panchayats keep no enforceable property register, and a council that cannot say which houses exist, who owns them and what they are worth has no property-tax base to tax - no base, no revenue, no number to report.

The second is documentary: without a standard chart of accounts, even a council that does collect cannot produce an auditable statement of what it collected, so the Rs 1,200 test is unverifiable even where the money is real. The third is the cruelty folded into the design: a council that cannot prove revenue forfeits the grant that might have paid for the very staff and survey that would generate the proof, and next year's demonstration is harder than this year's.

None of this is the villages' failure to report. Under Article 243H of the Constitution, a panchayat may levy only those taxes a state legislature chooses to authorise; the taxing power is permissive, and where the state has devolved no workable handle and framed no rules, the deficit was legislated in the state capital, not squandered in the village. The State Finance Commissions that Article 243-I obliges every state to constitute were meant to meet precisely this - most meet late, report later, and are acted upon barely.

None of it makes performance conditionality wrong in principle. Tying public money to demonstrated results is sound doctrine, not a trap, and no auditor should romanticise unclaimed grant dependency. The Commission is even right to offer two routes - a modest year-on-year growth in own revenue, or the flat Rs 1,200 floor. The growth test is defensible; a council asked only to do a little better than last year is being asked something fair. The absolute floor is where the design

turns punitive, because it is indifferent to the starting point. The error is not doctrinal but sequential. A results test cannot run before the instruments that produce the result exist. Any auditor learns this in the first week: you cannot audit what has not first been accounted for. Applied to councils without registers or ledgers, the Rs 1,200 rule creates not an incentive but a disqualification problem - councils that could improve are denied the means of proving it, and are filled, beside the genuinely negligent, under a single heading of failure.

What must come first is unglamorous and entirely buildable: a minimum viable balance sheet for the panchayat, three instruments in place before the floor is allowed to bite.

The first is a standard chart of accounts, uniform across a state and honestly kept. The template exists - the Model Accounting System prescribed by the Comptroller and Auditor General with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj - but a prescription is not a practice, and adoption remains ragged. A usable chart must state each revenue head separately - property tax, water charges, licence fees and fines cannot collapse into one line - keep capital heads apart from revenue, show grants distinctly from own collection, and carry a live demand-collection balance register of what was billed against what was actually realised. Without that last register, own-source revenue is a figure a council can assert but no one can check.

The second is a property register married to an enforceable valuation rule, and the choice of rule is the whole game. The unit-area method - built-up area multiplied by a notified zonal rate - and the annual rental-value method yield materially different tax bases from the same house, and a register that does not fix which method applies cannot

be audited, because two honest assessors will reach two lawful answers. "Enforceable" has to mean something exact: a rule notified by the state, a fixed revision cycle so values do not ossify for a decade, and a defined penalty on the officers who let the register lapse. A register without a valuation rule is a list of buildings; only the rule turns it into a tax base. The third is a chartered accountant's engagement, separate from the local fund audit that already exists on paper and typically runs years in arrears. Its scope should be narrow and its terms strict, and the accountant who writes up a panchayat's books cannot be the one who certifies them; independence is the point of the exercise.

The certificate should state three things before any grant turns on them - that the prescribed chart has been kept rather than reconstructed at year-end, that the property register reconciles to the demand-collection-balance statement, and that the reported own-source revenue tracks to bank credits rather than a secretary's self-declaration - and it should quantify its exceptions, distinguishing an honest gap in the records from a suspected diversion of funds. Where the accounts fall short, the answer is state money to set them right, not the automatic extinction of the grant, which only deepens the hole. Only once such a certificate exists does the Rs 1,200 test measure anything real. The Commission has offered the villages more money than they have ever been promised and, in the same breath, a reason many will never receive it.

West Bengal's brief, abandoned tax drive is the shape of things to come: states caught between a formula and their own poorest citizens, improvising levies and retreating under fire. A revenue floor is not a wall to keep the undeserving out; it should be a staircase the willing can climb, and a staircase needs its lowest steps built first. Lay the ledger before the levy, the register before the demand, the audit before the reward - or the incentive the Commission intends will reach the councils that need nothing at all, and land on the poorest as a fine for being poor.

INQUIRER

No joke: Secret fund misuse real

Confidential funds were used to buy tables, chairs, and groceries. Medicines and food items were used as rewards for information. Checks amounting to hundreds of millions were withdrawn in cash and stuffed in gym bags. Fake names were used as recipients. These were among the many red flags in Vice President Sara Duterte's confidential fund utilization, as stated in the testimony of a state auditor presented as a prosecution witness during last week's impeachment trial. The Vice President's reply to these irregularities will be known when her defense team presents its case at the trial, after the prosecution finishes presenting all four articles of impeachment against her in the next two months.

Yet the many telling details about how the Vice President's P42.5 million confidential funds were spent and liquidated bolster long-standing concerns about the potential for misuse and corruption of confidential and intelligence funds (CIF).

The lack of oversight and safeguards in

using secret funds, coupled with public officials seemingly being in no position of accountability when taking liberties with taxpayer money, only calls into question the continuing practice of allocating confidential funds beyond public scrutiny.

It was the testimony of Roderick Wamil, former auditor at the Commission on Audit's (COA) Intelligence and Confidential Funds Audit Office, that focused on the irregularities in the confidential fund utilization. He said the VP's office submitted mere acknowledgment receipts, instead of official receipts and sales invoices, for liquidating the expenses. "So, based on the acknowledgment receipts they submitted, rewards were paid in cash, medicines, and various goods. However, none of those reward payments had any supporting document attached showing the success of the information-gathering or surveillance activity conducted on the basis of the information provided by the

informer," Wamil said. He said failure to liquidate the funds was a serious practice tactic evidence that the funds were for the VP's personal and private use.

Private prosecution lawyer Lorna Kapunan presented obviously fictitious names as recipients of the confidential funds - Andy Lim, Alejandro Pikit, Mico Harina, Nova Santos, and Patty Ting. These were in addition to Mary Grace Platons, now a household name, who was found to have no birth or identification records.

One loophole in the much-touted Joint Circular No. 2015-01, which provides guidelines in the use of CIF, is its silence on the use of aliases in the liquidation documents. Wamil said under the joint circular, aliases are neither prohibited nor allowed. This is a grey area that can be exploited to flout accounting rules, as shown in the VP's case. The joint circular specifies expenses where confidential funds can be used, but the agency has wide latitude and total secrecy in spending the money.

COA's postaudit mandate does not help identify red flags before the funds are used. Only after the funds were utilized could the COA come in and issue an audit observation memo asking the agency to comply with proper liquidation requirements or a disallowance if the agency fails to do so. This brings us to the fundamental issue of why civilian agencies, such as the Office of the Vice President (OVP), should receive confidential funds when national security is not part of their mandate.

Unlike intelligence funds, which are clearly for information gathering by uniformed, military, and intelligence agencies that directly impact national security, confidential funds are for surveillance activities by civilian agencies intended to support their mandate. But as indicated in the VP's case, the confidential funds were used for expenses that are well within the OVP's regular budget. Bank officials likewise found it "unusual" that the VP's confidential funds were all withdrawn in cold cash.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Shared identity

Sir, India is a country born out of civil disobedience and hence no stranger to protest. Once worn as a badge of honour, today disobedience is considered a criminal offence. These are we discussing the issue in the month of August only adds to the irony. The official response to the CJP movement has revealed an inept government, out of its depth when challenged, and ready to wage war against its own citizens. A war that criminalises the use of 'offensive' language but not the use of pellet guns.

A war in which the media does not hesitate to circulate a video of a 15-year-old asking for forgiveness and applauds the magnanimity of a Prime Minister who forgives her. Meanwhile, no statements are made in parliament, no questions are answered. So much for the mother of democracy. And then there are those (Harsha Kataria and Vikram Singh) among them - *The Statesman*, 4 and 8 August respectively - who live in denial, trot out the same tired arguments, recycle state conspiracy theories and make sweeping, unsubstantiated claims.

The lure of free food at Jantar Mantar, the paid-to-protest crowd, the Pak-based infiltrators, and, of course, foreign funding. Yet the view from the ground revealed a different story. One of a sense of community, of shared identity of solidarity. No gentlemen, the bannans distributed at Jantar Mantar had not been sent by the CJP.

And Dipke himself has said that even the police helped out when the water supply was cut. It is so difficult to believe that there are good people out there who help each other? Or that a protest movement can bridge the divide and unite disparate groups with a shared grievance? Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has," said Margaret Mead.

Perhaps the government will now have to confront this uncomfortable truth. As the student protest unfolded, I was reminded of a quote that was popular in the student days: "The bidding of freedom, wild birds fly. Here's wishing India many wild birds."

Yours, etc, Ritu Khanna,
New Delhi, 10 August.

Manage AI

Sir, Apropos today's editorial "Investing in People", economic growth alone cannot heal the wounds of joblessness.

Globalisation followed by deindustrialisation in America resulted in displacement of jobs with matching rise of incomes and manufacturing in China.

Social discontent and political polarisation despite overall prosperity are shaping American politics today.

Artificial Intelligence brings major benefits like automation of otherwise boring and repetitive tasks, deep data insights in processing huge datasets faster than the human brain, working round-the-clock, reduction of chances of human error and capability of doing hazardous jobs.

However, it also creates serious challenges including displacement of human jobs, high installation cost and algorithmic bias.

The AI revolution should not be allowed to translate into mass unemployment. Retraining workers viewing their practical experience must be the priority.

The challenge is not the advent of technology, but its efficient management

so that innovation does not disrupt employment of human workforce.

Yours, etc, Sukhendu Bhattachacharya,
Sheoraphuli, 10 August.

Painting walls

Sir, Pakistan has made the complex choice of joining the Islamic NATO at Mecca. The primary target is Israel which in turn is an ally of the US. This indicates the changing priorities of Pakistan over their long-term relationship with the US. Pakistan also intends to leverage the strength of the axis to confront India. Pakistan as a nation has faced turbulent crises on multiple fronts ever since its independence. Politically, speculation about a coup by the military is on the rise. Fuel prices are the highest in South Asia and transport agencies are on strike crippling the country economically.

Geographically, the country is on the verge of breaking up. Neglecting the spread of muck inside the house, Pakistan is trying to paint the exterior.

Yours, etc, Murali M. Mallareddy,
Visakhapatnam, 11 August.

India must adapt to cash in on youth dividend

SIDDHARTH ROY

For nearly two decades, India's demographic dividend has occupied a central place in the country's economic narrative. Policymakers, economists and investors have repeatedly argued that India's greatest competitive advantage lies in its youthful population. While advanced economies, such as Japan, Germany and Italy contend with ageing societies and shrinking workforces, India remains home to the world's largest working-age population. According to the United Nations Population Fund's State of World Population Report 2023, nearly 68 per cent of India are between the ages of 15 and 64, giving the country a demographic profile unmatched by most major economies.

But demographics are not destiny. They are an opportunity whose value depends entirely on the economic environment in which they operate. Artificial intelligence is now transforming that environment. The assumption that a large labour force will automatically translate into economic growth is becoming increasingly fragile as intelligent machines perform a growing range of cognitive and routine tasks. India therefore faces a defining policy challenge: how to convert its demographic dividend into an AI dividend before technological disruption erodes one of its greatest strategic advantages.

The debate around artificial intelligence in India is often dominated by fears of job losses. Those concerns are understandable but incomplete. AI will undoubtedly automate certain occupations, particularly repetitive white-collar work such as document processing, customer support, routine coding and administrative functions. Goldman Sachs estimated in 2023 that generative AI could affect around 300 million full-time jobs globally, although many of these jobs are

expected to evolve rather than disappear. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 similarly projects that while AI and automation will displace millions of roles, they will also create new occupations requiring advanced digital, analytical and creative capabilities.

The real risk for India is not unemployment alone; it is employability. Every year, millions of young Indians enter the labour market. Yet several surveys continue to highlight a troubling mismatch between educational qualifications and workplace readiness. Reports by employability assessment firms have repeatedly shown that a significant proportion of graduates lack industry-ready skills despite holding formal degrees. This gap becomes even more consequential in an AI-driven economy, where adaptability matters more than routine expertise.

Previous technological revolutions largely complemented India's development model. Globalisation created demand for software engineers and business process outsourcing professionals. The digital economy generated opportunities in e-commerce, fintech and telecommunications. AI, however, is different because it increasingly automates precisely those middle-skill cognitive tasks that fuelled India's services boom. That does not imply India's demographic advantage has disappeared. It means its nature has changed. Countries that succeed in the AI economy will not necessarily possess the largest workforces. They will possess the most skilled, adaptable and technologically empowered ones. Human capital, rather than population size, is becoming the decisive determinant of competitiveness.

This is where India's policy choices become critical. The country already possesses several structural advantages. It has one of the world's largest digital public infrastructure platforms such as Aadhaar, the Unified Payments

Interface and DigiLocker have demonstrated that digital systems can operate at population scale while supporting innovation across sectors. India also hosts the world's third-largest startup ecosystem, with a rapidly expanding AI entrepreneurship landscape. According to Stanford University's AI Index Report 2025, India ranks among the leading countries globally in AI skill penetration and contributes significantly to the global AI talent pool. Yet there remains a striking paradox. Indian engineers help build many of the world's most sophisticated AI systems, but much of the intellectual property, frontier research and commercial value continue to be created elsewhere. India exports talent while importing advanced AI platforms. Bridging this gap requires rethinking education before rethinking technology. The National Education Policy 2020 rightly emphasises multidisciplinary learning, critical thinking and digital literacy. However, implementation must accelerate. AI is reshaping the premium on memorisation while increasing the value of reasoning, creativity and complex problem-solving. Universities should integrate AI across disciplines instead of treating it as a specialised engineering subject. Medical colleges should teach AI-assisted diagnostics, law schools should explore algorithmic governance, business schools should incorporate data-driven decision-making, and agricultural institutions should prepare students for precision farming.

Equally important is lifelong learning. The traditional assumption that education ends in one's early twenties is increasingly obsolete. Workers will need continuous reskilling as AI reshapes industries at an unprecedented pace. Countries such as Singapore have already institutionalised lifelong learning through programmes like SkillsFuture, enabling citizens to update their competencies throughout their



careers. India will require a similar national commitment if it hopes to preserve labour-market resilience.

Skill development alone, however, is insufficient. India must also strengthen its AI ecosystem. The India AI Mission is an encouraging beginning, particularly its emphasis on computing infrastructure, datasets and startup support. But becoming an AI leader demands sustained investment in research universities, semiconductor capabilities, high-performance computing and indigenous foundation models capable of understanding India's linguistic and cultural diversity. Public-private partnerships will be essential, but so will long-term public investment in frontier science. There is another reason why an AI dividend matters. Artificial intelligence is no longer simply an economic technology. It is becoming a strategic capability. AI increasingly influences defence planning, cybersecurity, healthcare, governance and industrial competitiveness. Countries that merely consume foreign AI systems risk technological dependence in areas central to national security and economic sovereignty. India cannot afford such dependence. Strategic autonomy in the 21st century will depend as much on computational capability and research ecosystems as it once depended on energy security or military strength.

The demographic dividend has always been described as a

once-in-a-generation opportunity because favourable age structures eventually disappear. India's working-age population is expected to peak in the coming decades before the country too begins ageing. That leaves only a limited window to transform demographic potential into sustainable productivity. Artificial intelligence has therefore raised the stakes rather than diminished them. A youthful population without advanced skills may struggle in an automated economy. A youthful population equipped with AI capabilities, digital literacy and adaptive education could become the foundation of India's next growth story.

The real question is not whether AI will replace India's demographic dividend. It is whether India can use AI to amplify it. If policymakers invest with urgency in education, research, innovation and lifelong skills, India could become the first major economy to convert demographic strength into technological leadership. If those investments are delayed, the country risks discovering that the world's largest workforce is no guarantee of prosperity in an economy where intelligence—both human and artificial, has become the defining source of national power.

The writer is a civil engineer, consultant (invited) to Rashtriya Raksha University under the Ministry of Home Affairs, and a contemporary affairs commentator. The views are personal.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 17 August 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

A second day's cricket at the Oval has seen the Australian innings ended for 302, a small advantage, and the second English innings on its way with 49 for no wicket. This is level fighting. Nothing sensational appears to have been done so far; apparently the most impressive feature of the game has been the failure of London to fill the Oval seats, which may be due to a disinclination on the Surrey side to pay the increased admission or to the damping effect of the four previous draws.

News Items

SEARCH FOR COAL PEACE

RESTRAINED OPTIMISM OPPOSITION TO EIGHT HOURS' DAY

(British Official Wireless.)
Rugby, Aug.

The forthcoming week is generally expected to see developments in the coal situation. The present position and the tone of the speeches made by the miners' leaders during the last few days have given rise to a feeling of restrained optimism among the public. Although it is likely that opinion will be divided, and that certain cross-currents will manifest themselves, it is widely expected that the meeting of the miners' delegates, which assembles to-morrow, will empower the men's leaders to negotiate within certain limits, for the best terms available. This does not necessarily mean that progress will then be straightforward and smooth, but if the anticipated overtures evanuate the Government will be prepared to arrange a fresh joint conference between the miners and owners, and to keep in touch with the parties during the negotiations. Although obviously desiring a resumption of conversations, the men's leaders maintain their opposition to an eight hours' day, while the owners declare that resumed negotiations can only succeed if the miners are prepared to face the economic facts of their industry.

DELEGATES' MEETING

LEADERS MAY BE GIVEN FREE HAND

(British Official Wireless.)
Rugby, Aug.

The meeting of the miners' delegates assembles this afternoon but no decision is expected before to-morrow upon the main issue before it, which is whether the executive committee will be released from the present instructions and given a free hand to re-open negotiations for the best settlement terms procurable. If the miners' leaders are given such a mandate, which they obviously desire, it is anticipated a request will be made to the Government to arrange a meeting with the coal-owners.

EARTHQUAKE SHOCKS

CARES IN ENGLAND AND WALES

London, Aug.

About five o'clock this morning an earthquake shock and subterranean rumblings, which lasted some seconds in certain places, and swaying of buildings, were experienced in Radnorshire, where people in one town rushed out into the streets. The shock was also felt in Shropshire, Somerset, Worcestershire, Berkshire and North London. —Reuter.

ANGRY PARIS CROWD

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF AMERICAN EX-SOLDIER

Paris, Aug.

There was an unusual scene to-day at the Unknown Warrior's tomb in the Arc de Triomphe. A one-legged American ex-soldier, named Trocker walked up to the sacred stone, broke a bottle of champagne, pronounced a toast 'In honour of the glorious dead' and smashed the glass on the stone. He was immediately arrested and was thus saved from rough handling from an indignant crowd. Trocker only arrived here last night and has given no reason for his strange conduct. —Reuter's Special Service.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

Talking with dogs

The young girl next door, who left her two shiny fish in a fishbowl with me when she went with her parents on a vacation, told me that they speak to her from time to time. Their moving mouth evoked my curiosity, but whatever their language, the message escaped me entirely.

Languages interest me. Though I am hardly fluent in all of them now, I have toyed in the past with new languages. It has been fun in strange countries to wander around on unknown streets, knowing that I can talk to strangers and will never be lost. But, like many others, I am lost when trying to understand the dogs and cats that have spent time with me. Their language is a conundrum.

My daughter, for instance, left her cat, Sancho, with me for two weeks when she went on a cruise. Sancho was quite mysterious, sometimes hiding in some obscure corner and sometimes following me around. As I worked on my laptop, she rolled over repeatedly, either to display her agility or to attract my admiration. Many other antics quite baffled me.

My longer association with Kirby, a handsome Siberian husky, whom I took out for a run twice a day for six years was no less baffling. When I

walked, she walked alongside sociably; when I ran, she ran faster—amazingly fast, in fact—in a singular display of independence. She had a distinct preference for certain trails, exactly like humans. Even more human like was her choice of specific places in the home. She chose to sit or rest in some corners and not in others. But, in many other respects, her activities were mystifying. She often seemed to be telling me things that I was too dumb to comprehend. Her movements and expressions told me that she wanted to do things, but I had no clue what those were.

Maybe these mysteries are about to cease their secrets. People who love their pets have wanted frequently to better understand their intentions and inclinations. There is now a distinct possibility that they can have their wish. Artificial intelligence, AI, has opened the door. In the last two decades, AI has mostly been used for what is called Supervised Learning. The researcher, for instance, tells the computer what to look for and how, such as how to identify photos of dogs and cats from a large pile of animal photos, fifty or fifty million. The researcher provides sample pictures of dogs and cats, which become the 'labels' that guide the computer's

algorithm, and, in seconds, the dog and cat photos are earmarked.

Now we have the breakthrough innovation of Self-Supervised Learning where such man-made labelling can be dispensed with. You simply give the computer a vast collection of photos and it struggles with the large inventory to identify some inherent patterns. Just as a person lost in a forest uses a variety of strategies to find a path out of it, the computer uses strategies appropriate to it to locate different categories and their characteristics. Such strategies have now been formalized into algorithms designed to capture animal languages.

The progress has been staggering. There is a giant collection of sounds of sea creatures collected through underwater recordings in coral reefs and other places, that will be able to tell us their characteristics. Such strategies have now been formalized into algorithms designed to capture animal languages. The progress has been staggering. There is a giant collection of sounds of sea creatures collected through underwater recordings in coral reefs and other places, that will be able to tell us their characteristics. Such strategies have now been formalized into algorithms designed to capture animal languages.



Illustration by: Debabrata Chakrabarty

batteries, thousands of bats and frogs are being regularly recorded. Machine learning systems are being used to parse animal communication in the wild. Software is analyzing vocalizations of different primates. Scientists already know that dolphins have a highly developed language and it has been the focus of substantial research.

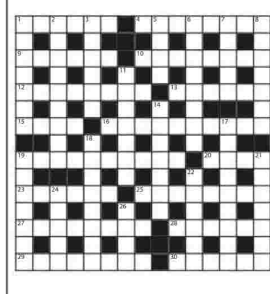
Such research is promising precisely because our idea of research itself is undergoing a radical change. Researchers are no longer beginning with the traditional concept of a hypothesis and then testing it against an array of data. AI is empowering them to start with a giant pile of data and then set a well-honed algorithm to find the pattern. The patterns of animal

communication, what has so far seemed to us like a meaningless blur of silly noises (you just have to recall old MacDonald's farm and its cacophony), are ripe for exploration and unravelling.

Cats and dogs that have romped around in our yards and living rooms and alternately amused and irritated us with their barking and meowing, will probably soon astound us with a glimpse of their hitherto inscrutable but probably colorful universe. The next time I acquire a dog or my daughter leaves her cat with me, I will expect to do a little better. Now if only I could understand the language of the women I meet.

The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at manishnandy@gmail.com

Crossword | No. 293553



Last Saturday's Solution

1. KILLER
2. VANDERBILT
3. ELEGANT
4. NINE
5. BAZ
6. UNRAVELLED
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Editor's TAKE

Modi's I-Day focus: Youth, reforms and Viksit Bharat

Prime Minister Modi's I-Day speech sought to place India's youth at the centre of Viksit Bharat, unveiling reforms and a series of initiatives

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address on India's 80th Independence Day – his 13th consecutive speech from the Red Fort, a record for any non-Congress prime minister – was ambitious in scope, familiar in tone. Built around the theme "Yuva Shakti for Viksit Bharat@2047," it unveiled "Shakti ki Sapta Dhara," a seven-point framework spanning manufacturing, agriculture, technology, infrastructure, defence, the green-and-blue economy and soft power, invoking the mythic "Sapta Sindhu" for a fresh current of reform.

The concrete takeaways skewed youth-first: free AI training for one crore young Indians, a Semiconductor Mission promising more fabrication plants within seven-eight years, a nationwide sports talent hunt for children aged 5 to 15 aimed at the 2036 Olympics, and free coaching for competitive exams. On energy, Modi noted that nearly all previously restricted offshore blocks have been opened to exploration, alongside progress on railway electrification and hydrogen trains.

Ceremonially, the full Vande Mataram – marking its 150th anniversary – was sung at the Red Fort for the first time since Independence. Where the speech overreached was its warning about "dimaagi Naxals" – people Modi said carried a "Maoist mindset" while embedded in the "corridors of power," including as advisers on government panels – with a call to identify and isolate them. He left the term undefined, and that vagueness let it be weaponised within hours: BJP spokespersons applied it directly to Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge, who skipped the Red Fort event for a second straight year.

A phrase meant to signal ideological vigilance became, instead, a personalised political jab – a stretch too far for an address meant to unite rather than target named rivals by insinuation. The bigger overreach was ambition standing in for course-correction. The speech arrived two days after a washed-out monsoon session in which Parliament barely debated student unrest, examination-paper leaks, or police action against young protesters. Official data put unemployment among Indians aged 15-29 at a record 16.2 per cent in June, with youth workforce participation sliding from 42.7 to 40.3 per cent over the year.

Against that backdrop, critics read the youth-heavy branding as mere repackaging. The opposition's pushback followed three tracks. Congress called the speech thin on substance: Maharashtra unit chief Harshwardhan Sapkal demanded an account of promises from Modi's previous two addresses. Jairam Ramesh dismissed "dimaagi Naxal" as evidence of "desperation," an escalation from the older "urban Naxal" tag. None of this erases the government's genuine claims – India remains, the world's fastest-growing major economy. But a speech meant to inspire ended up generating more heat than throw light on how the state plans to employ the youth it invoked fifty-two times.

Jharkhand students demand justice

Jharkhand's prolonged student agitation is no longer merely a protest over examination irregularities. What began with anger over alleged leaks and discrepancies in recruitment examinations has evolved into a broader expression of frustration over jobs, education, transparency and political representation



KALYANI SHANKAR

In recent years, Jharkhand has seen a rise in student activism driven by a growing awareness of social issues and the need for better representation. The student protests, which followed the rise of the Cockerroach Janata Party (CJP), at the all India level, marked a turning point in Jharkhand's socio-political narrative. Students recently organised protests after the unexpected rise of the Cockerroach Janata Party (CJP). These protests targeted issues in the education system, including the leak of question papers in NEET and other exams. The current political situation has encouraged young people to speak out about their frustrations and demands regarding the state's social and economic problems.

The student protests followed the rise of the Cockerroach Janata Party (CJP) and mark a significant moment in Jharkhand's social and political landscape. This student group is not just asking for better education and job opportunities; they want to be heard in the political conversation. They are fighting for a future where their voices matter, and their rights are respected.

Since July 25, protesters have gathered at a stadium in Ranchi, Jharkhand. Many have been sleeping outside, and some have initiated hunger strikes. Protesters are committed to continuing until all their demands are met. Their anger stems from a preliminary civil service exam held by the Jharkhand Public Service Commission (JPSC) in April. After the results were announced in July, candidates said leaked answer sheets on social media showed that some successful applicants answered fewer questions than expected. The CJP ended its five-week protest on July 25 with the resignation of education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

The CJP's achievements energised students, giving them a chance to voice their concerns about education, jobs, and social justice in Jharkhand – issues that the CJP highlighted. By pushing for transparency, accountability, and local involvement, the CJP resonated with students eager for change.

During the protests, students expressed their frustration with the declining quality of education in Jharkhand's institutions. Many protested against overcrowded classrooms, a lack of resources, and insufficient faculty, demanding immediate reforms to create a better educational environment.

Amid economic uncertainty, students pointed out the high unemployment rate, especially among graduates. They urged the government



THE IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF THEIR ANGER IS A PRELIMINARY CIVIL SERVICE EXAM HELD BY THE JHARKHAND PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION (JPSC) IN APRIL. AFTER THE RESULTS WERE ANNOUNCED IN JULY, CANDIDATES ALLEGED THAT LEAKED ANSWER SHEETS SHARED ON SOCIAL MEDIA INDICATED THAT SOME SUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS HAD ANSWERED SIGNIFICANTLY FEWER QUESTIONS THAN EXPECTED

The writer is a popular columnist

tunities and urged the CJP to prioritise youth employment in its agenda. Students demanded greater representation and involvement in the political process, expressing that the voices of the youth were often marginalised in decision-making. They advocated for platforms that encourage youth participation and ensure their concerns are addressed. The protests attracted a diverse group of students from various colleges and universities across Jharkhand. Utilising social media as an effective tool for organisation, they coordinated rallies, marches, and awareness campaigns. This visibility was crucial in amplifying their demands and bringing their issues to the forefront of public discourse.

As Jharkhand student agitation enters Day 20, job aspirants demand a CBI probe and the total cancellation of JPSC and JSSC recruitment exams. Protesting students, including Dendendra Mahto and Manoj Yadav, have threatened to demonstrate before the Chief Minister's residence after August 15th. An FIR has been registered against 100 named individuals and 500 unidentified protesters.

Meanwhile ABVP, the student wing has said it would stage demonstrations at over 1200 universities and in every district across the country, expanding the scope of the protests. The ABVP will resort to a phase-wise agitation across the country if a CBI probe into the job exam irregularities is not held. While the CJP movement is called Gen Z protest, the Jharkhand movement has a significant presence of an older generation of aspirants – millennials and others. It is not only youthful impatience. It is accumulated frustration. At Jantar Mantar, students were protesting against a BJP-led government at the Centre. The movement became increasingly confrontational and the police response became an important part of the story. In Jharkhand, the political equation is different and a non-BJP government is facing the students. A new twist is (CJP) has joined the ongoing student agitation in Jharkhand, with a party delegation reaching the protest site in Ranchi.

They declared "complete solidarity" with Jharkhand students. With the government holding talks but protesters refusing to call off their demonstrations, the coming days are likely to determine whether negotiations can break the deadlock.

For now, the students continue to demand accountability and corrective action over the recruitment examination process, while the state government says it will consider the issues raised by the protesting groups.



Armed Forces personnel during the 80th Independence Day celebrations, at Red Fort in New Delhi PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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INDEPENDENCE DAY: FREEDOM COMES WITH RESPONSIBILITY

The Sepoy mutiny of 1857 triggered India's fight for independence. Its rebellion against the British East India Company between 1857 – 1858 is a significant milestone in the struggle for freedom. Also known as India's first war of independence, the one year and six months revolt may not have yielded results in the sheer sense of the term but the rebellion was just the kind of boost required for the forerunners of Indian freedom struggle to take over.

As the country is geared up to celebrate the 80th Independence day on August 15, the supreme sacrifice and patience, not to mention the courage, of our freedom fathers deserve to be emulated.

Every Indian citizen should draw inspiration from what the freedom fighters did and how they achieved their goals with unflinching dedication and fierce determination.

At the stroke of midnight between August 14 and August 15, when the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru delivered his famous "Tryst with destiny" speech, entire India held its head high, and many may have had emotional goosebumps.

Nehru's "when the world sleeps, India will wake to life" cannot be easily erased from the psyche of an Indian. Independence day is a duty, a responsibility – to convert India into a country that others look up to.

GANAPATHI BHATT | AKOLA

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

The quiet power of belonging



SANJAY CHANDRA

2ND OPINION

Questions about employee attrition have become increasingly common in leadership discussions. Organisations invest heavily in understanding why talented people leave and what it takes to persuade them to stay. During one such conversation recently, I found myself reflecting on a very different workplace culture I had experienced more than four decades earlier, when I began my career in the Railways.

A senior officer accompanied me during the daily rounds of the maintenance shed for the first two weeks. At the end of the fortnight, he simply said, "From Monday, you are on your own." The shed and its staff were now my responsibility. Yet I was never really alone. Whenever difficult issues arose – whether with the trade unions or the Headquarters – I knew the senior officers stood firmly behind me. That

culture remained consistent throughout my years in the Railways. Senior officers backed difficult decisions, corrected mistakes without humiliation and encouraged me to take on unfamiliar responsibilities with confidence. These experiences made me feel that I belonged. I realised later that these small gestures influenced me more than I recognised at the time. I found myself offering the same support to younger colleagues, not because anyone asked me to, but because someone had once done the same for me.

When I entered the private sector nearly twenty-five years later, the workplace had changed considerably. Careers had become more mobile, organisations more dynamic, and restructuring more common. These changes brought many advantages – greater opportunities, faster growth and increased flexibility. I sensed that something less tangible, but equally important – was becoming harder to preserve: the sense of being connected to something larger than oneself. Many employers invest significant resources in designing performance management systems, incentives and retention strategies. These have an important place in every organisation. But they sometimes underestimate the influence of small human gestures – an encouraging conversation, a thoughtful approval, genuine appreciation or a senior taking an interest in someone's growth. Such moments create something that policies alone cannot: a lasting emotional connection with the organisation. Belonging cannot be mandated through organisational charts or employee handbooks. It develops when people feel that they matter beyond the role they perform.

Employees who experience that connection are often willing to contribute more than what is contractually expected because they begin to identify with its purpose as their own. Perhaps this becomes even more important during mergers and acquisitions. Structures, reporting lines and systems can be integrated relatively quickly. Trust, identity and belonging cannot. Unless people feel seen during periods of change, uncertainty often weakens commitment long before performance indicators begin to reflect it.

These experiences also made me reflect on a broader question. In a world where careers are increasingly fluid and professional relationships often shorter than before, organisations may need to invest as much in creating belonging as they do in improving efficiency. Technology can make work faster. Incentives can improve performance. But it is often another human being who determines whether someone merely works for an organisation or truly feels part of it. Looking back, I realise that what has stayed with me is not a policy, a promotion or even a particular achievement. It is the confidence others placed in me, often quietly. Perhaps that is what people remember longest – not the advice they receive, but the trust they are shown and the feeling that others believe in their potential. It is how people lead, work and inspire others.

The writer is a speaker of Kala - Krazy About Literature And Arts, is an author, founder, coach, arbitrator, and strategy consultant

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bar Council's Nalsar decision was unfortunate

The Bar Council of India's decision to temporarily halt the enrolment of 2026 graduates of Nalsar University of Law, reportedly because they opposed the university's invitation to Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, was unfortunate and legally questionable.

Though the decision has since been rescinded, it raises important questions about the limits of the Bar Council's authority and also about the right of students to protests. The Advocates Act empowers the Council to regulate professional conduct and standards among advocates. However, Nalsar students had not yet become advocates. The Council may frame rules concerning legal education, but this does not give it the authority to judge students' personal choices or moral conduct. In a democratic set up, the right to peacefully protest is sacrosanct and so cannot be penalised by the powers that be.

The decision to withdraw the order was therefore welcome. Every student should have the freedom to decide from whom they wish to receive their degree certificate. Declining to accept a certificate from a judge cannot amount to contempt, since distributing degrees is an academic, not judicial, function.

YASH PAL RAJHANI | JALANDHAR

Terrorism remains the biggest barrier

A recent Pew Research Center survey highlights the deep mistrust between India and Pakistan. While a large majority of Pakistanis view India as an existential threat, Indians too continue to regard Pakistan as a major security challenge.

Following the Pahalgam attack, bilateral relations have deteriorated further. For Pakistan, the persistent Kashmir and Jihadi rhetoric appears to serve domestic political purposes.

Yet such rhetoric cannot provide answers to the pressing concerns of ordinary citizens – employment, infrastructure, healthcare, education and economic growth. The experience of several resource-rich theocratic countries demonstrates that economic resources alone cannot guarantee inclusive development.

A sustainable future requires separating governance from religious extremism and ensuring that development remains the central priority. Unless Islamabad takes credible action against terrorism, meaningful improvement in bilateral relations will remain difficult. Peace requires both countries to move beyond hostility and focus on the welfare of their people.

NEELAM JAISWAL | DEWAS

Provide moral support to persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities need not merely physical assistance but also understanding, dignity and moral support. Society must recognise the individual before the disability and avoid language that reduces a person to a medical condition. Our attitudes often create a greater handicap than the physical limitation itself. When people are taught to view themselves only through the lens of their disability, their confidence and potential can suffer.

Acceptance, encouragement and opportunities can help them overcome these psychological barriers. Movement-related disabilities constitute a significant proportion of physical disabilities, while hearing and visual impairments also affect many people. The decline in movement disabilities among younger children may partly reflect the success of India's polio immunisation programme.

Moreover, better treatments have also been a factor to enable people to move. We must therefore create an inclusive environment in schools, workplaces and communities. Compassion, accessibility and equal opportunity can help persons with disabilities live with dignity and realise their full potential.

JAYANTHI SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI



India@80: The Independence story we need to know

India did not become free because the British suddenly accepted the moral case for self-rule. Independence emerged from a far more turbulent convergence of anti-colonial resistance, wartime exhaustion, economic crisis, political calculations, communal mobilisation and growing doubts about the Raj's ability to command obedience.



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

Unlike many countries that count their independence by anniversaries, India has developed a peculiar habit of counting its freedom in ordinal numbers. The United States, for example, celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2026, marking two and a half centuries since independence. India, by contrast, calls 15 August 2026 its 80th Independence

Day, although the country became independent in 1947 and this is therefore the 79th anniversary of independence. The language of the 80th Independence Day suggests a continuous national ritual in which each passing year is another instalment of a story already settled. Yet India's independence was anything but settled. It was born from an extraordinary collision of anti-colonial resistance, imperial exhaustion, famine, political calculation, communal mobilisation, ideological disagreement, international pressure and personal rivalries.

The British Empire did not simply relinquish India because the moral case for independence had finally become irresistible. By the end of the Second World War, Britain faced a more practical question than whether Indians wanted freedom. It was whether Britain still possessed the political, economic and coercive capacity to govern India indefinitely. Independence was therefore both a nationalist victory and the retreat of an exhausted empire.

Few episodes expose the contradictions of British rule more brutally than the Bengal famine of 1943. Crop failures, the 1942 cyclone, wartime disruption of food supplies, procurement policies, transport constraints and the loss of rice imports after the Japanese occupation of Burma all played roles. But political decisions made during the crisis cannot be separated from the catastrophe. Churchill's government prioritised the demands of a global war in which India was treated as an imperial resource while Indians had no equivalent political authority over the allocation of those resources. Indians were being asked to participate in the defence of an empire whose political system did not give their lives equal weight in the calculation of wartime priorities.

The surviving record becomes darker still when the language of imperial officials is examined. In his diary, Secretary of State for India Leopold Amery recorded Churchill making a remark about Indians "breeding like rabbits" during discussions over famine relief. Amery was so appalled by Churchill's attitude towards India that he wrote privately that, on the subject of India, Winston was "not quite sane" and compared his outlook with Hitler's. Millions were starving while the allocation of ships, grain and other resources was being argued over in terms of military necessity, imperial priorities and competing claims on British shipping. The famine was therefore not merely a humanitarian disaster. It exposed what imperial government meant when the population affected by a decision had no sovereign authority over it.

Churchill did not merely oppose a free India for Indian self-government. He opposed the underlying historical direction. He famously declared that he had not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire. For Churchill, empire was not an incidental possession. India remained one of its essential foundations.

India's side is no less troubling. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad remains one of the most consequential figures to disappear into the background of the conventional independence narrative. His opposition to Pakistan was not based on a denial of Muslim identity. He argued from within an Islamic intellectual framework that a Muslim had no reason to surrender India because political territory could not be divided neatly into the pure and the impure. He regarded the whole of India as his political inheritance. For Azad, Muslim identity and Indian nationhood were not incompatible propositions.

Azad believed that Congress had been offered a constitutional route that could have preserved Indian unity while accommodating substantial political autonomy for Muslim-majority regions. Nehru's insistence that the Constituent Assembly would ultimately be free to alter the arrangement, Azad argued, gave Jinnah the opportunity to claim that the safeguards offered to Muslims were unreliable. In Azad's judgement, this was one of the greatest tragedies of Indian history. He went further, arguing



CHURCHILL'S GOVERNMENT PRIORITISED THE DEMANDS OF A GLOBAL WAR IN WHICH INDIA WAS TREATED AS AN IMPERIAL RESOURCE WHILE INDIANS HAD NO EQUIVALENT POLITICAL AUTHORITY OVER THE ALLOCATION OF THOSE RESOURCES. INDIANS WERE BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DEFENCE OF AN EMPIRE WHOSE POLITICAL SYSTEM DID NOT GIVE THEIR LIVES EQUAL WEIGHT IN THE CALCULATION OF WARTIME PRIORITIES

The writer is a columnist based in Colombo

that Nehru had committed an "almost equal blunder" in 1937 and that the consequences of Congress's decisions in the United Provinces helped give the Muslim League a new lease of political life. Partition, in this reading, was not simply the inevitable result of an ancient Hindu-Muslim antagonism. Political decisions made by nationalist leaders helped narrow the alternatives.

Azad himself differed from Gandhi on war and strategy. He regarded non-violence as a policy rather than an absolute creed and argued that Indians had the right to fight if circumstances required it. He also warned Gandhi that Japanese forces approaching India could not simply be regarded as enemies of the British rather than potential enemies of India. He found himself in the extraordinary position of having earlier urged organised opposition to Britain while later warning that Gandhi's proposed strategy, once Japanese forces approached India's frontier, was dangerously unrealistic. Gandhi could regard non-violence as a moral principle, while Azad could regard it largely as a political method. Nehru could view the Second World War through the global confrontation between fascism and democracy, while Azad insisted that India's own freedom remained paramount. C. Rajagopalachari openly dissented from Congress policy and argued that accommodation with the Muslim League might unlock the constitutional deadlock. Jinnah moved from constitutional politics towards a mass-based demand for Pakistan. Patel pursued political calculations that Azad regarded as falling short of Congress's professed nationalism.

Meanwhile, even some Europeans concluded that loyalty to justice required opposition to empire. Annie Besant, an Englishwoman, became one of India's most prominent advocates of self-government. Benjamin Jowett, another Englishman, identified so closely with Indian political grievances that he publicly aligned himself with the nationalist cause. American missionary Samuel Stokes went further, adopting Indian practices and entering the nationalist struggle. Then there was Shapurji Saklatvala, the British-Indian communist politician whose political relationship with Gandhi was far from harmonious. Saklatvala belonged to a political tradition that viewed Gandhian methods with suspicion. Constitutionalists, revolutionaries, socialists, communists, religious nationalists, secular nationalists and advocates of non-violence disagreed profoundly about what freedom should produce. The British Empire was weakened not by one argument but by the accumulation of contradictions.

An empire claiming to fight fascism could not indefinitely deny political freedom to its largest colony. A government demanding Indian resources could not easily explain why Indian political authority remained subordinate. A state dependent on Indian soldiers could not ignore changing loyalties within the armed forces. By 1946, the Royal Indian Navy revolt demonstrated how dangerous that transformation could become. It was not the sole cause of British withdrawal, but it was an unmistakable warning that the coercive foundations of colonial rule were becoming unstable. The empire had survived earlier rebellions because it could rely upon the obedience of its soldiers and police. That obedience could no longer be taken for granted. The deeper meaning of 1947 is therefore not that one man defeated an empire, nor that one organisation liberated a nation, nor even that Partition was unavoidable. India became independent because an enormous imperial structure had been weakened from several directions while Indians themselves were arguing fiercely over what should replace it. That is why the overlooked history matters. It asks why an empire that proclaimed liberty ruled India for so long, why famine coexisted with imperial priorities, and why the Raj ultimately lost the loyalty on which its power depended. The flag raised in 1947 represented freedom, but also the end of several competing visions of what India could become. Some disappeared with the empire. Others disappeared with Partition.

When schools disappear, so do dreams



ABHINAV NARAYAN JHA

DIVYANSHU BHARDWAJ

India's journey as the world's largest democracy has been inseparable from its commitment to public education. For decades, government schools have served as the first classrooms for millions of children, particularly those from rural, tribal, and economically weaker communities. For generations, the neighbourhood government school symbolised aspiration rather than privilege. It offered every child,

irrespective of caste, class or geography a fair chance to succeed. Today, however, the foundational pillar of the Republic faces an unprecedented challenge. According to analyses of UDISE+ data and highlighted in NITI Aayog's report on the School Education System in India, nearly 94,000 government schools have ceased functioning over the last decade, averaging nearly 25 closures per day. Many of these closures have occurred due to mergers, rationalisation, and consolidation aimed at improving efficiency. Yet the scale of this transformation raises a constitutional and policy question that deserves national attention: Can India fulfil its promise of universal education? At the same time, its public school network steadily contracts.

Education occupies a unique position in India's constitutional framework. Through the Eighty-Sixth Constitutional Amendment, Parliament inserted Article 21A, making free and compulsory education for children between six and fourteen years a Fundamental Right. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) transformed this constitutional guarantee into an enforceable legal obligation. Additionally, Articles 41, 45 and 46 of the Directive Principles require the State to promote education, provide early childhood care and protect the educational interests of weaker sections. Even before Article 21A came into force, the Supreme Court had recognised education as intrinsic to the right to life under Article 21. In Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka (1992) and Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1993), the Court observed that meaningful enjoyment of other fundamental rights becomes impossible without access to education. Public education is a constitutional responsibility. Viewed through this constitutional lens, the closure of government schools deserves scrutiny. In thousands of villages, the government primary school remains the only educational institution within accessible distance. Once such schools are merged or closed, children often have to travel significantly farther every day.

For older students, this may be inconvenient; for younger children, it can become prohibitive. Girls, children with disabilities, and those belonging to economically weaker households are particularly vulnerable. Longer travel distances, lack of safe transport, and additional costs frequently translate into irregular attendance, higher dropout rates, and poorer learning outcomes. Accessibility is not merely a logistical concern; it determines whether the constitutional right to education can be exercised in practice. Government schools also perform functions that extend far beyond classroom teaching. They serve as centres for the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, vaccination drives, disaster relief, elections, public health campaigns and community gatherings. More importantly, they remain among the few institutions where children from different castes, religions and economic backgrounds study together, strengthening social cohesion and democratic values.

Nevertheless, any balanced discussion must acknowledge the government's rationale behind school rationalisation. Declining fertility rates, migration from villages to urban centres, teacher shortages, and falling enrollment in several regions have created schools with very few students. Maintaining separate infrastructure and teaching staff for such institutions may not always represent the most effective use of public resources. These considerations deserve serious attention. However, administrative efficiency cannot become an end in itself. If school mergers result in children discontinuing education because the nearest classroom has moved beyond practical reach, constitutional objectives stand compromised irrespective of administrative savings. Rationalisation must therefore remain a means to strengthen education—not a mechanism that unintentionally restricts access. Recent reports by NITI Aayog, UDISE+, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and the National Achievement Survey (NAS) continue to identify challenges relating to teacher vacancies, infrastructure deficits, foundational literacy, digital inequality and regional disparities. These concerns suggest that India's education system requires sustained public investment and institutional strengthening rather than merely reducing the number of schools. The way forward requires balanced, evidence-based reforms. Any decision to merge or close schools should be preceded by a social impact assessment, considering distance, accessibility, gender and dropout risks. Teacher vacancies must be filled urgently, while rural schools need better infrastructure, digital connectivity and basic facilities. School Management Committees should be empowered to strengthen local participation and accountability.

India today aspires to become a developed nation under the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. Public schools remain India's most powerful instrument of social justice. Weakening this network without adequate safeguards risks widening educational disparities at precisely the moment when India seeks inclusive growth. The real objective should be to preserve the constitutional principle that no child's educational opportunity should depend upon geography, income or social background. The closure of nearly 94,000 government schools over the past decade should serve as a moment of reflection rather than political confrontation.

India's constitutional promise was never simply to educate children—it was to ensure that every child, regardless of birthplace or circumstance, enjoys an equal opportunity to realise his or her potential. That promise deserves not only preservation but renewed national commitment.



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Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train: A new lifeline for India's growing cities



PRATEEK VAIBHAV

The Mumbai-Ahmedabad Bullet Train is not simply a faster train project; it is being built as a new transportation lifeline connecting some of western India's most important economic

centres. The 508-km Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail corridor is expected to transform the way people travel between Mumbai, Thane, Virar, Palghar, Boisar, Surat, Vadodra, Ahmedabad and other cities along the route.

City Centre to City Centre Travel
One of the biggest advantages of the Bullet Train will be its city-centre-to-city-centre connectivity. Instead of relying on airports far from urban centres, passengers will be able to reach major business and residential areas via strategically located high-speed rail stations. The Mumbai station at Bandra-Kurla Complex is particularly significant because BKC is one of Mumbai's major commercial districts. The underground station will also connect with the city's metro network and road transport. Similarly, stations at Surat, Vadodra and Ahmedabad will bring high-speed rail closer

to the heart of the cities they serve. This can make the journey more convenient, especially for daily or frequent travelers. A New Lifeline for Middle-Class Passengers: The bullet train is often associated with premium travel, but its larger impact could be felt by India's growing middle class. As cities expand and employment opportunities become concentrated in major urban centres, affordable and reliable intercity transportation becomes increasingly important.

The Bullet Train can provide for passengers travelling frequently for work, education, business or family commitments, which could significantly improve mobility. The corridor can also strengthen economic opportunities in cities and towns along the route by making it easier for people to travel between residential areas and major employment centres.

Relief from Heavy Traffic in Major Cities

Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Surat and Vadodra are major economic centres that experience substantial road and rail congestion. A high-speed rail system can shift a portion of long-distance passenger traffic away from roads and conventional rail services. Better integration between high-speed rail stations, metro systems, buses, and other public transport can encourage passengers to leave their private vehicles behind and use a more integrated public transportation network.

Time Savings for Greater Mumbai Commuters

The project could be particularly important for commuters and residents in the wider



REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE

Mumbai Metropolitan Region. Cities and towns such as Thane, Virar, Boisar and Palghar are increasingly connected to Mumbai through employment, education and business.

Reducing overall travel time between regional centres and major employment hubs will be a big relief for the daily commuters from these places.

The integration of high speed, metro, bus could make the Mumbai region function more like a connected metropolitan economic zone rather than a collection of separate cities.

Engineering Marvels Taking Shape

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the project is the scale and complexity of the engineering work taking place. The Mumbai section includes a 21-km underground tunnel between BKC and Shilphata.

This section is being constructed using massive Tunnel Boring Machines & NATM. Approximately seven kilometres will pass beneath Thane Creek, making it India's first undersea rail tunnel.

The TBMs being used are engineering giants, with cuttersheads measuring 13.6 metres in diameter and machines weighing around 3,200 tonnes. Advanced Mixshield technology is being used to control ground settlement while tunnelling beneath densely populated urban areas and critical infrastructure.

The project is also introducing advanced Japanese-inspired J-Slab ballastless track technology in India. The system is designed for stable high-speed operation, with precision-engineered track slabs, rails and Cement Asphalt Mortar. Noise barriers are another important feature.

Around six lakh noise barriers have already been installed along approximately 297 km of the corridor. These barriers are designed to reduce the impact of high-speed train operations on surrounding communities. The electrification system is equally ambitious. The corridor is adopting a 2x25 kV overhead traction system, supported by thousands of masts and sophisticated electrical infrastructure designed for trains operating at speeds of up to 320 km/h.

The engineering achievement is impressive, but the real test of the project will be how effectively it improves everyday mobility for the millions of people living and working across Mumbai, Gujarat and the surrounding regions.

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Caste count

Census must be conducted with clarity, transparency

THE decision to record caste through an open-ended question in the upcoming Census is an anticlimax. The government wants enumerators to merely record what respondents say, rather than decide whether a particular surname or sub-caste belongs to a recognised caste category. But the choice raises a key question: can a caste enumeration produce meaningful public data without some mechanism of standardisation? The experience of the 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census offers a warning. Respondents were allowed to report their caste freely; the exercise produced around 46.7 lakh caste names. The data was ultimately not released in a usable form. Repeating the same basic methodology while expecting a different outcome would be difficult to justify.

The government has preferred not to offer respondents a drop-down menu of castes. Caste identities are extraordinarily complex, varying across states and communities, while surnames and sub-castes do not always correspond neatly to official categories. Asking enumerators to classify people could turn a Census into an exercise in official certification of caste identity. That could spark allegations of bias, inconsistency and even political manipulation. A credible caste count requires an independent and transparent system for processing the responses.

A Census is a foundational instrument of governance, and the information it collects can shape public policy for years. The decision to include several questions that had triggered a row during the 2019-20 anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) protests inevitably invites scrutiny. Details about nationality, parents' particulars, mobile numbers, Aadhaar, voter ID, passports, etc. were part of the 2020 NPR (National Population Register) schedule. At the time, civil society groups and Opposition parties feared that the NPR could become a stepping stone towards the NRC (National Register of Citizens), even as the government tried to dispel doubts. Thus, the 2027 Census must be conducted with transparency and clarity. A successful Census is one in which the citizens trust the counting process.

Rail reality

Grand projects, basic amenities missing

THE Indian Railways has invested heavily in station redevelopment, but the Comptroller and Auditor General's latest audit shows that the country's busiest public spaces continue to fail passengers on the basics. The findings expose systemic gaps in safety, sanitation and service delivery across a network that carries 292.4 crore non-suburban passengers annually through 5,908 stations and over 7,424 daily passenger trains. The audit of 512 stations across all 16 railway zones found that 458 stations (89%) lacked one or more mandatory Minimum Essential Amenities despite Railway Board instructions requiring compliance by August 2018. Only 54 stations met the prescribed standards. Even premier NSG-I stations such as New Delhi, Howrah and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus showed deficiencies.

The most alarming finding concerns public health. Drinking-water samples from platform taps tested positive for total coliform bacteria, including *E. coli*, at 49 stations in 2022-23 and 56 stations in 2023-24. Residual chlorine levels were outside the prescribed range at 135 stations one year and 139 the next, while 479 stations failed to test all mandatory water-quality parameters. The audit also exposed chronic neglect of passenger facilities. Shortfalls included fans at 42% of stations, water coolers at 40%, drinking-water taps at 27%, urinals at 22%, seating at 15% and platform shelters at 13%. Accessibility remained poor, with deficiencies in ramps, tactile pathways and accessible toilets, while 59% of 395 passenger-amenity projects were delayed by up to four years.

Perhaps the most damning finding is that this is not merely a funding problem. Between 36% and 44% of the passenger-amenity budget remained unspent for five consecutive years. Before unveiling more iconic stations, the Railways must ensure every passenger has safe water, clean toilets and dignified waiting spaces.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, AUGUST 17, 1926

The Hyderabad mystery

WHAT is the precise position in regard to Hyderabad? Are the telegrams recently published by the *Indian Daily Mail* from its Hyderabad correspondent substantially correct, or are they not? The Government of His Exalted Highness has, we know, sought to summarily dispose of the statements made by the correspondent as "absolutely without foundation." But this summary treatment of the subject has carried no conviction either to the Indian or to the Anglo-Indian Press. The *Pioneer*, which in these matters writes with an authority which no other journal, whether Anglo-Indian or Indian, possesses, has frankly refused to accept the Nizam's version. It does not, indeed, consider the *Indian Daily Mail* version to be entirely accurate, and it condemns the premature disclosure. But it is perfectly clear to anyone who can read between the lines that as between the two versions the Allahabad journal would much rather accept the version of the *Indian Daily Mail*. Other Anglo-Indian newspapers follow more or less the same line. The Indian Press is naturally divided in its appreciation of the probabilities of the case. But the general belief is that, as stated in the *Indian Daily Mail* telegrams, the issue has been raised, and that the Hyderabad communique does not state the whole or even the greater part of the truth when it says that the British Government has only given "friendly advice".

Taliban-Pak strife gives India a foothold

Five years of the Afghan regime marked by growing closeness to New Delhi



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

THE Taliban have completed five years of their rule in Afghanistan. They re-established their Emirate on August 15, 2021, as the Afghan republic collapsed. President Ashraf Ghani fled the country. Other leaders, with the exception of former President Hamid Karzai and former Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, also left Afghanistan. With the end of the republic's political system, its armed forces disintegrated; its personnel went back to their villages.

Over the past five years, the Taliban regime under Haibatullah Akhundzada has cohered despite internal differences. It has reimposed the group's basic ideological tenets, but not as rigorously as in the 1990s. Afghanistan's economic situation continues to be dire, even though some foreign assistance and remittances have helped in preventing a meltdown. The Taliban have contained the activities of the Islamic State (Khorasan province). In recent months, though, there have been reports of some popular restlessness. There has also been some armed anti-Taliban activity in the Baghlan and Badakhshan provinces, but it is not of major proportions. All in all, the regime remains stable.

A remarkable development in the Taliban story over the past five years, if not since their emergence in 1994, is the breakdown in their relations with Pakistan. This has been best illustrated by Lt Gen Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, Director General (DG) of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations. Recently, he told the media that the Taliban were



FOREIGN POLICY : The Taliban have followed an independent course. REUTERS

"massacring the Islamic faith". He went on to ask if their conduct was Islamic.

Chaudhry pointed to their treatment of women as well as children and fatwas against other Muslims. He concluded by asking if the Taliban represented any version of Islam. He reminded the media corps that the Taliban's ties with India were contrary to the Quran's Surah Al Imran, Ayat 28. According to him, this Ayat instructed Muslims not to befriend *kafirs*. Most Muslim scholars disagree with this interpretation.

It is ironic that the Pakistani establishment responsible for nurturing the Taliban and ensuring that they defeated the US and demolished the Afghan republic should now be so vituperative during the 2021 Doha interaction between the republic and the Taliban about how Pakistan-Afghanistan relations would evolve if the Taliban came to power in Kabul. The official told the Afghan leader that Pakistan and the Taliban were heading for a "divorce".

istan and the Taliban?

Recently, a senior leader of the Afghan republic told me that a perceptive Pakistani official was worried during the 2021 Doha interaction between the republic and the Taliban about how Pakistan-Afghanistan relations would evolve if the Taliban came to power in Kabul. The official told the Afghan leader that Pakistan and the Taliban were heading for a "divorce".

This Pakistani — a Pathan — was an outlier, for the prevailing opinion in Pakistan's Punjabi-dominated military leadership was that it would reduce

Afghanistan to almost the status of the country's fifth province. However, the official, who had a clear understanding of the Taliban psyche, knew that they would eventually follow an independent course, including in their approach to India. This assessment was correct.

After an initial period when the Taliban could not openly go against Rawalpindi, they insisted on opening up to India and wanted to establish warm and cooperative ties with it. New Delhi took its time, but eventually it reciprocated. The India-Taliban relationship has been a major reason for Pakistan's rupture with the regime.

More importantly, it was the Pakistani establishment's complete misreading of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'s solid ties with the Taliban that led Rawalpindi to expect that the Taliban would abandon the TTP. The TTP had sworn allegiance (*bayat*) to the Taliban emir. It had also developed the ability to influence intra-Taliban relations, which gave it a standing in Afghanistan.

Since 2021, Pakistan has tried everything — from persuasion to coercion, including sending back Afghan refugees at a time when the country found it diffi-

cult to absorb them, to open use of armed force — but the Taliban-TTP relationship has not eroded. There is little chance that it will do so in the foreseeable future.

Over and above these factors, there is the old and enduring prejudice of the Punjabi establishment towards Afghans, which got exacerbated when the Afghan State disintegrated and millions of poor Afghans came to Pakistan. This Punjabi prejudice is also reflected in its attitude towards its own Pathans, though many of them have been co-opted in the Punjabi-dominated state.

The bias exhibited by Punjabi *biradars* towards the Pathans who have long settled in Punjab is less than that towards those who live across the Indus, but it is there nonetheless. Former PM Imran Khan is of Pathan origin; he captured the popular imagination in Punjab, but that began with his cricketing success. He languished in politics till the Army built him up, but the Punjabi generals brought him down when he grew too big for his boots.

There has been a long history of an inimical attitude among the people on both sides of the Indus, and in particular those who live across the Durand Line. Analysts do not generally appreciate how much of a role this plays in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Only those who have spent endless hours with the Afghans, drinking pot after pot of *chai sabz* (green) or *chai siyah* (black), sometimes late into the night, get an inkling of their attitude towards the Punjabis and the role they play in the affairs of the State even now.

This has now been added the bitterness over the treatment meted out to the refugees by the Pakistani officials and even the public. And, finally, there is the Taliban feeling that Pakistan was playing both sides during the years it supported the group. Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions are not going to end anytime soon; this will naturally give opportunities to other powers. These have to be utilised constructively and wisely.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I am alarmed to see promises made to Afghan women and girls by the Taliban being broken. —Antonio Gutierrez

Through the looking glass of time

SHARAD MANOCHA

As a child watching the movie *Kabuliwala* on Doordarshan, I wondered: how could the protagonist, Abdul Rehman, spend years in prison and still expect Mini to be the same little girl? How could he bring back a pair of small bangles, completely oblivious to the relentless march of time?

It was years later that I read Rabindranath Tagore's short story on which the film was based. But long before that literary clarity arrived, it was the haunting expression on Balraj Sahni's face upon encountering the grown-up Mini — a devastating cocktail of realisation, heartbreak and sudden displacement — that stayed etched in my memory.

That celluloid lesson in ageing returned to me in a completely different avatar. A couple of months ago, I watched *Umichai*, starring Amitabh Bachchan, Anupam Kher and Danny Denzongpa. Seeing these stalwarts play characters as old as they were in real life felt strangely comforting. Then a graceful middle-aged woman appeared on screen.

I drew a blank for a few seconds. I squinted, peeled back the layers of time and gasped. It was Sarika. With her striking green eyes that held a universe of unspoken emotions, Sarika was the epitome of classic, breathtaking beauty. She effortlessly commanded the screen, blending soulful depth with mesmerising charm. It left me with a philosophical question: What does time do to us?

The other day, during a dinner outing, a young couple with two kids approached my table. The woman greeted me with an endearing smile: "Hello, Sir! So good to see you after almost 15 years." It took my brain a few frantic seconds to recalibrate. Beneath the maternal exterior was one of my all-time favourite students — the girl who laughed the loudest during inter-class competitions. Now, the weight of familial responsibilities and adulthood had gently settled upon her. She had changed, moulded by life.

The ultimate epiphany, however, did not happen in a cinema hall or a restaurant. It happened the next morning in the quiet sanctity of my bathroom. While shaving, I found myself scrutinising my own reflection. Beyond the obvious shift to more salt and less pepper in my hair, I actually looked at myself. There they were: a few wrinkles around the temples, subtle bags under the eyes, crow's feet — all the classic, inevitable signs of ageing that we so easily miss.

We live with ourselves every day, watching our reflection in instalments, becoming blind to our own slow transformation. We remain static in our own minds. It was only then, looking at the stranger in my own mirror, that the *Kabuliwala* finally made perfect sense. Rehman (Rahmat in Tagore's story) hadn't just forgotten that Mini would grow up; he had forgotten that the world moves on, even when our internal clock stands still.

The writer is Associate Professor, DAV College, Jalandhar
epaper.tribuneindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Accepting her 'No' is not a favour

Appropos of 'The freedom to say No' (*The Great Game*), India has completed 79 years of Independence, but many women of our country still hesitate to exercise their freedom to say 'No'. Unfortunately, social attitudes still put unnecessary restrictions on women and often make them feel guilty for asserting themselves. Women are increasingly raising their voice against harassment, intimidation and discrimination. However, the responsibility cannot rest with them alone. Families, institutions, workplaces and society must teach men that consent and personal boundaries are non-negotiable. A truly progressive society is one where a woman can refuse something without fear of consequences. Respecting her 'No' is not a favour; it is a basic requirement of equality, dignity and freedom.

BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI, SANGRUR

Women's freedom to make choices

Refer to 'The freedom to say No'; the current phase of female self-assertion should be examined in the backdrop of an exponential rise in educational opportunities available to all. Today's empowered woman understands her strength and potential with a balanced mind. Even when she is opting for a live-in relationship or become a single parent — as is evident from her acceptance of filiofentric families. The silver lining lies in the fact that she is not asking for a complete reversal from a patriarchal to a matriarchal setup. Let us not forget that the word 'she' includes 'he' and 'woman' includes 'man'.

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Strategic hedging led to Partition

With reference to 'India committed crime of Partition upon itself'; modern Indian nationhood emerged under colonial rule and through the anti-colonial struggle. More importantly, responsibility for Partition cannot be placed upon an abstract 'India'. It resulted from concrete historical forces: British imperial policy, competing claims to political power by the Congress and Muslim League leaderships, communal mobilisation and the hurried British

withdrawal. The failure of the political leadership to find an alternative settlement ultimately produced territorial division.

MANU KANT, CHANDIGARH

Partition a lesson for separatists

Refer to 'India committed crime of Partition upon itself'; in 1947, I was only ten years old but clearly remember the atrocities people suffered. Lakhs of people, both Hindus and Muslims, faced immense hardships. Our houses were burgled and we came to India penniless. Nehru and Jinnah were blinded by their desire to become Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan respectively. Even Gandhi, who could have stopped the horrors of Partition, couldn't do much. Even after migration to India, our woes didn't end. Partition should serve as a lesson to those demanding separation from India.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

India must deepen Gulf ties

Refer to 'The Mecca pact is about Iran, not India'; Saudi Arabia has long relied on the US for security, but the Iran conflict has exposed the limits and uncertainties of US hegemony. For Pakistan, the agreement is an even more valuable gain as the deal brings Islamabad closer to its traditional allies. India should resist the temptation to see this agreement as an anti-India alliance. India's measured official response is therefore more sensible than either alarmist or rhetorical. But complacency would be equally misplaced. New Delhi needs to deepen its ties with the Gulf.

HARBINDER S DHILLON, UNA

Clarity must define food labels

Refer to 'Food labels'; consumers need more than coloured symbols. They need information that is easy to interpret. Food manufacturers often use technical terminology that can obscure what consumers are actually buying. These terms may be technically legitimate, but they can leave an ordinary shopper with little meaningful understanding of the product. The purpose of regulation should therefore be clarity, not merely compliance. Food labels should tell consumers what they need to know, not challenge them to become food technologists.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

Reading Pakistan beyond the Mecca pact



LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN (RETD)
GOVERNOR, BIHAR &
EX-COMMANDER, CHINAR CORPS

THE Türkiye-Saudi Arabia-Pakistan Mecca Joint Defence Agreement has so far been examined largely through the ambitions of Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. Pakistan has appeared almost as a junior partner — bringing military experience, manpower and nuclear weight to an arrangement driven by the insecurities of the other two. From an Indian perspective, that may be the wrong way to read it.

Pakistan has long sought greater strategic relevance in the Islamic world, drawing upon its geography, large military, nuclear capability and longstanding relationships with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. It has also sought to mobilise the collective weight of the Islamic world in support of its Kashmir position. These are familiar elements of Pakistan's strategic playbook. The question is whether the new strategic environment has changed the way Islamabad may seek to employ them.

Operation Sindoor altered an important assumption in the India-Pakistan relationship. The belief that terrorism

could remain below India's threshold for conventional retaliation became less secure. India demonstrated a willingness to impose military costs beyond the immediate point of provocation.

The conflict also showed how drones, precision weapons, air defence and electronic warfare are changing the character of warfare in the subcontinent. But deterrence does not necessarily eliminate adversarial intent. It can instead encourage an adversary to search for alternative methods.

This is where the last 15 months matter. The question is not whether Pakistan is preparing another adventure; there is no basis yet for making that assertion. The important question is whether it has concluded that the next contest with India must be conducted differently.

Pakistan's relationship with Türkiye is not new. Turkish support on Kashmir and Erdogan's aspiration for a larger role in the Islamic world have endured. What has changed is Türkiye's huge growth as a defence-industrial power.

Pakistan is already deepening cooperation with Türkiye in aerospace, unmanned systems, emerging technologies, training and interoperability. Reports following Operation Sindoor indicate that Pakistan has also been looking to Türkiye for unmanned systems while addressing gaps exposed during the conflict.

This should not be interpreted as Türkiye preparing to fight the



RELEVANCE : The agreement may make Pakistan more confident about its strategic options. REUTERS

war for Pakistan. The consequential possibility is more subtle: Türkiye can help Pakistan fight differently. Drones, counter-drone systems, electronic warfare, surveillance, precision technologies and defence production can, over time, expand Pakistan's options with basic Turkish cooperation.

The Saudi dimension adds another layer. Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia has extended across military, economic and strategic domains. Some years ago, I assessed the Saudi reliance on Pakistani military capabilities and the importance Riyadh attached to Pakistan as a counterweight to Iran. I also recorded the limits of the relationship: Saudi Arabia would not allow Pakistan's Kashmir agenda to dictate its own wider foreign policy.

The new pact does not change that basic reality. Saudi Arabia is not signing up to Pakistan's India policy. Yet,

The consequential possibility is more subtle: Türkiye can help Pakistan fight differently.

Pakistan gains something valuable: strategic depth in political, economic and military relationships.

Saudi financial strength, its position in the Islamic world and its security partnership with Pakistan can provide Islamabad greater confidence even when Riyadh remains neutral on an India-Pakistan contingency. The mere existence of additional strategic relationships can influence how a state assesses risk.

Pakistan remains the only nuclear-armed member of the tripartite arrangement. There is no Pakistani nuclear guarantee to Saudi Arabia and no evidence of nuclear sharing. Yet Pakistan's nuclear capability inevitably forms part of the strategic backdrop.

The combination is therefore worth watching: Pakistani nuclear deterrence, Turkish defence technology, Saudi economic strength and China's continuing military relation-

ship with Pakistan.

None of these automatically combine into a single military instrument. But together they can provide Pakistan with more options and greater strategic confidence. That distinction matters because deterrence is shaped not only by capability, but by the adversary's perception of the consequences of using it.

If Islamabad begins to believe that its external partnerships can complicate or raise the costs of an Indian response, the confidence generated by that perception could itself encourage greater risk-taking.

J&K will remain central to Pakistan's strategic thinking, but the next challenge need not originate there. Operation Sindoor has made the traditional theatre more hazardous for Pakistan. Islamabad could therefore retain its objectives while shifting the geography and method of confrontation, looking for vulnerabilities beyond the familiar front.

This does not mean predicting specific targets. Maritime approaches, economic centres, critical infrastructure, cyber networks and technologically important regions could offer different opportunities for disruption.

The next Pakistani challenge may be more than the disruption caused the last few times. Pakistan need not target India conventionally; it needs ambiguity, deniability and psychological effect at a cost it considers manageable.

The most important uncertainty is not whether Pakistan

has learnt lessons from Operation Sindoor, but which lessons. It may conclude that another adventure would carry unacceptable costs — or that the method, rather than the objective, must change. The latter possibility demands greater Indian vigilance.

The Mecca pact, Türkiye's defence capabilities, Saudi strategic weight, Chinese military support and Pakistan's nuclear deterrent do not create immunity, but could foster a perception in Islamabad that calibrated risk-taking is more feasible: a Musharraf-like thinking. India must therefore avoid complacency simply because Pakistan's next move may not resemble the last.

The appropriate Indian response should be anticipation. Every change in the strategic environment can produce a different mode of threat. The task is to identify the new possibilities before they become operational realities. Pakistan may or may not contemplate another adventure. But whatever it does, surprise will be a major factor.

India should therefore not prepare for Pakistan's next move by preparing only for its last one. The Mecca pact may not make Pakistan stronger in every dimension. It may, however, make Pakistan more confident about its strategic options. For India, that distinction is important.

Fifteen months after Operation Sindoor, India must ensure that deterrence survives even if or when Pakistan changes the method of confrontation.

Breaking the gang economy



VIKASH NARAIN RAI
FORMER DIRECTOR, NATIONAL
POLICE ACADEMY

THE narrative of organised gangs in Punjab and Haryana finds deep resonance in the politics and popular culture of the region. Too visible and too well-entrenched, uprooting these gangs presents an uphill challenge on administrative scales that require urgent policy monitoring.

The Punjab and Haryana High Court recently asked the Haryana government to place on record its policy framework and institutional measures to tackle the menace of organised criminal gangs. The affidavit should indicate the preventive, investigative, intelligence and inter-agency coordination mechanisms and specific measures to curb the organised crime activities.

A classified intelligence report of December 2025 by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), titled 'The Bishnoi Gang: An Emerging Threat in Canada', was recently made public during court proceedings in that country. The report confirms the involvement of the gang in Canada, in high-profile killings, extortion threats and shootings as their principal criminal activities.

Some gangsters operating from

Indian jails work in tandem with associates in Canada/US/Central Asia, using social media for recruitment, extortion, contract killings and drug-narcotics money-laundering.

Being lodged in an Indian jail works to their advantage; their presence in India being essential for overseeing the domestic leg of the international deals. They run the gangs from the jails safe sanctuary via phones and emissaries without bothering too much for alibi, surveillance or encounters outside.

Both the Punjab Police and Haryana Police have raised dedicated special units, well supported by intelligence and coordination networks to tackle the growing phenomenon. Their records of arrest, surveillance and prosecution are impressive. It is to be conceded that the old raid-and-arrest model was not enough to isolate the elaborate gang networks. Encounters

and bulldozers create headlines but not deterrence. Trust deficit eats into public cooperation if two weeks later the gang is back to business. The bottom line: be tough on crime, be ruthless while upholding due process.

Organised crime is a business. You don't shut a business by neutralising its delivery boys. Or, by raiding its prospective agents. The task is multi-layered. You need to completely shut their two departments: Publicity (visibility) and HR (recruitment from villages). This will be realised through a robust community interface involving career coaches, social influencers, religious leaders and political activists.

Next, challenge the gang leadership on two counts: Command (kill all communication lines) and Stability (shift frequently from jail to jail). This will require a seamless tech interface. Simultaneously, follow the money trail relentlessly, confiscate the cash and other assets, set up a dedicated financial task force as it is easier said than done.

The Punjab-Haryana gangs feast on drugs and diaspora, are fluid, Instagram-glorified and business-driven. Less ideology, more pay-or-die virality. The state is stronger now, but gangs operate from Canada/jail, making them harder to decapitate.

A policy framework to break gangs must prioritise speedy trial and witness protection in tandem with the expanded social reach of preventive policing. Another aspect would be: how far do the businesses of politics and popular culture align with the mission? There should be a game-changing rehabilitation programme.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

There should be a game-changing rehab programme.

Rethink Sutlej water sharing



SURESH KUMAR
FORMER CHIEF PRINCIPAL
SECRETARY TO PUNJAB CM

PUNJAB'S demand for Rs 1.44 lakh crore from Rajasthan has reopened one of India's oldest and most emotive water disputes. Ahead of the 2027 Assembly election, the timing invites political interpretation. But timing cannot decide the merits. The enduring questions are simpler: what did history provide, what does the law permit and what can these rivers now sustainably spare?

The story begins before the Indus Waters Treaty. Under the Sutlej Valley arrangements of 1920, the princely state of Bikaner received Sutlej waters and agreed to pay seigniorage on supplies. Punjab is therefore entitled to ask whether any contractual obligation survived the Independence and the arrangements that followed.

But seigniorage under a historical irrigation agreement is not the same as ownership of a river. Rajasthan's claim, equally, did not begin with the 1960 treaty. In January 1955, an interstate arrangement distributed 15.85 MAF of the then-assessed surplus Ravi-Beas waters: 8 MAF to Rajasthan, 5.90 MAF to Punjab, 1.30 MAF to PEPSU and 0.65 MAF to J&K. Importantly, the question of the cost of water; storage and related

works was left to be considered separately. In 1959, Punjab and Rajasthan entered the Bhakra-Nangal agreement, fixing their shares in stored water supplies at 84.78% and 15.22%, respectively. The arrangements show that allocations changed when the assessed hydrology changed.

This is why the analogy with mineral royalty is weak. Minerals are extracted under statutory ownership and royalty regimes. The critical word is not 'royalty'; it is 'surplus'. A surplus is a hydrological conclusion.

Rajasthan has built farms, settlements, drinking-water systems and livelihoods around supplies received for decades. Federal equity cannot ignore that dependence. But equity cannot operate only downstream. Punjab's aquifer depletion, river ecology, dependable flows, climate variability and costs of large trans-

basin transfers must also count. Nor can Punjab simply stop established supplies by unilateral action. The Supreme Court's 2016 advisory opinion on Punjab's Termination of Agreements Act made clear that unilateral state legislation could not free Punjab from inter-state obligations and judicial decrees.

For the past, it should pursue whatever contractual seigniorage, infrastructure, conveyance or other financial claims can survive legal scrutiny. The 1920 agreement, the post-Independence treatment of payments and the basis of the Rs 1.44-lakh-crore demand should be tested transparently.

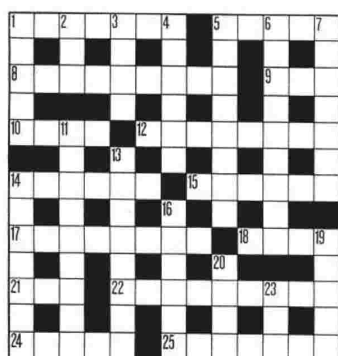
For the future, however, the larger national question is whether the historical 'surplus' still exists. India needs an independent, basin-level reassessment of dependable flows, ecological requirements, groundwater-surface-water interaction, climate risk, efficient irrigation needs and established downstream dependence. If the surplus has diminished or vanished, quantities of trans-basin transfer cannot be beyond prospective, lawful and equitable review.

Rajasthan's history establishes legitimacy of use; it does not establish immutability of quantity. Punjab's geography establishes burden; it does not confer exclusive title. The Indus Waters Treaty made the eastern rivers available to India. Indian federalism must now determine their sustainable sharing through law, science and equity. Settle the past through law. Reassess the future through hydrology.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

Settle the past through law. Reassess the future through hydrology.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

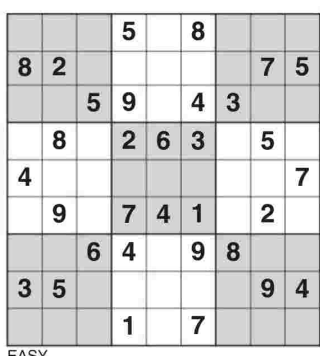
- 1 A juicy stone-fruit (7)
- 5 Resources (5)
- 8 A startling revelation (3-6)
- 9 Industrious social insect (3)
- 10 Grim fate (4)
- 12 Visible in darkness (8)
- 14 A main road (6)
- 15 Nothing but (6)
- 17 Sufficient (8)
- 18 Actively encourage (4)
- 21 Break in continuity (3,4)
- 22 Listen attentively (2,3,4)
- 24 Bishop's head-dress (5)
- 25 Senseless talk (7)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Skirmish, 5 Fiji, 9 Smack, 10 Opinion, 11 Fit as a fiddle, 13 Uneven, 14 Accord, 17 Singleminded, 20 Advance, 21 Italy, 22 Term, 23 Reveille.

Down: 1 So so, 2 Imagine, 3 Make a beeline, 4 Slogan, 6 Illad, 7 Innuendo, 8 Disincantive, 12 Outsmart, 15 Overall, 16 Impede, 18 Never, 19 Type.

SU DO KU



SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

7	3	8	6	9	2	4	5	1
4	1	5	7	8	3	6	9	2
2	9	6	4	1	5	7	8	3
5	7	4	9	6	1	3	2	8
3	6	1	5	2	8	9	7	4
8	2	9	6	3	7	4	5	1
1	4	3	8	5	9	2	6	7
9	8	7	2	4	6	1	3	5
6	5	2	1	3	7	8	4	9

CALENDAR

AUGUST 17, 2026, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Shravan Shaka 26
- Bhadrpad Purnashti 1
- Hijri 1448
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 5, up to 5:01 pm
- Shukla Yoga up to 5:30 am
- China Nakshatra up to 4:59 am
- Moon enters Libra sign 4:20 pmj

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SUNRISE:	MONDAY	TUESDAY	19:42 HRS	19:42 HRS
CITY		MAX	MIN		
Chandigarh		34	25		
New Delhi		34	25		
Amritsar		34	25		
Bathinda		37	25		
Jalandhar		34	25		
Ludhiana		34	25		
Bhiwani		36	26		
Hisar		36	26		
Sirsa		36	27		
Dharamsala		28	20		
Manali		25	19		
Shimla		22	18		
Srinagar		29	21		
Jammu		32	27		
Kargil		30	17		
Leh		27	13		
Dehradun		28	23		
Mussoorie		22	18		

temperatures in °C

I-Day announcements should not end up as mere political rhetoric

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Independence Day address was awaited to gauge the government's general stance in the aftermath of the Cockerroach Janta Party (CJP) agitation, which resulted in the resignation of education minister Dharmendra Pradhan. There are two major takeaways from his 75-minute speech. First, the government is not willing to shed its opposition to the Left, activists, and pinkish intellectuals. "The armed Naxalites have been defeated, but the Naxal mindset remains. These forces are looking for opportunities. They are searching for paths of violence and anarchy and are employing various tactics to drag society onto the wrong path," he said. Second,

he tried to address the concerns of youth at length, promising to make "our youth our highest priority." It was clever of the Prime Minister to underline the end of Naxalism or Maoism, for it is one of the biggest achievements of his government. Beginning in the late 1960s in Naxalbari, West Bengal, this extreme Leftwing movement had a major negative impact across vast swathes of territory in India. At its peak in 2009, it held sway in 10 states, involving about 180 districts, overall. This April, the government was able to announce that there were no Naxal violence-affected districts in the country. Naxalism was the bane of several generations, as it ruined the future of millions of young people.

"In places where Naxalites once fired their guns, the soil was once stained with blood, today, in those very Naxal-affected regions, the tricolour of development, trust and endeavour is flying high because these areas are becoming Naxal-free," Modi said. There is no doubt this marks a major feat of his regime. It looks like by "the Naxal mindset" he meant both violent methods to further political ends and the attractive promises Leftist ideologies make. To be sure, the promises are too good to be ignored. Who would not like free or affordable housing, healthcare, and education, or greater equality? The problem begins when Leftist leaders implement their utopian schemes, which invariably lead to

unpleasant results—from arrested economic growth and development in India to the death of tens of millions of people in the erstwhile Soviet Union and China. So, the Prime Minister's misgivings about Naxal or other Left-leaning schools of thought are genuine. To wean youngsters from the meretricious charms of red and pink ideologies, Modi has made many promises.

Among other things, he pledged, "We have decided that in the next one year, we will train one crore youngsters in AI skills, so that our youth can lead in the world of AI as well." Good intentions indeed, but the fact is that such announcements have also been made in the past, resulting in inconsiderable improvement. Quality jobs are still difficult to find, as is quality education. The need of the hour is not more announcements but the implementation of the ones that have already made. The government must ensure that AI training is linked to actual employment opportunities, industry requirements, and meaningful career pathways. It must also improve the quality of schools, colleges, vocational institutions, and skill-development programmes. Unless these promises translate into better learning, decent jobs, higher incomes, and greater economic mobility, they will remain political rhetoric rather than a credible alternative to Left-leaning ideologies.

LETTERS

Kissa kursi ka

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge skipped the Independence Day celebrations at Red Fort, not because of ideology or principle, but because the chairs weren't "deserving" enough. The issue, which has occurred again, highlights a deeper issue of respect and protocol in national events. Leaders of their stature deserve recognition that matches their contribution to public life. To avoid such controversies, organisers should adopt a more inclusive approach. One option is to allow senior leaders to choose their seats themselves, ensuring comfort and dignity. Alternatively, two prominent seats could be reserved in front of all guests, symbolising their standing in national politics. A creative solution could be elevated seating using a hydraulic platform or positioning them within the enclosure from where the flag is hoisted, giving them visibility and honour without disrupting tradition. Such measures would not only prevent disputes but also uphold the decorum of Independence Day, ensuring that unity and respect remain at the forefront of such an august celebration.

Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Democracy deserves dignity, not drama

A propos 'Washout of parliamentary session underlines democracy' (THI August 15). The editorial highlights a painful truth. Our Parliament has become a place where noise drowns everything else. Important laws are passed in minutes while our leaders spend hours shouting at each other. The government avoids answering tough questions. The opposition demands resignations instead of solutions. In this ugly fight, the common citizen is forgotten. We send our representatives to Delhi to debate, deliberate, and decide on matters that impact our daily lives. Instead, we get endless sloganeering and walkouts. Both sides must realise that this constant confrontation is hurting our democracy. The solution is not complex. Fixed time for debate, ministers who stay and answer, and strict rules against disruption. Until then, public trust will keep falling. Our democracy deserves dignity, not drama.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Salute to women in defence

The prominent role of women officers in our country's Independence Day ceremony reflects the changing face of India's armed forces. Greater opportunities for women in defence should be accompanied by appropriate training, leadership roles and professional recognition, strengthening both representation and national service.

Tasleem Unnisa, Hyderabad

Justice Varadarajan was one of a kind

August 17 marks the birth anniversary of Justice A Varadarajan, the first Dalit judge of the Supreme Court of India. His elevation to the nation's highest constitutional court in 1980 remains a defining chapter in Indian jurisprudence symbolizing the Constitution's core promise of equality, dignity and social justice. Born in 1920 at Jolarpettai in Tamil Nadu, into a Scheduled Caste family, Justice Varadarajan grew up facing systemic caste discrimination and economic hardship. Through academic rigour and perseverance, he completed his legal studies at Madras Law College and enrolled as an advocate of the Madras High Court in 1944. Entering judicial service in 1949 as a munshi, he steadily rose through the ranks before making history with his appointment to the apex court. Justice Varadarajan's judicial philosophy was anchored in constitutional morality, procedural fairness and the rule of law. He maintained that constitutional guarantees must yield practical meaning for ordinary citizens, particularly marginalized communities.

He stood as a beacon of hope for generations of marginalized legal professionals. The eminent jurist's trajectory proved that education, integrity and constitutional values can triumph over structural inequality. He passed away in 2009.

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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 every Wednesday. Mail the details along with relevant photographs if any, to hanspeoplesvoice@gmail.com

-Editor

BENGALURU ONLINE

K'taka govt hikes PUC testing fees

BENGALURU: The Karnataka government has revised Pollution Under Control testing fees, citing a significant rise in operational and maintenance costs. According to a government order, the testing fee for two-wheelers has been increased to Rs 80 from Rs 65, while the fee for three-wheelers has been raised to Rs 80 from Rs 75. The fee for four-wheelers powered by petrol, LPG or CNG has been revised to Rs 150 from Rs 115, while that for diesel-powered vehicles has been increased to Rs 200 from Rs 160. Hitting out at the Congress government over the hike, senior BJP leader and Leader of Opposition in the Assembly R Ashoka said mandatory vehicle compliance should not become another opportunity to extract money from hard-working Kannadigas.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

New agreements or more conflicts in the offing?



RAVULAPATI SEETARAMA RAO

The agreement among the West Asian countries with Pakistan in Mecca is viewed by international analysts as a move by the United States and Israel to control Iran's military prowess. They feel that it was a plan beneficial to America and Israel, while Pakistan alone possesses nuclear weapons. In West Asia, in South Arabia and Turkey, the United States has built numerous war bases over the years and, as part of a broader strategy to keep world powers in check, established NATO and CENTCOM-like organizations to restrain Soviet Russia and China.

It is well known that the earlier policy crafted to keep leadership over India and Muslim countries and other nations was beneficial, though its true value became clear only to later generations. If we give a nod to the political equation of the United Nations,



There is growing skepticism among war strategists about whether such a pact can withstand the situation with Pakistan and India, especially regarding control of Pak-occupied Kashmir (POK). It seems Pakistan has agreed to face this pact to counter the situation, but many doubt whether it can withstand the pressure. Until recently, Pakistan, having joined the American camp and serving as an intermediary between Iran and Israel, now finds itself at a stage where it cannot fully confront the United States, Iran, and their allies

even the founding of the UN had some purpose and utility. Unfortunately, that did not come to pass, and as a result there has been a lack of an umpire among the world's nations to manage disputes. The UN thus abdicated its role as an umpire and became a "silent spectator." Hence, for any international problem or conflict, it continues to cause trouble for years without offering a solution.

The clash that occurred

on August 7 has people wondering whether it may gradually erode the US-led plan to contain Iran and open a new scenario for the United States. The three countries had signed a "Joint Security" agreement, and the understanding is that if any one of them is attacked by another, the other two will regard that attack as an attack on themselves and will respond collectively to defend the attacked country and thereby foil the aggressor's bid. This

is what the agreement is supposed to ensure.

After the collapse of NATO, it is hard to say how useful these collective defence pacts will be, but with weapons and drones, and advanced technology powered by artificial intelligence, such a defence may be rendered largely symbolic. There is growing skepticism among war strategists about whether such a pact can withstand the situation with Pakistan and India,

especially regarding control of Pak-occupied Kashmir (POK). It seems Pakistan has agreed to face this pact to counter the situation, but many doubt whether it can withstand the pressure.

Until recently, Pakistan, having joined the American camp and serving as an intermediary between Iran and Israel, now finds itself at a stage where it cannot fully confront the United States, Iran, and their allies. Now Iran has clearly told Pakistan not to allow its oil ships to reach its shores via the Hormuz Strait, leaving Pakistan in a difficult position. Long-standing tensions between Iran and Pakistan, rooted in Shia-Sunni religious divides, have soured the friendship that briefly blossomed due to the changing dynamics of the period. As for India and China, announcing that Iran will permit oil shipments to India has effectively severed the relationship with Iran.

There is no need to be surprised that, despite the collective military strength of the United States, West Asia, Israel, India, Russia, and China have further strengthened their partnership and cooperation. The same could happen in the near future. The literal use of the "sanctions" that US President Donald Trump has been wielding has diminished. These three

countries are trying to weaken the dollar by conducting payment in their own currencies within their borders, which is worrying other nations, especially the European Scandinavian countries. Signs that France and the United States are drifting apart are becoming clearer, which was underscored by the public tiff between leaders of the two nations. So far, the international pacts have been built to strengthen the leadership of two powerful countries—America and Russia. Now times have changed. Regionally strong countries are ready to fortify their own defences and arrange their power to counter the major powers, and this "new alignment" is revealing that truth. Among the ongoing conflicts, it would not be surprising to see more defence-centered alignments emerge.

The initial expectation that Israel and the United States would be locked in a battle with a stick or a stone is turning out to be more daunting for everyone. However, as technology advances and countries prepare to harness AI for their own interests, we must wait and see what extreme consequences this will have in the future.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

Time for a new framework that ensures women's digital and physical safety



MARRI ADITHYA REDDY

Every few years, India goes through the same ritual. A gruesome crime shocks the nation. This triggers outrage, television debates and candlelight marches. Governments promise punishment. A bill gets tabled. And silence! Alas, for all these developments, the machinery underneath remains much the same.

Institutions remain unsafe, reporting systems untrusted, survivors are left to fend for themselves, and trials drag on for years together.

Numbers tell a story:

It is a tragic irony that the figures of crimes against women and children are rising at an alarming pace, across the country.

India recorded 4.41 lakh crimes against women in 2024, while crimes against children rose from 1.62 lakh in 2022 to around 1.88 lakh in 2024. A POCSO case takes an average of 510 days to resolve, while the conviction rate is only a little over one in three.

It is time that we move past this cycle. Rather than coming up with a new law after every tragedy, there is a compelling need for a

more comprehensive framework that can ensure every woman's digital and physical safety.

Safety no longer ends at the front door:

A woman's safety today doesn't stop at her front door. It follows her onto her phone, into her data, photographs and online identity.

The line between digital and physical harm has nearly disappeared. A woman can be stalked online, have a private photograph morphed and used for extortion, or have a deepfake that destroys her reputation, as the 2023 deepfake targeting actress Rashmika Mandanna demonstrated.

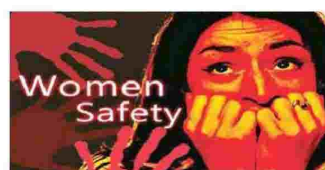
Technology has made existing violence faster and harder to escape. A safety law written only for the street is already out of date. Of course, India has numerous laws in place. The problem is enforcement.

Not short on legislation: The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, POCSO, POSH and provisions under the IT Act are all in place. However, enforcement and coordination remain the bane.

A compliance gap:

It is bizarre to note that fewer than one in six universities file the mandatory annual sexual-harassment compliance report that is required under POSH.

Among colleges, the figure is closer to one in 100. These are not freak, unconnected incidents. The same weak points appear time and again: prevention, institutional accountability,



response time, investigation, survivor privacy and support.

What the numbers don't capture:

The physical numbers themselves almost certainly understate the problem. NCRB figures capture what is reported and formally logged. NIFES-5 found that nearly a third of married women report spousal violence — far more than what appears in NCRB tables.

Kidnapping and abduction, including trafficking and forced marriage, now account for nearly one-fifth of recorded crimes against women.

The digital blind spot: The digital side is even less understood.

- 1,01,928 cybercrime cases were recorded in 2024
- 72.6% are involved in banking or investment fraud
- Online sexual exploitation accounted for 3.1 per cent
- 76,000+ complaints involving women were logged on India's cyber-crime portal in 2025

That does not imply that online sexual abuse is rare. It means a system designed to count money that has been lost has no good way to register fear, humiliation or a

reputation destroyed.

In a way, underreporting is part of the problem.

Many women do not know where to report cyber-crimes. Others fear stigma, family pressure or further circulation of the offending material.

Incidentally, rural India faces a particular version of this problem: fewer police resources, less anonymity and consequences that can affect education and family standing.

The six factors needed for a functional framework:

1. Make institutions accountable: Every school, college, hostel, hospital, workplace and public institution needs enforceable safety obligations, independent audits and transparent grievance data.

2. Make reporting simple and time-bound: A complaint filed once should set the right machinery in motion, without forcing survivors to navigate different agencies.
3. Put clear duties on digital platforms: Platforms need legal duties around intimate-image abuse, deepfakes, impersonation and threats. Harmful con-

tent should be preserved as evidence and promptly removed from further circulation.

4. Build functioning crisis infrastructure: Every district needs counselors, legal aid, emergency shelter, mental support and trained cyber-investigators. A scheme without trained and paid staff cannot really be a scheme, in the first place.

5. Take prevention as seriously as punishment: Consent education, gender sensitisation and digital literacy belong in school and college curricula. Boys must be part of that conversation.

6. Tie funding to outcomes: India's Nirbhaya Fund has used roughly 80 per cent of what has been allocated, but a disproportionate share has gone into CCTV cameras and control rooms. These cannot substitute for functioning of help centres, trained investigators, counselors, safe transport or timely trials.

Telangana as the testing ground: There is no need to invent the suggestions from scratch. Spain, Norway, Denmark and the United States offer models that make institutions more accountable and measurable outcomes.

Telangana is an ideal place to begin with. It boasts of SHE Teams, Bharosa Centres, a dedicated Cyber Security Bureau and India's first child-friendly court.

The priority is in bringing these systems together

through campus safety dashboards, rural digital safety programmes, audited district response protocols and survivor feedback mechanisms. It may be noted that Dr Marri Channa Reddy Foundation runs pilots across urban and rural Telangana, including school safety audits and digital safety sessions for young women. The goal is not another law shaped primarily by demands for harsher punishment and then left waiting in constitutional or administrative limbo.

Punishment matters. But so does the need to figure out if the complaint is taken seriously, whether an investigation is competent, how quickly protection arrives and whether institutions have earned public trust.

The Foundation is opening this up for public consultation because a law built to last requires students, communities, teachers, police officers, counsellors and survivors.

The principle is simple: A woman's physical and digital safety should be treated as one continuous right to move, study, work, speak and simply exist in public life without having to calculate the risk first. There is no need to wait for the next tragedy. It needs a law that can survive a change in government; is realistic enough to implement; and does its job before and during a crisis.

(The writer is a senior Congress leader, lead anchor for the Women Safety Parliament Bill Consortium and Chairman of Dr Marri Channa Reddy Foundation, Hyderabad)

Crude, Hormuz tensions and Fed outlook to set market tone

Global uncertainty weighs on sentiment, but resilient corporate earnings continue to throw up stock-specific opportunities

Weekly Snapshot

- BSE-Sensex shed 489.92pts (-0.62%) to 78,009.25
- NSE-Nifty declined 204.65pts (-0.83%) to 24,366
- Fills purchased Rs1,228.24-cr; Dills infused Rs9,285.63-cr

C KUTUMBA RAO

UNNERVED by elevated crude oil prices and persistent global uncertainty, but supported by strong corporate Q1 earnings, relative stability in the rupee, continued FII participation and a marginal easing in July wholesale inflation, markets moved into consolidation mode during the week ended.

For the week, the Sensex shed 489.92 points, or 0.62 per cent, to end at 78,009.25, while the Nifty fell 204.65 points, or 0.83 per cent, to close at 24,366. Divergence was seen in the broader market with the Nifty Smallcap 100 index declining 0.65 per cent and the Nifty Midcap 100 index rising 0.5 per cent for the week.

Despite sporadic selling on some days, FIIs continued their buying streak for the third consecutive

week, purchasing equities worth Rs1,228.24 crore. Meanwhile, DILs continued to provide support to the market, investing Rs9,285.63 crore in equities over the week. The Indian rupee snapped its two-week losing streak, ending 22 paise lower at Rs 95.43 against the US dollar. During the week, the rupee traded in a narrow Rs 95.17-95.44 range, with elevated crude prices and geopolitical uncertainty weighing on it.

Independence Day address of Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined a seven-pronged framework-Saptadharma-to help India become a developed country and sought the engagement of youth to realise the vision. The Saptadharma or Sapt Shakti include manufacturing; food processing; technology and innovation; Gati Shakti; defence Shakti; green and blue economy; and India's soft power.

Over the past two years, SEBI has introduced a series of norms aimed at making India's capital markets safer, more transparent and less speculative. Retail F&O losses have fallen and risk controls have been strengthened. SEBI introduced the Closing Auction Session (CAS) for F&O stocks, replacing the earlier 30-minute VWAP-



MARKET KHAABREIN

based closing mechanism.

The objective is sound: improve price discovery, reduce the influence of last-minute trades and align India with global practices. However, the first few sessions saw unusual price gaps between spot and futures and low initial participation.

The intent is welcome. But regulation must also preserve market efficiency, liquidity and fair access. Observer's projections for FCNR(B) inflows, considering the last two months are now predicted to reach around \$80 billion, while external commercial borrowings (ECBs) and overseas foreign currency borrowings (OFCBs) are projected at \$10-15 billion. The inflows received through these measures will have a positive impact on banking system liquidity.

News of Chandrasekharan's exit and friction with Tata Trusts regarding long-term capital

allocation caused sharp, immediate stock corrections. Investors remain anxious over whether massive ongoing bets in high-tech and aviation will face delays or redirection under a new chairperson. Analysts note that despite near-term jitters, the individual Tata group companies remain professionally managed with strong underlying fundamentals.

Keep a watch on minutes of the recent US Federal Reserve meeting for any clues on whether rates could rise next month. A surprise drop in US retail sales has dented expectations for a Federal Reserve rate hike next month. Geopolitical risk escalated further into the weekend after Trump statement that he intends to declare the Strait of Hormuz a US territory once the war against Iran is finished.

Hormuz deadlock, US Fed pause may trigger two-way volatility in global markets

Quote of the week:
The individual investor should act consistently as an investor and not as a speculator.

- Ben Graham

next week. In coming weeks, investors will closely track international crude oil prices, geopolitical developments in Middle East, FOMC minutes and Chinese economic data for further cues on global growth and the Fed's policy outlook. With Q1 earnings season nearly coming to an end, the strength of corporate earnings despite a challenging external backdrop continues to create opportunities for a bottom-up stock selection approach.

You're an investor, not someone who can pre-define the future. Base your decisions on real facts and

analysis rather than risky, speculative forecasts.

FUTURES & OPTIONS / SECTOR WATCH

Due to a lack of fresh triggers that could provide a clear direction, derivative segment witnessed subdued volumes. Lower market participation has also affected the options segment. On the weekly chart, Nifty declined by more than 0.80 per cent while Bank Nifty closed around 0.45 per cent lower.

In the options segment, strong Call open interest for Nifty was observed at the 24,500 and 24,400 levels while major Put open interest was concentrated at the 24,300 and 24,400 levels. For Nifty 24,400 will act as key level in upcoming sessions. For Bank Nifty, significant Call open interest was seen at 58,000 level whereas notable Put open interest

was also placed at the 57,000 level for upcoming sessions. Implied volatility (IV) for Nifty's Call options settled at 10.30 per cent while Put options concluded at 11.73 per cent. The India VIX, a key indicator of market volatility concluded the week at 11.41 per cent.

The Put-Call Ratio Open Interest (PCR OI) stood at 1.08 for the week. In the coming sessions, the Nifty may face resistance in the 24,600-24,700 zone, while support is seen at 24,000 and 23,800. Overall, the market is likely to remain range-bound until a fresh trigger emerges. It is pertinent to observe that since the beginning of August, the benchmark indices have been trading in a narrow range of 500 points. More importantly, the index's daily trading range has contracted

significantly. Among the sectors, Media, Capital Market and Consumer Durable were the top performers, registering healthy gains.

In contrast, Cement, Metal and FMCG stocks remained under pressure and closed the week in negative territory. Technically, Nifty India Defence, Consumer Durables, Auto, PSU Banks, and Chemicals are well placed to sustain their relative outperformance in the near term. Conversely, Nifty CPSE, PSE, Oil & Gas, FMCG, and Cement are likely to remain laggards and continue underperformance the broader market.

Stocks looking good are Bharti Airtel, Glenmark, Jubilant Foods, OFSS, PNB and Mphasis. Stocks looking weak are Bharat Forge, Godrej Consumer, Max Health, PI Inds REC, PGEL and TI India.

AVT Natural Products

THE company operates in Food and Feed Ingredients (Natural Raw materials) business segment has reported excellent Q1 results. Consolidated revenue has doubled and PAT has shot up from Rs12.11 crore to Rs31.10 crore. Stay invested for medium term target of Rs150. Results of KNR Constructions provided surprise in the form of



exceptional income. Order book of the company is now Rs8667 crore. Sources indicate partial payment of outstanding Kaleswaram bills in coming months. Stock may surprise in coming days with unexpected rally. Sources indicate expansion of SMS Pharma into lucrative Peptides segment. Painters suggest accumulation in the present corrective phase.

FPIs turn buyers, invest ₹16,621-cr in August so far

NEW DELHI: Foreign investors continued their buying spree in Indian equities, investing Rs 16,621 crore in the first fortnight of August, as improving relative valuations, resilient corporate earnings and expectations of softer US interest rates boosted sentiment. The inflow follows a Rs 20,200-crore investment in July, marking a sharp turnaround after four consecutive months of heavy selling by Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs). FPIs had withdrawn Rs 49,340 crore in June, Rs 32,963 crore in May, Rs 60,847 crore in April and a massive Rs 1.17 lakh crore in March. Prior to this selling streak, they had invested Rs 22,615 crore in February, according to CDSL data.

Foreign investors have remained net sellers in Indian equities in 2026, withdrawing around Rs 2.4 lakh crore so far, already exceeding the Rs 1.66 lakh



crore outflow recorded during the entire 2025. Market experts attributed the recent reversal to a combination of factors, including attractive valuations relative to other markets.

"The key drivers are improving relative valuations, resilient corporate earnings, expectations of softer US rates, lower currency volatility and some diversification away from crowded Korea-Taiwan AI trades. AI became a magnet of all capital across the world," said Manish Bhandari, CEO and Portfolio Manager, Vallum Capital.

RIL gets biggest LPG output target as Centre plans supply buffer

NEW FRAMEWORK SEEKS TO BUILD A DOMESTIC LPG BUFFER AND REDUCE VULNERABILITY TO IMPORTED COOKING GAS DISRUPTIONS

- Production targets fixed for 21 refineries and upstream companies
- Combined potential output capped at 63,810 tonnes a day
- Reliance's Jamnagar DTA refinery gets largest target of 18,000 tonnes a day

NEW DELHI

THE government has for the first time fixed maximum LPG production targets for individual public- and private-sector refineries and upstream companies, seeking to build a domestic supply buffer after the West Asia conflict exposed India's vulnerability to disruptions in imported cooking gas. The Petroleum and Natural Gas Ministry, in



an order issued on August 13, specified production levels for 21 refineries and upstream companies, with combined production potential set at 63,810 tonnes a day. The targets will kick in whenever there is a supply constraint.

Reliance Industries' older refinery at Jamnagar has been assigned the largest target of 18,000 tonnes a day. Russia's Rosneft-backed Nayara Energy's Vadinar refinery has been given a target of 4,480

tonnes a day. Eighteen refineries owned and operated by public-sector oil companies have been ordered to produce a combined 31,470 tonnes a day, while upstream gas producers and processors such as ONGC and GAIL have been given a target of 6,460 tonnes a day. India consumed 33.2 million tonnes of LPG in FY26, or around 91,000 tonnes a day. Domestic production was about 13.1 million tonnes, while 21.3 million

tonnes was imported, leaving the country dependent on imports for more than 64% of its requirement. The government had ramped up domestic LPG production during the West Asia crisis after disruptions to imports. The new framework goes beyond those emergency measures by creating facility-wise production benchmarks and requiring companies maintain adequate infrastructure for storage, evacuation and transportation.

Companies have also been asked to implement technically and economically feasible measures, including naphtha-to-LPG conversion and refinery upgrades, to maximise output. The production schedule will be reviewed every six months, with new capacity and technological upgrades incorporated into future targets.

TCS, RIL lead ₹1-L-cr market cap erosion among top 10 firms

NEW DELHI: The combined market valuation of five of the top-10 most valued firms eroded by Rs 1 lakh crore last week, with IT bellwether TCS taking the biggest hit, amid a bearish trend in domestic equities.

While Reliance Industries, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, State Bank of India and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) faced erosion from their valuation, Bharti Airtel, Bajaj Finance, Larsen & Toubro, Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) and Hindustan Unilever were the winners from the top-10 pack. These five firms together added Rs 55,149.45 crore in market valuation.

The market valuation of TCS eroded by Rs 34,263.28 crore to Rs 8,53,066.85 crore. Reliance Industries' valuation declined by Rs 31,869.13 crore to Rs 17,70,056.06 crore, and that of State Bank of India



dropped by Rs 25,891.88 crore to Rs 9,85,829.96 crore. The market capitalisation (market cap) of HDFC Bank edged lower by Rs 7,165.37 crore to Rs 11,20,802.10 crore, and that of ICICI Bank diminished by Rs 2,792.65 crore to Rs 10,17,577.98 crore. However, the valuation of LIC jumped Rs 26,438.49 crore to Rs 5,23,330.31 crore.

The mcap of Bharti Airtel surged Rs 30,521.3 crore to Rs 12,43,016.11 crore, and that of Bajaj Finance climbed Rs 3,548.79 crore to Rs 6,77,197.34 crore.

SIP success is less about timing, more about time

TWO DECADES OF ROLLING-RETURN DATA SHOW THAT LONGER SIP TENURES SHARPLY REDUCE THE FREQUENCY AND SEVERITY OF LOSSES

K.NARESH KUMAR

IT'S for a reason they call, compound interest, an eight wonder. Everyone agrees with the result but only a few fathoms the process. It's omnipresent in nature, in ourselves, the power of compounding on how we hone our skills, how we better at many things we take for granted including running, learning, etc. which we manage over time. Time is thus a defining feature in our lives and so is in investing.

Even when we spell the formula for compounding, we say, "to the power of", where we transfer the power to time, which we possibly have control while concentrating in trying to manipulate the returns, which are arguably the least in our control. So, when people complain that they've not seen returns in the short run, I sometimes am forced to bluntly ask if they or their kids began walking from the day they were born.

So, when SIP (Systematic Investment Plan) is marketed often as a simple, piece-meal and low-stressed method of building wealth in equity markets over the long-run, the invariable question people shoot back is - how long? While answers could feel subjective, there's

enough research to bring some realistic perspective from the past data. Though, past performance isn't an assurance of the future returns, as disclaimed by the mutual funds (MF), still could offer a peek into what future could rhyme if not repeat.

A little over two-decade study of rolling returns from Apr 2005 to Aug 2026, offers a data driven unambiguous answer to this question. The findings show that the longer the SIP runs, the higher it neutralizes the market volatility and market timing even as the shorter tenures leave investors exposed to significant market volatility.

Let's look at the evidence on the shorter tenure SIPs. Checking the 2-year SIPs, the sharing of rolling returns is striking with about 25% for the NIFTY Smallcap 250 TRI, about 19% for the NIFTY Midcap 150 TRI and about 14% on a relatively stable NIFTY 50 TRI. In simple words, an investor starting a 2-year SIP in smallcap stocks had roughly a one-in-four chances of ending up with a loss.

However, this risk declines slowly as the tenure lengths. By 3 years, negative return instances drop to around 22% for smallcaps, 11-12% for midcaps



and 6% to the large ones. By 5 years, the numbers fall further to single digit across all three categories of indices. By 7 years, the negative returns become a rarity: under 5% for the smallcaps while it's closer to null for the other two indices. What's interesting is that this pattern is consistent. Time in the market steadily erodes the probability of loss, regardless of which segment of the market an investor chooses.

It's not just the instances of negative returns that improve with longevity but even the severity of the losses. The minimum returns on the SIP reflect how bad the worst-case scenarios could translate to. For a 2-year SIP, the worst outcomes are negative: about -39% for NIFTY 50, -53% for Midcap 150 and about -57% for the Smallcap 250 indices. These losses are substantial and could offset an investor's financial goals materially. But by the 3 years,

the worst-case outcomes improve but remain painful ranging from -26% to -36% depending on the index. Things emerge better over 5 years, with minimum returns cluster in mild negative band of about -5% to -9% across the indices. And by 7 years, the broader index of NIFTY 50 records a minimum rolling return of just 0.4%, implying that even the unluckiest SIP investor in the large-cap space wouldn't have lost money, making it a powerful argument for extending investment horizons.

The longer tenures don't just stop at mitigating the risk, i.e., the downside, but turn crucial in generating higher consistent average returns. Comparing 5-, 7- and 10-year average rolling returns show relative stability across categories. NIFTY 50 averages about 12.5 and 12.7%, NIFTY Midcap 150 TRI around 17.3 and 17.7% while NIFTY Smallcap 250 TRI around 14.8 and 15.5%, reinforcing the idea that patience converts market volatility into predictable compounding growth.

The industry practitioners wrestle with timing the market or time spent in the market. The results indicate a definitive tilt towards time or timing. When compared for 10-year SIP started

in every calendar year from 2006 to 2016 on three scenarios of starting at: the year's high (the worst possible timing), the first trading day of the year, and at the year's low (possibly the best timing); the results converge more than most investors would expect.

Regardless of the timing, for the NIFTY 50 TRI, returns ranged narrowly between 12.6 and 12.9%, 18 to 18.1% for NIFTY Midcap 150 TRI, and 18.1% for NIFTY Smallcap 250 TRI ranged between 15.3 and 15.7%. Over the 10-year period, the difference between the worst and best possible timing was less than 50bps (basis points) in every case. This is probably the single most reassuring finding for SIP investors to not worry about when to start investing.

While I just enumerated the benefits of staying invested, another question haunts the SIP investors: what if I stop SIP in between? For instance, a 20K SIP invested at an average return of 10%, takes about 17 years to accumulate a corpus of 1Cr. However, the consequence of pausing the contribution could delay the goal accomplishment. Continuing the same example, if the SIP is stopped for 6 months after 2 years of contribution, the goal is deferred by

nearly 5 months i.e., 4 months and 27 days to be exact. The damage is similar even if the interruption is at later stages of the journey. A 6-month break after 4 years still costs about 4 months and 3 days while a 12-month break would impede the goal achievement by 8 months.

Thus, data suggests that short tenure SIPs (of 2-3yr) are susceptible to both higher probability of negative returns and potentially severe losses particularly in mid- and small-caps. As the investment horizon extends, both the frequency and severity of losses diminish sharply while average returns stabilize, across the segments. This reduces the investor behavior (fickleness/timing) though inconsistency could hurt (pauses) by disproportionate delays in goal achievement. SIPs thus counterweigh the human emotions and bring patience and consistency to the reward investors. As Malcolm Gladwell said, "practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good." (The author is a partner with "Wealcity Analytics", a SEBI registered Research Analyst firm and could be reached at info@wealcityanalytics.com)

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



VIEWS

In Good Company • How AI is changing the way companies hire | A18



Who am I when my working life comes to an end?

Society has conditioned us to tie our identity to our job title. Retirement forced me to confront that – and learn what it's like to be a beginner again.

Sonny Santos

During a dinner party three months into my retirement, someone asked me what most people ask when they meet someone new: "So, what do you do?"

I wanted to tell them that I had tyre rotation at 11.30am, then a four-hour refrigerator delivery window, and a reminder to myself to "buy cabinet legs, 9cm". Instead, I mumbled something about "exploring new directions", then escaped to refill my drink. It used to be much easier for me to answer that question. I am – or

was – a solutions engineer, focused on the financial services industry. It was broad enough to keep the conversation going and specific enough to help them decide if they'd rather run for a drink refill.

"I'm retired," I'd like to say. But that just brings up an inevitable follow-up question: "Ah, so what do you use to do?"

For 25 years, I spent most of my time working to support my family. As I entered my 50s, I realised I'd saved enough and decided to become good at the parts of life I'd been shortchanging – like my health, friendships and family.

But when my life as a full-time

corporate worker came to an end, it made me question: Who was I without that identity?

'WHAT DO YOU DO?'

For many of us, what we do for work forms the core of our identity. Sociologist Everett Hughes calls this a "master status" that overrides all other identities and dictates not just how others perceive us but also how we see ourselves.

We've been conditioned to think this way since childhood, constantly badgered about what we want to do when we grow up.

And when we grow up and enter the corporate world, the question "what do you do?" feels like second nature – a polite way to show interest, but also a shortcut to understanding a person's status and usefulness.

Leaving our corporate identity and "master status" behind can therefore be harder than expected – even though I know in theory that there are other parts of my identity – father, husband and the friend who shows up when it matters – beyond what I did for work.

My friend Alvin, who also recently retired after more than

25 years in technology, is also facing this struggle. "Society is taught to tie identity to how senior you are," he told me.

"When you no longer have a brand company behind you, the simple question 'what do you do?' becomes uncomfortable."

For three decades, my job title was proof that I was an expert at something. I was a person who spotted a client's problem before they finished describing it.

Now, what unsettles me is leaning into the other parts of me that I don't feel expert at – like writing.

I published for years before I

paused for over a decade. But telling people "I'm a writer" feels like an aspiration. I play a little bit of guitar, but getting through three chords without wincing doesn't make me a guitarist any more than knowing how to boil an egg makes me a chef.

Registering for events online isn't any more forgiving. Recently, I tried registering for a technology summit. The online form required two mandatory fields: employer and role. I typed "freelance" and "writer". A few days later, my application was rejected. No billion-dollar company behind my name means



What we do for work forms the core of our identity, dictating how others perceive us and how we see ourselves, the writer says. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Bundles of memories in the making of bak chang

Family bonds come wrapped in the value of preserving heritage food.

Leslie Koh

I was stricken recently by a sudden and random craving for Nonya bak chang. For a brief moment, it left me wondering if it was possible at all to get hold of the glutinous rice dumplings now that the Dragon Boat festival was over.

Fortunately, friends assured me that while not as common as, say, curry puffs, bak chang is available all year round these days, in neighbourhood eateries as well as at pop-up stalls in shopping malls. "Try Kim Choo in Joo Chiat," I was told, "they're really good."

As I have not bought one in years, I discovered something else about the dumplings: that it's not uncommon for them to cost \$8 apiece (a fancy one from hotels at the height of the season in June can cost triple that). I reeled on

hearing this.

And that was when I thought of my grandma's bak chang. And how I missed them.

More precisely, it wasn't just the taste I longed for – it was the making of the dumplings that I missed too.

For decades until Ah Ma died in 2014, it was a family tradition. The annual effort, which kept the household bustling in the kitchen for days, was tiring but rewarding for the results it produced – meal upon meal of aromatic dumplings, accompanied by copious amounts of Chinese tea to counter the richness of the fare.

The making of bak chang was laborious and complex.

It started each year with my grandma procuring heaps of bamboo leaves and reed strings, which she insisted had to be bought "at the right time". Apparently, some batches of leaves at the market were better than others. The leaves and strings had to be washed and lightly boiled to soften them so that they would fold readily and not rip when the dumplings were wrapped.

Then, the assortment of main ingredients had to be prepared – garlic and shallots, which had to be chopped and fried; spices like coriander powder, which had to

be ground; glutinous rice, which had to be washed and lightly salted; and mushrooms, candied winter melon, lean pork and pork belly, all of which had to be diced.

The size of the meat cubes had to be just right – not too chunky or too fine as to lose all texture.

Same thing for the candied winter melon, dicing them such that the fragments would melt when the bak chang were later steamed, imparting a fragrant sweetness to the mixture.

One secret behind Ah Ma's dumplings was, simply, the generous proportions of meat that went into them. She took the "bak" in bak chang quite literally: her dumplings had more meat than rice, whose main purpose was to keep the dumplings from falling apart in the steamer.

Finally came the wrapping of the ingredients in the familiar tetrahedral shapes. Binding them tightly – but not too tight – and getting them in the right shape was an art in itself.

The entire process of bak-chang-making took three to four days, and involved all four of us in the immediate family. All that just to produce little more than 100 dumplings each year, just enough for our own consumption plus some to give away to relatives and friends.

For my grandma, it was a yearly tradition that was a little ironic, given that my family wasn't particularly traditional to begin with. I learnt about the Chinese legend behind the dumplings and their association with the poet Qu Yuan much later in life.

For me, tradition meant the family coming together happily each year to produce a batch of sticky rice dumplings, not so much about Warring States-era villagers casting zongzi into the river to keep fish from harming a drowned poet.

To my family, there was only one variety of dumpling worth eating – the Nonya bak chang.

To be sure, there are others available, such as the hearty Hokkien ones and the Teochew ones with embedded balls of sweet bean paste, but the Peranakan version, with its sweet-and-savoury blend of spices, was the only one that mattered to us. It was familial tradition.

But this is not simply a story about heritage food that has seen a revival of ang ku kueh, now in multicoloured "shells", or min jiang kueh, stuffed these days with trendy pistachio kunafa – this is also about the bundling of memories and the crafting of family traditions, with food that is



literally hand-made.

Yes, one day we'll perhaps have robots to fill and wrap bak chang, but wouldn't that remove the oh-so-human experience of getting loved ones together and producing dumplings by hand, as well as the pure satisfaction of doing them well?

Like any other skill, wrapping bak chang takes time and patience. In my case, it took at least 10 years before I got it right. Along the way, Ah Ma would frown or laugh whenever my

dumplings turned out misshapen or threatened to fall apart.

One year, however, I knew I had made it when she got up and remarked: "Can I leave the rest to you this year? I need to sort out the steaming."

How does one put a price on that skill?

My bak-chang-wrapping ability, for sure, had little economic value. It wasn't something I could put on LinkedIn. But I took a secret pride in knowing that I could put a decent bak chang

no business reason to let me in. It's a minor thing, but it still stings.

'THIS ISN'T RETIREMENT'

Beyond the loss of identity, there's also something else I'm grappling with: The sheer amount of time on my hands to fill.

In the corporate world, work dictated what I did every week. Forecast calls, strategy sessions and customer meetings filled the boxes so I didn't have to think about them. Now, it's up to me to do it.

Some days, I still feel vaguely guilty if the answer is absolutely nothing. Like I should be producing something to earn the right to sit still.

It's not just me. My friend Donald, who left a Singapore bank after 22 years, found himself packing his calendar. Within three months of retirement, he had 12 consulting projects in motion and was heading back towards 70 hours a week.

His wife looked at his schedule and dropped a reality check: "What are you doing? This isn't retirement."

Donald had taken the traditional corporate work ethic that ties human value directly to the hustle and simply repackaged it to stay occupied. Sociologist David J. Ekerdt calls it the "busy ethic", the frantic impulse among retirees to keep moving so the world doesn't shrink.

No doubt staying active keeps the mind sharp, but there is a fine line between healthy recreation and bowing to the pressure of performing a high-energy, highly productive retirement for an imaginary audience.

THE 'UN-OPTIMISED LIFE'

Donald eventually adjusted by focusing on one interesting project a month, freeing up time for exercise, family and building a glamping resort in rural Thailand. Alvin found his balance through what he calls the "un-optimised life", which is a deliberate refusal to let usefulness be the sole measure of a day.

For someone who used to measure his working life in 30-minute blocks, he had to consciously ditch the idea that every second required a productive side hustle.

That space allowed him to think about his purpose for the next season. He ended up raising funds to combat human trafficking and "pig-butcher" scams. He's still working, just with room to breathe.

True balance is about choosing to spend time on what's important and not about recreating a busy corporate calendar... An open calendar started looking less like a blank canvas to panic over and more like a chance to reset.

I picked up some lessons from them. Donald showed me that true balance is about choosing to spend time on what's important and not about recreating a busy corporate calendar. Alvin reminded me not to apologise for how I spend my time.

An open calendar started looking less like a blank canvas to panic over and more like a chance to reset.

I realise that I still have a long way to go to figure out what this season means to me. I am slowly learning to reframe work, health, play and relationships in my life.

I have shrunk work to afternoons spent writing or chasing the right light with an old camera.

Health and relationships are no longer items squeezed into the margins of a business trip and instead, built into early morning runs or unhurried dinners with family.

Play, meanwhile, is simply the willingness to be average at something new, like wrestling with a guitar chord progression.

I am still learning to look at an empty Wednesday afternoon and resist the urge to fill it. I'm also still learning to get over the discomfort of no longer having a job title tell me who I am, and embracing the other parts of myself.

Instead of trying to prove that I'm an expert at something, I'm trying to believe that it's okay to be a beginner again, and there's no shame in being average at something new.

So the next time I'm cornered at a dinner party and asked what I do, I'll just look them in the eye and tell the truth: I am a beginner.

Whatever I drift towards next, another project, or simply more time with people I like, it's mine to choose. It won't carry much corporate social capital, but it's exactly what I do.

• Sonny Santos is a former financial services solutions engineer.



After my fiancée died, I had to keep moving to move on

But I found comfort in the stillness of yoga – and doing almost nothing.



Chew Hui Min

Senior Correspondent

We settled down at the end of yoga class for *shavasana*, or the corpse pose. Lying still in the darkened studio, I let my body go limp, and soon, tears rolled down my face to the mat.

I so love these few minutes of doing almost nothing in this resting pose – just breathing and relaxing – that I began tagging it to other exercises (after a long walk, why not lie in the grass and get a few ant bites?).

But in the months after my fiancée died, my devotion to *shavasana* took a detour.

For 15 years, he was my rock and best friend, the one person who was always by my side and on my side. He survived leukaemia twice, only to succumb to appendix cancer last August.

Daring myself to flip upside down or twist into a pretzel took my mind off things. But once I lay down on the mat, my body remembered its grief.

It felt familiar – the weight in my chest, the sharp chin in my nose, the ache in my eyes, swelling into tears. I sobbed staring at his photos, cried while driving past places we

frequented, teared whenever memories popped into my head. I spent months bawling at anything and everything. I just did not expect it on the yoga mat.

I had to iron out this kink in one of my familiar comforts, but I kept returning to the mat.

I blanked out on the future, not knowing what lay in store for me now that there was no "us", but planting my hands and feet on the mat in downward dog grounded me. Deep stretches eased a backache that had crept up on me while we shuttled between hospitals and oncologists. Just moving made me focus on the present, instead of wondering if in some alternate universe, we could have saved him, somehow.

At a time when it felt like I was carrying stones in my chest, moving my body became one of the surest ways to unload. It wasn't just yoga; I went walking, swimming, cycling – every day, I had to move, to move on.

MOVING TO MOVE ON

It dawned on me that, somehow, I had been doing this all my life. When my brain fried while studying for exams, I ran the slopes of my university. When I burned out at work, yoga was my refuge. After a week of breaking news and adrenaline, yoga class was where I slowed my breath and found some balance. It was where my body made peace with my mind.

In my mind, I concocted many comforting stories – I told myself he wasn't suffering anymore, that he was having canapés and wine with friends and family who had gone before him, that one day, we will meet again, in another realm. It helped, but my heart knew better – all I wanted was for him to squeeze my hand, laugh at my unfunny jokes, find fault with my cooking and fart in my face.

Eating alone felt the most unnatural. He lived to eat, and half the time, he'd intuit what I want and order food for me. He cooked by instinct, and even when I follow his old recipes, the dish lacks the pizzazz that he



gave it with a few final shakes of seasoning. Life too, felt like that, flat and bland, lacking the dash of spice he brought to each ordinary day.

It was hard to believe that someone with such verve and vigour for life was gone, leaving only memories.

But flipping through my memories gave me paper cuts – each happy moment from the past also a reminder that he wasn't here anymore. Some days, I sought out our favourite haunts; on other days I went out of my way to avoid them. Sometimes I enjoyed telling people about his quirks; at times, just hearing his name wrung my heart.

For months I toed this wavering line, teetering from grief to joy, then back to the mundane task I was absorbed in... and repeat.

Along the way, many kind and wise people offered comfort. Some words captured the penumbra I inhabited.

I cried as I read about the origins of "*saudade*" – a Portuguese word to describe the bittersweet longing for a loved one who is far away, coined in a detour.

Deep stretches eased a backache that had crept up on me while we shuttled between hospitals and oncologists. Just moving made me focus on the present, instead of wondering if in some alternate universe, we could have saved him, somehow.

time when sailors went on long voyages, sometimes never to return. There is no equivalent word in English that captures both the melancholy of yearning and the joy of having memories to cherish.

Sobbing through a screening of *Dear You* at the cinema, I thought our migrant forefathers would have found the word apt.

In truth, love and loss cannot be unbound – the deeper the love, the more profound the ache it leaves behind. "Grief is just love with nowhere to go" – I recited this phrase each time it felt like my heart might burst.

Do tears wash away the hurt or wear the grooves of grief deeper? I have no answer, they just come. During *shavasana*, when my breath calmed and my muscles forgot to tense, they simply flowed.

Rousing from the pose, we gently move our toes and our fingers, bend our knees, then turn to our side and slowly sit up.

HITTING PAUSE ON LIFE

A year after his passing, I no longer cry at yoga. It was a year in which I did nothing much but exercise, travel, bake, crochet, laugh at my niece's and nephew's antics, and watched too many K-dramas.

There was sadness; there was anger and despair; there was joy and gratitude – I never knew one could feel this much. I struggled to find space to hold it all and I'm still looking for room inside me to house these discordant guests.

I miss him, I always will, but my life is rotating out of the shadow of grief. The most unexpected thing was how, in between periods of lethargy or intense emotion, I started noticing little things that lifted my heart.

The rhythmic tedium of pulling yarn through a loop, having time to take the bus and stare out the window, the warmth of the sun on my face during my morning walks, having friends and family by my side... and slowly, I began to breathe with ease again.

I'm glad I hit pause on life, performing an extended *shavasana* that let my feelings crash over me.

Then a former colleague asked if I would like to come back to journalism, and I was surprised to feel my heart beat faster. I said yes without a second thought, or even a first. My heart knew the answer that my mind came to grasp – there is a time to rest, but it's time to press on.

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• Finding Joy is an Opinion series about the things that bring us satisfaction, fulfilment and meaning. If you have a submission, e-mail us at stopinion@sph.com.sg



The value of the slow, sometimes inefficient processes in making a traditional dish, like bak chang, is something worth holding on to, the writer says. PHOTO: SAMANTHA LEE

together. (Preparing the ingredients is another story)

The preservation of traditional delicacies has been highlighted in recent years. And many proposals and ideas have emerged, including exhibitions, cooking courses and funding support for hawkers.

I'm sure they're all needed, and some may actually work. But, I think, the motivation to preserve our culinary heritage ultimately has to come from deeper within each one of us.

If you asked me what it would take for me to attempt making bak chang one day, I know what the answer would be: my

memories of Ah Ma, of the family getting together, and of the best bak chang I have ever tasted.

Preserving traditional dishes and delicacies is not simply an abstraction about safeguarding our national heritage; it's also about keeping alive personal, cherished memories – of family bonding over the preparation of food, of the importance of dedication to detail and painstaking labour in producing something to enjoy and celebrate.

In today's era of mass production and instant gratification, the value of the slow and sometimes inefficient processes involved in making a traditional dish is something worth holding on to, as are the skills required to carry them out.

That said, the end goal shouldn't be focussed solely on replicating faithfully what grandma used to make.

BLENDING OF THE OLD WITH THE NEW

Consider how the bak chang has seen some modern upgrades, with creative fillings such as miso pork, white pepper crab, scallops, kurobuta pork and purple sweet potato. I suspect Ah Ma would have frowned on some of these ingredients and dismissed them as "not the real thing".

But for all my championing of the Nonya bak chang, I'm a little more sanguine about the dumpling's "evolution".

While there is merit in striving to stay true to a recipe or tradition, what's more important is that we still believe in it enough to keep going, and to do it in a meaningful manner that honours its intentions and memories.

In the case of bak chang, I suppose that would be getting the family together to make them by hand.

The satisfaction of having done so is to be savoured – and remembered – with each bite of the dumplings, whether or not they come out as good as those that Ah Ma used to make.

• Leslie Koh is a former journalist with The Straits Times.

ManpowerGroup chairman and chief executive Jonas Prising says that as companies augment and change their value creation chain with artificial intelligence, workers will need to adapt – both in the jobs performed and in their expectations, including the notion of lifetime employment.
ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH



InGoodCompany

Jobs aren't being lost so much as they're changing, says ManpowerGroup CEO

The head of the workforce solutions giant sees organisations continuing to rely on people with skills to design, manage, maintain and optimise automated systems.



Ravi Velloor

Senior Columnist

Seven years ago, when I first spoke with Jonas Prising about the rapid advance of automation and artificial intelligence impacting jobs, the chairman and chief executive of workforce solutions giant ManpowerGroup was confident that human beings would always have work to do. He was equally certain that work would continue to have meaning. Hence, concepts like a universal basic income – which has been criticised as paying people for doing little – are not the way to go. If anything, it would be “disastrous”. But so much has changed in the industrial and office landscape since then.

Dark factories abound in China, operating with a minimal workforce. Agentic AI is a hot topic, while software such as Claude performs tasks as well as

or better than humans, disrupting the workplace. Implications extend to the entire edifice of capitalism.

The educated-unemployed are now a political worry for many Asian governments – from China to Indonesia to India.

So, it was reassuring to hear from Prising – 62 years old and a father of three adult children – that he still holds to those views, substantially. The hiring slowdown, where that exists, he attributes mostly to economic cycles – not technology killing jobs.

As for the idea that humans in the coming age will have little else to do but stare at the ocean eating grapes – as a participant quipped at an AI conference I attended in San Francisco earlier this year – Prising says work will, if anything, take on even more meaning.

And yet, he acknowledges that things are changing beneath the surface. Employers are getting to be very specific on the skills they seek in staff. And yes, there is a slowdown in hiring younger people – those with greater experience are preferred because it is the experienced ones who drive productivity gains.

Take the software services industry. “Coders are still very high on the list of top 10 roles in demand, and all that’s happened is that they’ve gone from No. 2 to No. 4 on the list,” says Prising, co-chairman of this year’s Summer Davos in Dalian, otherwise known as the Annual Meeting of the New Champions.

“So the demand is still very strong but less than it was before. Likewise, contact centre agents are staying longer in positions, so hiring comes down. Other than that, these are either economic cycles or geopolitical events influencing the cycle that’s causing employer hesitation.”

“If you think of the narrative of big changes happening (because

of technology), that narrative is not visible in the data.”

And that holds true in much of South-east Asia including Singapore and Vietnam, particularly in the latter, which is enjoying a manufacturing boom, he notes.

As for growth, it is all in categories such as on-demand services – the “Uber-isation of work”, freelancers, independent contractors and outsourcing.

“Companies have a plethora of choices on how to execute strategy. So you are seeing this evolution of a permanent workforce being augmented by other pieces – today, most of the growth (in jobs) sits in the augmentation of other forms of employment. That makes companies get very sophisticated when they hire.”

What about China, where, according to some estimates, youth unemployment could be as high as 46 per cent?

Fully automated plants may capture the headlines, but the broader story is about human-machine collaboration and

the emergence of entirely new categories of work, says Prising.

“Despite concerns around youth unemployment and the rise of highly automated factories, what we see is that technology changes work far more than it eliminates it,” he says. “The sectors creating demand are increasingly concentrated around advanced manufacturing, automation, semiconductors, clean energy, digital services, healthcare and AI-related occupations.”

“Even in highly automated environments, organisations still need people with the skills to design, manage, maintain and optimise these systems.”

And India, the world’s most populous nation? One whose middle-class expansion is widely attributed to its once-proliferating outsourcing industry?

Goldman Sachs this month said in a report that 8 to 12 per cent of non-agricultural jobs are under threat of displacement as AI sweeps into manufacturing, finance and education sectors. The unemployed young have even led social eruptions lately, capturing global headlines.

While it is true that generative AI is good at the three Cs – content, coding and customer service – India’s strength has never been labour arbitrage alone but also its ability to adapt, says Prising.

“As AI takes over more routine activities, the opportunity shifts towards higher-value services, digital transformation, AI implementation, cybersecurity, data, product engineering and human-centred consulting. India’s demographics and investments in skills development should ensure it is well-suited to adapt.”

Some people believe that, in the headlong rush towards AI adoption, not enough chief executives comprehend the full dimensions of what they are doing, and to what purpose – bandwagoning with others spending hugely on AI because they fear that not doing so might make them appear as if they don’t “get technology”, so to speak.

Besides, if these machines are so good and the future is all about collaboration between man and machine, why is it that the gains from these technologies are at best uneven and aren’t showing up quite enough in the bottom line?

Prising explains that the lack of evidence that AI affects profitability is because the world is in a phase where AI is being used as a tool to tackle, say, two or three tasks in a job with 20 tasks. The time gained by automating those couple of tasks is probably spent on relaxation or surfing the web – who knows. Eventually, the profit advantage will surface.

“The next wave is end-to-end transformation, and that’s when the gains will be seen,” he says. “And that is really the recreation of value chains – of how

companies can augment and change their value creation chain with AI – as opposed to plonking AI on an existing value creation chain. That will fundamentally alter the nature of work and the nature of jobs – which ones are there, which ones are augmented, and which ones leave.”

As these transformations progress, workers will need to adapt – both in the jobs performed and in their expectations, including the notion of lifetime employment.

In an earlier era, employees sought to earn a company badge from firms such as IBM and GE, or SIA and Singtel, and turn in the same badge at retirement. But the era of rapid changes of employer, and even multi-jobbing, is at hand. Retirement is also being pushed further out as longevity rises.

Prising, who is the Geneva-based World Economic Forum’s CEO Champion of the Reskilling Revolution, says that as working life extends towards age 70, one has to think of it as a “portfolio of career moves”. The young, particularly, will be much more open to trying different occupations until they find something they like.

What is more, careers may no longer be all about vertical progression but also a series of lateral moves. For instance, 90 per cent of Uber drivers do it as their second or third job. You might be driving Uber on Saturday night and walking dogs the next morning for someone else, depending on the stage of life that you are in.

How does one prepare for such an employment universe? It used to be that the young were told to focus on paper qualifications – achieving solid grades in school and college, the better if these were in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines. A good university, good grades – and it was easier to get your foot in the door of a reputed company and build your life thereon.

But in the AI era, soft skills and real-life experience will be increasingly valued over paper qualifications. Bob Sternfels, global managing partner at McKinsey, told me in 2024 that the firm had just appointed its first non-graduate partner.

It’s a great anecdote, says Prising, who doesn’t seem to be convinced.

Who knows, AI-assisted hiring practices may well throw up such candidates. But human preference will still be to look at which university a candidate attended and what grades were scored.

“It is human behaviour overriding data. You would say ‘It’s weird and not going to last’, and I would say that this is the most lasting element of any technological revolution.”

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EDITORIAL

HK researchers join the vital race against dementia

Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia, is a global ageing disease for which scientists worldwide are seeking a cure or prevention, while trying to develop drugs to delay or slow the onset of symptoms. Dementia is so prevalent – nearly one in 10 Hongkongers over 60 suffers from it – that groundbreaking progress on either front could be a public health event with socio-economic implications, including a longer life expectancy, not to mention the life-changing impact on patients and carers.

In this light, recent advances by local researchers in identifying at-risk individuals and tackling the disease have brought new hope to many.

A surgical procedure for Alzheimer's disease being tested in Hong Kong has the potential to make a real difference to patients by improving their ability to take care of basic needs, such as getting dressed and remaining socially engaged.

Researchers at Chinese University (CUHK) are running clinical trials on the procedure, which involves an operation to drain an abnormal build-up of two protein types in the brain – tau and amyloid – that damage brain cells and contribute to cognitive decline. Alzheimer's is characterised by a build-up of these two proteins.

The method is not new, having been pioneered by a mainland doctor in Hangzhou as long ago as 2018 and popularised by social media videos showing dramatic improvement of patients. But mainland health authorities have banned its unregulated use in hospitals, pending resolution of uncertainty about its safety and effectiveness.

CUHK researchers should be commended for taking the next step. Last year, the team obtained approval from a joint CUHK-Hospital Authority clinical research ethics committee to hold clinical trials under strict scientific controls and has recruited four suitable patients so far. One has improved so markedly that his wife describes him as a "completely new person".

Short of a confirmed, clinically proven breakthrough, any advances that slow the progress of the disease – such as an earlier diagnosis enabling more timely treatment – can also make a difference. Many people are unaware they have the disease.

In that regard, a team from the CUHK Department of Psychology has developed a screening tool that uses functional near-infrared spectroscopy.

Scientists at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology have also spearheaded the development of a blood test that uses biomarkers for early detection of Alzheimer's disease and mild cognitive impairment. It includes a free blood test for 6,000 local residents aged between 60 and 75. The test has been found to have an accuracy rate of 96 per cent in identifying Alzheimer's.

The aim of the five-year programme is to shift the treatment of Alzheimer's from late-stage elderly patients in hospitals to earlier intervention in the community. This is a significant development in a fast-ageing city like Hong Kong, where nearly a quarter of the population are aged 65 and above, with the number projected to rise to 36 per cent in 2046.

The scheme reflects broader moves to identify and tackle health problems early. For example, testing for hypertension and diabetes began under a pilot scheme in 2023. Screening has since been expanded to cover hepatitis B. It would make sense to include Alzheimer's in the scheme with an efficacious test.

The CUHK surgical team is looking for more patients for clinical trials of the surgery to drain abnormal protein build-ups. If it proves effective in arresting or reversing the disease's progress, even if temporarily, it will be a landmark incremental advance against the cruel frustrations of the disease.

It offers patients the possibility of a future other than years of a poor quality of life with declining mental faculties.

According to the World Health Organization, more than 57 million people worldwide are living with dementia, 60 to 70 per cent of them with Alzheimer's. The number is projected to reach 153 million by 2050.

Dr Tor Chiu, an honorary associate professor of surgery at CUHK and head of the Alzheimer's research team, said: "If you see any improvement in an Alzheimer's patient, even just a little, that is potentially very important because currently there's nothing that can improve their condition."

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World has lost with death of Zhu Rongji

The current state of US-China ties shows the importance of leaders like the former premier, who was pragmatic, cosmopolitan and committed to constructive talks

With the death of former premier Zhu Rongji, both China and the wider world have lost a great leader.

Zhu took personal risks for better US-China ties. He believed that productive Sino-American relations were good for China and for the world.

He was a global leader before China had achieved its current great power status. In mid-1990, when I was president of the National Committee on United States-China Relations, our organisation invited Zhu, then Shanghai mayor, to the United States. Several colleagues and I spent nearly three weeks travelling to several US cities with him.

This trip occurred about a year after June 4, 1989 – the first high-level visit to the US by a Chinese leader after the trauma and bloodshed of Tiananmen Square.

Making this journey at that time was a risk for him. If he was too strident defending his government in America, he would fail in his mission to improve ties with US citizens and leaders.

On the other hand, if he was perceived back home as a weak defender of China's dignity, he would be vulnerable to nationalist backlash.

He did not want to appear to be the darling of the West when his superiors in Beijing were prohibited from contact with US officials because of Washington's post-Tiananmen sanctions.

Zhu candidly hinted at his quandary, saying: "I wish they [the US press] would quit calling me 'China's Gorbachev' – it's killing me in China. I am not China's Zhu Gorbachev, I am China's Zhu Rongji."

Leadership greatness is anchored in character. Our rides together during his extended 1990 US trip, subsequent opportunities to meet him one on one and with groups over subsequent years and my conversations with other world leaders about their interactions with Zhu left me several indelible impressions about his character and qualities of leadership.

On the evening of July 7, 1990, Zhu and his delegation of five other mayors from some of China's largest cities, plus the venerable former mayor of Shanghai Wang Danhan, landed at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York.

As we rode into New York City, the illuminated bridges spanning the East River suddenly popped into view, as did the twin towers. He asked me, "Tell me. You have something here called the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. What is it? What does it do? Why was it established?"

I inadequately explained that the Port Authority was a multi-state/municipality special-purpose jurisdiction to plan, develop and operate infrastructure and promote region-wide economic and social development.

**“
Zhu left me several indelible impressions about his character and ... leadership**

Showing his cosmopolitanism and practical nature, he said: "That is important. Though you are capitalist, you need planning. And we, though socialist, need a lot more market. In the end, we are all mixed systems."

He was right. In my experience, Zhu never spoke with a group before first asking who was in the audience and what they cared about. He almost never read a speech. Also, unlike most Chinese leaders, he did not live in fear that someone in the audience would ask an embarrassing question.

One day, as we headed for Capitol Hill to meet with members of Congress, he was undaunted by the prospect of meeting Nancy

Pelosi, a junior House member from California. She was calling for protecting the visa status of Chinese students then studying in the US and tying most-favoured-nation status for China to its human rights behaviour.

Heading towards that meeting, I cautioned the mayor that he would get what he might see as hostile, unfriendly questions, which I don't think he needed me to tell him.

All this he understood, and more. As we left the last meeting of that day on the Hill, he said: "Well that wasn't as bad as you warned. Reminds me of my barber shop. People come in, people go out, everyone talks over everyone else. Yeah, like my barber shop."

My experience seeing many members of Congress interact with Chinese leaders is that they generally identify a legitimate concern, then come up with a proposed remedy or to-do list for their Chinese interlocutor.

Such was the case in April 2002 – about a year before the US invasion of Iraq – when he was urged to support the US invasion of Iraq to forestall what the George W. Bush administration argued was Baghdad's drive to acquire nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.

Zhu replied: "I cannot agree with you on the Iraq issue. You can't produce solid evidence that Iraq has nuclear weapons. To destroy a country at will is very dangerous. The whole Arab world will fall out with you. We don't hope to see this."

Nearly two decades later, the US still lives with the consequences of not heeding this advice, as well as repeating the error with respect to Iran today.

While Zhu Rongji was China's Zhu Rongji, he also was the world's Zhu Rongji. Reflecting on him and the current US-China relationship shows how much the world has lost in terms of a leader and a constructive global approach.

David M. Lampton is professor emeritus at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies



David Lampton

Training vital for animal handling

As Hong Kong residents speak up about the bird that died after flying into a gym, we must remember that just weeks earlier, a security guard was jailed for dumping a cat in the trash. It's clear that some people who encounter animals at work simply don't know how to respond appropriately.

Cleaners, security guards and property management staff are often the first to deal with lost, injured or distressed animals. Yet many receive little or no training in animal welfare or even the basic protections animals have under Hong Kong law. Some may not realise their mistake until they are sentenced to jail.

Just as frontline workers are taught workplace safety, they should also receive basic guidance on handling animals humanely and legally. A frightened bird or stray cat should never lose its life because of panic or a poor decision. While education may not prevent every tragedy, it can significantly reduce many of them before they occur.

Jason Baker, president, Peta Asia

Pet proposal may spur smuggling

I refer to the letter, "City can meet demand for pet-friendly travel" (August 9).

However attractive the proposal for allowing tourists to bring along their pets to Hong Kong may seem, it should not be pursued as it might encourage animal smuggling.

LETTERS

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Go visit a pet shop in Guangzhou or Shenzhen. Chances are that you will easily find pet sellers promising they can deliver pets to Hong Kong. I am rather dubious about how legal this is as an import licence is still required by the Hong Kong government and the imported pet will need to undergo quarantine.

There is indeed a huge price gap between Hong Kong and the mainland when it comes to puppies and kittens. For example, I own a schnauzer myself. A schnauzer can cost only 1,000 yuan (HK\$1,160), if not less, in a remote mainland city,

while the same may cost as much as HK\$10,000 in Hong Kong.

Should pets be allowed to come along with their owners, the tremendous profit margin would definitely tempt more dishonest traders into taking the risk.

A. Chan, Guangzhou

MOU should have protected civilians

I refer to "Trump demands Iran pay compensation as hopes fade for Hormuz agreement" (August 11).

Although it is unlikely that either side will compensate the other for the harm done in the last five months, should the current memorandum of understanding (MOU) collapse, as seems likely, there is at least one additional condition which the United States should add. The June 17 MOU was flawed in that it did not protect Iranian civilians against oppression by their own government.

Given that thousands of Iranians were killed in demonstrations this year, it would be useful for any new US proposal to insist on a right of peaceful assembly, including peaceful demonstrations, for Iranian citizens. This does not mean all demonstrations this year have been peaceful, but protecting the lives of peaceful demonstrators would reduce death and injury levels among unarmed civilians.

Any future US proposal should also guarantee the right of Iranians to use communications technologies to communicate among themselves and with the outside world. This does not mean to say that the government should not have some control over the content of such communications.

Failure to meet these standards should allow the US to impose economic and trade sanctions on Iran. However, such failure should not allow the US to attack Iran.

Bruce Couchman, Toronto

On recognition of subgroup unions

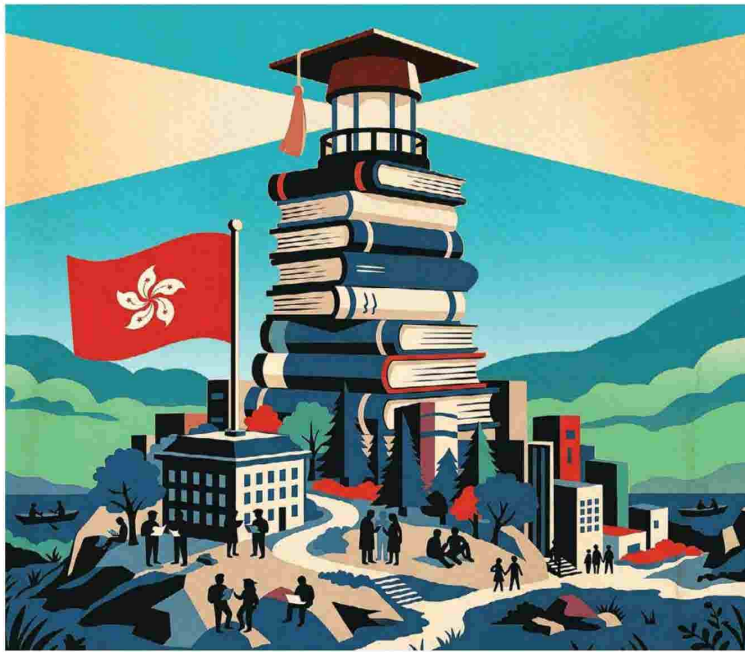
I refer to the article, "We are missing the real picture on migration" (August 4), about Chinese subgroups. Interesting, yet I did not see a reference to marrying outside a subgroup.

After three or four generations in the Philippines or the United States, many young Chinese have mixed ancestry. When a Teochew speaker marries a Hakka speaker, no one calls that intermarriage. But how often does that happen? Are statistics being gathered?

Michael J. Sloboda, Tsim Sha Tsui



Basic guidance on handling animals humanely and legally is urged. Photo: Karma Lo



University town tests city's global ambitions

Done correctly, the Northern Metropolis project can create new international links, redefine what higher education can achieve and drive national development needs

The Northern Metropolis University Town is no longer just a planning concept. After site visits by a university town task force, the government has reportedly absorbed lessons from overseas models, expanded the university town area to more than 1,000 hectares, received 19 proposals from local institutions and moved towards phased site tendering and development.

The project has become something more significant: a test of what Hong Kong wants its higher education system to do in a changing world. This matters because the context around universities has changed dramatically.

Academic cooperation is now shaped by geopolitics, security concerns, talent competition and the growing need for strategic relevance. At the same time, the global balance of academic and innovation power is shifting. For Hong Kong, the university town is not simply a land-use or campus-planning exercise. It is an opportunity to rethink the role of universities in the city's future.

The idea of a world-class university has long been closely associated with Western institutions. Now, Chinese universities are important players in frontier fields such as artificial intelligence, green technology and advanced manufacturing. Hong Kong itself hosts a rare concentration of highly ranked universities in a compact city.

Some scholars are moving from the West to Chinese institutions, including Hong Kong universities, which reflects a broader shift in academic gravity. The challenge now is not whether Hong Kong can imitate the old global hierarchy but whether it can define a new one rooted in relevance, openness and real contribution.

In that sense, the university town should be judged by a more ambitious standard. It should not simply be about building another campus or attracting another name. It should help Hong Kong become a place where international education is not only prestigious but meaningful. That means building institutions that can connect the city to the world while also connecting the world more to China.

Higher education is increasingly caught in the wider trend of securitisation. International academic cooperation is no longer as open, neutral or predictable as it once was. Sensitive research areas,

cross-border technology flows and geopolitical tensions have made collaboration more complicated. Hong Kong cannot assume the old model of education exchange and cooperation will continue unchanged. It needs a new one that respects national security while preserving academic vitality, exchange and global credibility.

The university town can also serve a practical economic purpose. Chinese firms are going global, and they need more than symbolic partnerships with universities. In other words, industry-academia collaboration should move beyond knowledge transfer. It should become a form of capacity building and co-creation.

This is where a university town can matter most. If designed well, the Northern Metropolis University Town could become a place where universities help firms solve real problems, train the next generation of managers and support the internationalisation of Chinese businesses. This would make higher education more closely aligned with industrial upgrading and national development needs.

“Hong Kong must not let rising demand for its education system distort its priorities”

The Greater Bay Area dimension is equally important. The university town should not be evaluated only by what it adds to Hong Kong in isolation. In a region built on integration, the right question is whether the university town improves overall efficiency, strengthens cross-border spillovers and supports the movement of talent, knowledge and innovation across the region.

Hong Kong also has a critical opportunity to serve as a bridge for mutual understanding. As direct people-to-people and academic exchange becomes rarer and more difficult, Hong Kong's gateway position becomes even more valuable. It can be a safe, internationally familiar but China-connected space where foreign students, researchers and

institutions can better understand China in a structured and credible setting.

That role should not be underestimated. Misunderstanding between societies can be intensified when contact becomes more limited. Hong Kong can help reduce that risk by becoming a place where exchange remains possible and institutionally trustworthy. If built thoughtfully, the university town could strengthen that role.

At the same time, Hong Kong must not let rising demand for its education system distort its priorities. More mainland students can bring talent, local spending and broader activity to the city, but if the response is simply to expand capacity without protecting quality, Hong Kong risks slipping into a model of excessive commercialisation. Universities should not treat students as a revenue stream. Their legitimacy depends on rigour, student experience and reputation.

This is why the success of the university town should not be measured by speed alone. Under pressure to accelerate Northern Metropolis development, it might be tempting to push land out quickly, attract institutions and treat implementation as success in itself. A university town should be assessed by deeper criteria.

Does it support the integrated development of the Greater Bay Area? Does it serve national needs? Does it help Hong Kong engage the world more effectively? Does it produce graduates and research that matter? These are the standards that should guide its next phase.

The project sits at the intersection of education, land use, talent policy, innovation, regional development, international exchange and cooperation. It is not just about adding another campus to Hong Kong's landscape. It is about whether the city can build a university town that supports real transformation for Hong Kong, the Greater Bay Area and China.

If Hong Kong gets the university town right, it will have done more than build a new education district. It will have taken a meaningful step towards redefining what a world-class university town can be.

Ryan Ip is the vice-president of Our Hong Kong Foundation and executive director of its Public Policy Institute. David Yu Chak-wai is a researcher at Our Hong Kong Foundation



Ryan Ip
&
David Yu

Rice occupies a special place in Chinese hearts

Ancient staple is woven into the fabric of the nation, shaping its landscape, economy and culture

Years ago, I was invited to speak in Bali about the significance of rice to the Chinese. At first, I wondered whether there was enough to say about something so ordinary. Once I began writing, however, the words poured out like water from a broken dam. The talk, delivered in a pavilion overlooking emerald rice paddies, turned out to be my most engaging.

There was far more to rice than I had imagined. In China, it occupies a special place in the national imagination, somewhere between food and faith.

Nai, my beloved grandmother, treated every grain with reverence. Whenever my siblings and I left a few grains in our bowls, she would urge us to finish them. Every grain, she reminded us, represented countless hours of labour in the fields. Sometimes she resorted to a more colourful warning. “Finish your rice,” she would say, “or you’ll end up marrying someone with a pockmarked face.”

As a child, I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or be frightened. What I did understand was that rice was precious. In Mao’s China, food was never taken for granted. My grandparents had experienced famine; my parents had endured chronic scarcity. To waste food was not merely careless. It was wrong.

For thousands of years, rice has been woven into the fabric of Chinese civilisation, shaping not only the country’s landscape and economy but also its culture, customs and collective memory. Vast irrigation systems transformed southern China into one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. Communities organised their lives around planting, harvesting and celebrating harvests.

The importance of rice is reflected in language. Traditionally, one common greeting is not “How are you?” but literally “Have you eaten rice?” A “rice bowl” is the usual metaphor for one’s livelihood or income. A “rice bucket” describes someone who only has the capacity to eat. And when Chinese people say “raw rice has been cooked,” they mean that what is done cannot be undone.

Chinese schoolchildren still learn Tang poet Li Shen’s famous lines – Who knows that the food in the bowl / Every single grain is the fruit of bitter toil? – conveying the lesson Nai tried so hard to teach us. Rice also connects the living and the dead. During Qing Ming and the Hungry Ghost Festival, bowls of rice are often placed alongside meat and fruit as offerings to ancestors and wandering spirits.

But the deeper story is not about rice. It is about China. For most of Chinese history, obtaining enough food was a daily preoccupation. Droughts, floods and failed harvests could bring catastrophe.

It is no coincidence that the Chinese character for harmony, *he*, combines the radicals for grain and mouth. The message is simple: when people have food to eat, there is peace.

Even with the founding of the People’s Republic, food remained a worry in the early decades. The state controlled the distribution of staples through a rationing system. Rice, cooking oil, meat and other essentials could be bought only with coupons, and allocations varied according to occupation.

Manual labourers, whose work demanded more calories, received larger grain rations than office workers, while men generally received more than women.

Today, for many urban Chinese, the challenge is abundance. Supermarket shelves overflow with choices that would have been unimaginable when I was a child. Meat, fish and dairy products, once luxuries, have become everyday staples. Coffee, milk tea, bread and fast food now compete with the bowl of steamed rice that once anchored almost every meal.

Young people, especially urban and educated ones, are also more health-conscious than previous generations. Many are cutting back on white rice and turning instead to whole grains such as corn, barley, millet and oats, driven by concerns about carbohydrates and blood sugar. For the first time in Chinese history, many are choosing to eat less rice not because they cannot afford it, but because they believe it is healthier.

Within the span of a single lifetime, China has transformed from a society shaped by scarcity into one increasingly defined by choice.

The fact that many Chinese can now choose what not to eat is itself a testament to how far the country has come.

Yet when abundance becomes the norm, it is easy to forget what hunger once taught. Nai’s reverence for rice came from hardship. Every grain embodied a farmer’s labour and a small triumph over scarcity. Many young Chinese today have grown up in a world of plenty, with little sense of the scarcity that once shadowed daily life.

Whenever I find a few grains of rice left in my bowl, I still hear Nai’s voice. I’m no longer scared of ending up with a pockmarked partner, but I find myself finishing the rice anyway. I savour the grains that remind me how far China has travelled in a single lifetime. The declining importance of rice is not merely a dietary shift. It is a measure of China’s success.

Perhaps prosperity is easiest to appreciate when one remembers what came before.

Lijia Zhang is a rocket-factory worker turned social commentator, and the author of a novel, *Lotus*



Lijia Zhang

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EDITORIALS

A broken system

Illinois has rules against harassment, but the Harry Benton scandal shows they're not working

In Springfield, there's a time-honored way to deal with a crisis and give the impression that lawmakers are doing something without their actually having to do anything at all. Form a working group. That way, you can buy some time until (hopefully) everyone moves on.

Last year, House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch convened working groups on property taxes and pensions. Not much actually changed.

Welch's most recent iteration is a new "culture and accountability" working group. And the wheels are already falling off.

Welch is known for his preference to form these Democrat-only private groups, and this one is no different — except that two of the Democrats Welch asked to join the group have declined.

State Rep. Gregg Johnson, an East Moline Democrat, told Capitol News Illinois he was uncomfortable with the makeup of the group given that some members had already gone public with their position on Welch's handling of the recent House sexual harassment scandal surrounding disgraced former state Rep. Harry Benton.

The other Democrat to RSVP no? State Rep. Kelly Cassidy of Chicago, who has said she was concerned it could amount to little more than a PR stunt.

Gov. JB Pritzker has also expressed skepticism that a working group is a satisfactory way to resolve this problem (ya think, Gov?), pointing out that these groups often drag on and on.

"There is no time here. There are already models for dealing with this in other states," he said at an Aug. 7 press conference.

Based on Tribune reporting, which paints a thorough picture of what happened, we can get a sense of where to start looking. The young staffer who alleged harassment from Benton reported the behavior to Welch's chief of staff in April 2023. She was encouraged to take her allegations to the Legislative Inspector General but declined, telling the Tribune she feared formally pursuing the complaint could permanently damage her job prospects.

Since Welch appears set on the working group idea, we'll share what we think the first matter of exploration ought to be: Why did a young woman who knew there was a system for reporting harassment feel that merely using it might well ruin her career?

But let's back up a bit here. For a working group to be successful it needs clear marching orders, the right people at the table — that would be some combination of lawmakers from both parties, victims and longtime staffers who know the Springfield culture — and a tight deadline. Then there is at least a shot of answering the most salient question: Why don't women in Springfield feel safe coming forward with serious harassment concerns?

Employees at good private-sector companies can take a harassment complaint to human resources without fear of losing their job. Clearly, Springfield needs something like that. As distinct from another open-ended exercise in brainstorming ideas.

Welch has floated the notion of centralizing human resources operations in the House. Maybe some element of HR-style reform is part of the answer, but Springfield shouldn't build another bureaucracy before identifying what the current system couldn't — or failed to — do this time. Staffers already have multiple avenues for reporting harassment outside their immediate supervisor, including the Legislative Inspector General and Illinois Department of Human Rights, as well as the state's Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Help-



SCOTT STANTIS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

line.

The problem, in other words, may not be that employees lack somewhere to go, but that they don't sufficiently trust what will happen to them once they go there.

No system can guarantee that an accused lawmaker won't deduce who complained, but Statehouse employees should be able to report harassment with reasonable confidence that doing so won't cost them their careers. We asked Pritzker's team what he had in mind when he pointed to other states.

One example to which Pritzker's team pointed (although it noted the governor does not necessarily endorse these particular ideas) is giving regular citizens more involvement in oversight, as Washington state does. Their Legislative Ethics Board includes five public members in addition to four lawmakers. Giving citizens a majority gives the public

adequate weight and authority over serious ethics matters. Making such a change in Illinois surely would be an effective safeguard against lawmakers protecting bad actors with whom they are chummy.

One obvious challenge to transparency here comes from policies in place that could've prevented us from learning about the issues with Benton in the first place.

The LIG's Benton report easily could have remained secret.

Illinois law requires the Legislative Ethics Commission to publish certain reports involving serious employee discipline, but gives the commission discretion over publication of other reports — including one like Benton's. Because Benton resigned before the report was completed, its release was not mandatory. Had the commission declined to publish it, the report could have remained confidential indefinitely. That gives a small panel of

legislators substantial power over whether the public learns what an ethics investigation found. That's a big problem.

The Pritzker administration also highlighted Rhode Island, which has rules in place to ensure efficient investigations. Its ethics commission is generally required to complete an investigation within 180 days, allowing for no more than two 60-day extensions when the situation warrants it.

Several states also provide longer windows for certain complaints or ethics enforcement. Alaska generally allows legislative ethics complaints involving conduct within the previous five years, while Oregon gives workers five years to file certain employment-discrimination complaints. Illinois allows two years for state civil-rights complaints, while the LIG generally has just a year to initiate an investigation.

These are the types of targeted changes Illinois could consider

once lawmakers know precisely what they're trying to fix — the kinds of ideas a solid working group should be debating and evaluating.

"It takes all of us to change a culture," Welch said in an Aug. 5 interview with Capitol News Illinois. "Everyone that sees something should say something. We should have an environment where people are comfortable to say something, and it's not going to be fixed by one person alone."

Correct. The instinct to analyze what happened with Benton and where the system fell short is the right first step. Only once we know where the breakdowns occurred can we understand what needs to change.

Give the working group that mission, a firm deadline, the right people at the table and the ideas Pritzker pointed to as a place to start.

Then let's see the work. And the results.

Quotes of the week

"Some politicians are running for this office at the same time they are standing for reelection for their current office in November.... It may be legal, but it is morally wrong."

CHICAGO MAYORAL CANDIDATE WILLIE WILSON, on fellow candidates running for mayor while also campaigning for other offices

"Wisconsin, we have built something that will last forever. No matter who's on this ballot, y'all, we are going to fight to win for one another."

FRANCESCA HONG, a democratic socialist, after her narrow loss in Tuesday's Democratic gubernatorial primary in Wisconsin

"To us, Northwestern University is Chicago. Chicago loves sports and we need Wildcat Football to be competitive. We are pleased to support the university as it enters an exciting new era."

LIZ AND DICK UHLEIN, who just donated \$35 million to Northwestern football

"Invention, not automation, will be the greatest contribution of superintelligence."

MARK ZUCKERBERG, in an essay on artificial intelligence

"There's just been a lot of outside noise. But our locker room is good. Our locker room in there, it's tight, and we have each other's backs. Coach loves us."

INDIANA FEVER'S SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM, on speculation of conflict with head coach Stephanie White

OPINION



Former National Institutes of Health Director Anthony Fauci arrives for testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee hearing on July 29 in Washington. **ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY**

The problem with outrage over Fauci

By **Alessandra Hirsch**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Ever since Dr. Anthony Fauci appeared in front of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, my social media feed has been inundated with scenes of the past. Doctors and nurses post picture after picture of their yellow-gowned bodies or N95-covered faces, all with the same message: if this wasn't you during the COVID pandemic, no one cares what you think about Fauci.

These healthcare workers, serving images of themselves to the internet and its inevitable wrath, are providing testimony where Fauci will not. As he pleaded the Fifth Amendment to each of the questions, those who are not compelled to court feel compelled to something else. Sara Jennings, for example, a pediatric nurse who goes by @nursepeeps on Threads, posted pictures of herself in mask, goggles and face shield and wrote:

"Y'all forgot awfully fast about the days where so many died we ran out of body bags. I wrapped a tiny child in Home Depot plastic sheeting and carried her into the refrigerator truck. I wore garbage bags for PPE and sutured my one issued mask back together when it broke. So many died, my hospital forced ICU nurses to call in to grief counselors. So shut it with your Fauci hate."

I remember, too. I was an intern, only just beginning to understand the hospital's tunnel system when COVID-19 hit. My education on the South Side of Chicago in obstetrics and gynecology was fundamentally shaped by the pandemic.

As I learned to deliver babies, I also learned to quickly don and doff personal protective equipment. As I learned to diagnose signs of fibroids on an MRI, I also learned to diagnose signs of respiratory failure in a woman who was pregnant and breathing hard.

That education did not stop in the hospital. My relationships, all of our relationships,

Fauci's critics are motivated by fear. They saw the vaccine as an untested threat and a dangerous oversight. Let me be clear: They are wrong. The COVID-19 vaccine saved 3 million American lives. Fauci will be remembered as one of the great heroes of public health and modern medicine.

were changed by the pandemic. A 3-month-old flirtation became my future husband when, on the eve of lockdown, we exchanged "I love you" for the first time. I didn't touch my mother for over a year.

What healthcare workers want the world to see with these posts is, on the surface, a defiant support of Fauci. Indeed, they have medical expertise (like Fauci), and experience (like Fauci). But really, I think it's about exhibiting and reliving our fear. That fear still lives so close to the surface, that, like a caged animal, we are always ready to pounce.

Unfortunately, it seems that Fauci's critics are motivated

by fear as well. They saw the vaccine as an untested threat and a dangerous oversight. Let me be clear: They are wrong. The COVID-19 vaccine saved 3 million American lives. Fauci will be remembered as one of the great heroes of public health and modern medicine.

But here is the problem with the Fauci outrage on all sides: It forgets about the hope.

When the COVID-19 vaccines were announced, we in the medical community felt, for the first time in nine desperate months, the first sliver of hope. My hospital had a lottery system, and by some miracle of luck, I was among the first to be vaccinated. I asked the nurse to take my

picture as the needle went in, and it's that picture I have been thinking of these past weeks, as my colleagues post image after image of their traumatized faces.

In the photo, I am masked and seated, with a volunteer bent over my bared left shoulder. I'd just come off a night shift, and my eye bags have eye bags, such was my fatigue. But I'm smiling back tears of unmitigated hope.

All of us who survived the pandemic — and this is all of us who remember it — carry its scars. No one has a right to use those scars to litigate the past. But we'd all do well to remember the moments of hope that dotted the unbearable. And we might just find that Fauci, with his poise and equanimity, was responsible for more than a few of them.

Dr. Alessandra Hirsch is a writer and assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. She has written a memoir about her time in residency during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The real lesson to be learned from the Common Core

By **Michael Casserly**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The political battles over the Common Core State Standards may feel old and settled. They are not. Critics continue to describe college- and career-ready standards as federal overreach, wasted effort and academic failure. That conclusion is too simple — and, in important ways, wrong.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress tells a more complicated story: Standards did not succeed everywhere, but where districts turned them into stronger classroom instruction, students made real gains.

The anger toward the standards was not manufactured, though. Common Core reached classrooms before many districts had the materials, training and explanations teachers and parents needed. Federal incentives attached to adoption fed the perception of coercion, even though the standards were developed outside the federal government and state adoption was voluntary. And new tests that came with the standards were often bundled with teacher evaluations, adding another layer of resistance.

Those grievances were real. But they were mostly grievances about political clumsiness and rushed implementation, not proof that stronger standards were the wrong aspiration.

Did Common Core deliver everything its supporters promised? No. But disappointment is not the same as failure. The real lesson was that standards alone do not raise achievement. Standards matter when states and districts use them to raise expectations, create more rigorous and coherent curriculum, purchase better



High school students walk toward their classroom at Von Steuben Metropolitan Science Center in Chicago on Dec. 15, 2025. **ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

instructional materials, focus professional development, align assessments with what students are expected to learn and build the capacity of schools to teach the content well.

Chicago's results were hard to square with the claim that higher standards were an academic dead end. Between 2003 and 2019, NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment showed that the nation's public schools gained just six points in fourth grade math and five points in eighth grade math. Large-city districts as a group did better, gaining 11 to 12 points. Chicago, which was an early adopter of the standards, did better still: 18 points in fourth

grade math, 21 points in eighth grade math and 15 points in fourth grade reading — roughly triple the national math gain. Chicago's eighth grade reading scores stayed flat, a useful reminder that no reform lifts performance evenly.

Other city school systems such as Washington, San Diego, Miami-Dade County and Dallas had similar experiences with their state's versions of the standards and had among the highest achievement gains on NAEP.

Since then, the pandemic took a toll on Chicago, as it did in many places, except in eighth grade reading, where the district is actually ahead of its 2019 performance.

Chicago earned these gains by treating the standards as more than a compliance exercise. District leaders used them to rethink instruction, align classroom practice with system supports, build capacity among school supervisors and principals, and clarify what students should know and be able to do. NAEP cannot prove that standards alone caused Chicago's gains. But it can show that districts that treated standards as a foundation for better teaching could move student achievement substantially. That sense of direction and coherence — not the standards document itself — is what the results capture.

That distinction matters now because some policymakers and advocates are moving backward, especially in math. In May, South Dakota's Board of Education Standards replaced its 91-page Common Core-based standards with a 49-page "common sense math" framework, citing stagnant proficiency as justification. The problem is not that the new document is shorter; the danger is that it is weaker, according to Sharon Vestal, the president of the state's Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Some national groups, however, are now encouraging other states to follow South Dakota's lead.

This is what mistaking simplicity for strength looks like. Teachers need standards that are clear, precise, coherent and demanding enough to prepare students for the future. Chicago and other cities are the counterexamples to the claim that the standards were a fool's errand.

The urgent task now is not to rekindle old political wars. At a time when the national assessment is still showing deep pandemic-era damage, this is the wrong moment to lower our expectations or dress weaker versions up in the language of commonsense. Now is the time to double down on college- and career-ready standards.

The real lesson of the Common Core was not that higher standards failed. It is that higher standards only matter when states and school systems do the hard work of making them real in classrooms.

Michael Casserly has been with the Council of the Great City Schools for almost 30 years, including nearly 30 years as its executive director.

OPINION

Every American president has had a sense of humor — except one

By John Blumenthal
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

More than one commentator described President Donald Trump's speech at the recent White House Correspondents' Association Dinner with variations of "the opposite of funny." There's no reason to elaborate because we've been down this road before. But what does it say about a man who thinks "lock her up" is a classic one-liner?

Trump may be the only president with little to no sense of humor, unless he secretly watches reruns of "The Honeymooners" late at night while tweeting vitriol.

What about our other presidents? Did John Tyler, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland and William Howard Taft have funny bones? Not in the top 20 perhaps, but yes.

Our first and arguably best presidential comedian was Abraham Lincoln. He may have been known as the "Rail Splitter," but he was also an exemplary sidesplitter.

Biographies about Honest Abe often dwell on his legendary sense of humor. He would tell jokes and spin frontier tales to whoever would listen. Here's one famous example: Accused of being two-faced, the less-than-attractive Lincoln replied, "If I had two faces, would I be wearing this one?" He was often self-deprecating and occasionally biting, as well as subtle and folksy. He once observed that laughter is "the joyful, beautiful, universal evergreen of life."

Although he wasn't a folksy storyteller like Lincoln, John F. Kennedy had his own approach to comedy.

Like many presidents, his one-liners were often meant to defuse crises. He could not resist answering reporters' questions with a zinger. The press loved him. His playful sophisticated wit was often aimed at his presidency, his wealthy background and occasionally his brothers, Teddy and Bobby.

Asked why he wanted to be president, Kennedy replied, "The way is good, and I can walk to work."

Franklin D. Roosevelt was right up there with the best of the presidential humorists and often joked, like Kennedy, to lighten the enormous stress a president faces. Roosevelt's case, these crises were World War II and the Depression.



President Donald Trump reacts after congratulating staff members of The Wall Street Journal for The Katharine Graham Award for Courage and Accountability for their reporting on the Jeffrey Epstein files during the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner on July 24 in Washington. ERIC LEE/GETTY

His humor was said to be charming, and he took considerable joy in teasing. He also enjoyed political humor and often quipped about members of his Cabinet and politics. "A radical is a man with both feet firmly planted — in the air," he said. "A conservative is a man with two perfectly good legs who, however, has never learned to walk forward."

When he was in office, Barack Obama was often funnier than the stand-up comedians who had been hired to entertain audiences at the yearly correspondents' dinner. His timing and deadpan delivery were perfect, and he often got more laughs than the professionals. About the presidency, he said, "It's like I was shot out of a cannon. I am so overexposed, I make Paris Hilton look like a recluse."

A former actor, Ronald Reagan delivered witticisms with polish, which earned him the name the "Great Communicator." He often

used self-deprecating humor to get a laugh, particularly on the campaign trail and during presidential debates. When his advanced age became an issue during his second campaign in 1984, he managed to neutralize the problem with this clever line: "I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and experience."

It is said that Bill Clinton was always the last person to leave a party. His humor was a combination of down-home Arkansas drawl and Yale University sophistication. To many, he was our first funny president, certainly the coolest up to that point. He played the saxophone, which until then was not considered presidential. Like many of his predecessors, he often used humor to lower the temperature in crises.

Being president is like running a cemetery: You've got a lot of people under you and

nobody's listening," Clinton said at a campaign event for Senate candidate Alison Lundergan Grimes in Kentucky.

Even our first president knew hilarity when he saw it. If George Washington appeared stodgy in portraits, it's because of his well-known dental issues, but he loved to laugh. His taste in humor was decidedly quirky. Pranks and slapstick, such as people falling off horses, cracked him up. Friends said that he relished wit and humor, although he was not noted for actually telling jokes.

The other presidents had some semblance of comedic appreciation, whether through cynicism, irony, sarcasm, joke-telling, joke appreciation or storytelling. Some, such as Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight Eisenhower, used humor for political purposes. LBJ was a great storyteller, but many of the tales about his youth were apocryphal.

Our second president, John

Adams, was said to have had a sarcastic demeanor and made biting remarks about his contemporaries. "Thanks, be to God!" he once said, "that he gave me stubbornness when I know I am right."

Theodore Roosevelt loved to guffaw at a good joke. And he had a few good ones on his own. "When they call the roll in the Senate, the senators do not know whether to answer 'present' or 'not guilty,'" he said.

Even Richard Nixon had a sense of humor, albeit it was comical, stilted and awkward. To alter his image as a dreary, grim-faced candidate, he appeared on "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In," a popular "Saturday Night Live"-type show in those days and delivered (badly) one of the program's most famous phrases: "Sock it to me."

That's right. Even Nixon.

Writer John Blumenthal is the co-writer of the movie "Blue Streak."

Voice of the people

Landlords are overwhelmed

As a small landlord in the city of Chicago who owns three buildings, I offer a perspective as the Chicago City Council is considering the mayor's proposal on additional tenant protections. To be successful as a landlord, one must have tenants who value their living space enough in terms of condition and price to be driven to make the monthly payments. It makes sense that tenant loyalty is built on the foundation of affordability and value. As a result, I have sought to not seek the highest possible rent, but instead one that allows for the payment of necessary costs and that gives the renter a strong motivation to live in the space.

Unfortunately, the state of Illinois in 1970 changed its Constitution to make public workers' pensions a contract that can't be diminished. As the property taxes have soared to pay for all this, affordability is being seriously negated by the very government under which we reside.

Currently, I am the plaintiff in an eviction case. The tenant is an educated person who interviewed well and grew up in an upper middle class background by all appearances. This case has been in court for a number of weeks. I was under the impression that the court would rule in my favor. But unfortunately, there are more requirements to fulfill, and now, the next hearing is scheduled for late August.

Julie Dworkin in her Aug. 6 op-ed strongly supports Mayor Brandon Johnson's new tenant protections ("New protections for tenants in changing rental landscape are good policy"). The cold facts are that landlords are being seriously damaged in this current environment of escalating costs and increased requirements. It would be a profound mistake by the City Council to pass the mayor's proposed rental ordinance.

—Daniel Dillon, Chicago

Tenants need protections

As the housing market has strained Chicago homebuyers,



Tulsi McDaniels, a community organizer with the Metropolitan Tenants Organization, speaks in support of Mayor Brandon Johnson's proposed Protecting Renters Ordinance at Daley Plaza on June 29. STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

renters need additional protections as well. Rising mortgage rates, higher property costs and fewer available affordable units have put renters on their heels.

Also, the city recently acknowledged the lack of affordable accessible housing for people with disabilities and agreed to identify, build or rehab 2,800 units to meet accessibility standards. A fight is brewing in City Hall over dueling ordinances for renters' rights.

The first proposal — Protecting Renters Ordinance (PRO) — introduced and backed by Mayor Brandon Johnson along with community advocates, would greatly improve the rights of those most vulnerable. It was drafted with tenant input and by a diverse coalition of community supporters.

It is a sweeping update of the 40-year-old Residential Landlord and Tenant Ordinance. It includes just cause for eviction; a citywide rental registry; a dedicated city agency for renters; and continued support for tenants facing eviction. The draft ordinance would require landlords to provide a valid reason before evicting a tenant or declining to renew their lease. In some cases,

landlords would also be required to provide relocation assistance.

The second offering — the Fair and Accountable Illinois Rental Ordinance, using the misnomer FAIR — cuts back on the limitations the other ordinance would put on junk fees that renters pay in addition to rent, and it expands the definition of small landlords who are exempt from the ordinance's tenant protections, thereby protecting fewer renters. This proposal would not only remove renter protections for more people but introduce more inequality into the system, especially for those who are already vulnerable, including immigrants, people with disabilities and those transitioning from the legal system.

People with disabilities are more likely to rent than own because they are more likely to have lower income. Changes to renters' rights therefore disproportionately affect disabled people.

People with disabilities and other marginalized residents also frequently struggle to locate units. It is expensive and can be hard to locate a unit that meets a disabled person's needs. PRO's residential rental registry would

support these residents by including landlord-provided unit identification and contact information. Further, it could help the nonprofits that serve them to locate housing.

Both proposals are undergoing review and debate among the city's policymakers, who are getting an earful from the various interest groups. We need to come together on all sides to modernize 40-year-old housing law, prevent displacement and establish clear tenant rights.

—Iliana Rivera Haven, housing community organizer, Access Living

Transphobia in sports

Thank you to Julia Poe for providing insight into the debate about transgender athletes ("Transgender debate makes me think about my friends," Aug. 13). Since this group is only 1% of those participating in sports, most people do not know or understand this community.

I am amazed at the amount of time spent on this and also the hate generated. Although the number of transgender athletes is so low, the hate they receive is disproportionately giant.

—Ann Marie Jagiella, Orland Park

Important voice in the din

I want to thank and commend Julia Poe for her important column appearing on the front page of the sports section. This view has not been heard in the dizzying din of the emotional outburst and fear-mongering of the side show and irrelevant conversation about transwomen in sports inexplicably occurring in the context of the WNBA.

In these difficult and incendiary times, perspectives such as Poe's are often silenced and forced to remain in the shadows. I thank Poe for her bravery in sharing this crucial and often-un-

heard viewpoint due to the polarization in our current dialogue.

And thank you to the Tribune for publishing Poe's column.

—Janine L. Hoff, Chicago

Humane point of view

As a long-gone newspaper sports guy, I'm impressed with basketball writer Julia Poe's deeply personal, well-written views about the controversial issue of transgender women and kids in sports.

In sharing her humanity as a gay woman with transwomen friends who plays pickup basketball with them, she revealed her concern that many of those players withdrew from their small minority in organized sports at a young age, feeling unsafe to be exposed as different. The argument about competition against girl athletes is a reasonable one, though apparently very limited in number of events and any advantages. Poe believes from her own experience that opponents — hateful types with power and others — don't just want to protect girls; they also want transgender people, who just seek happiness feeling who they really are, to get out of our country's life.

She makes a lot of important points.

—Ed Stone, Northbrook

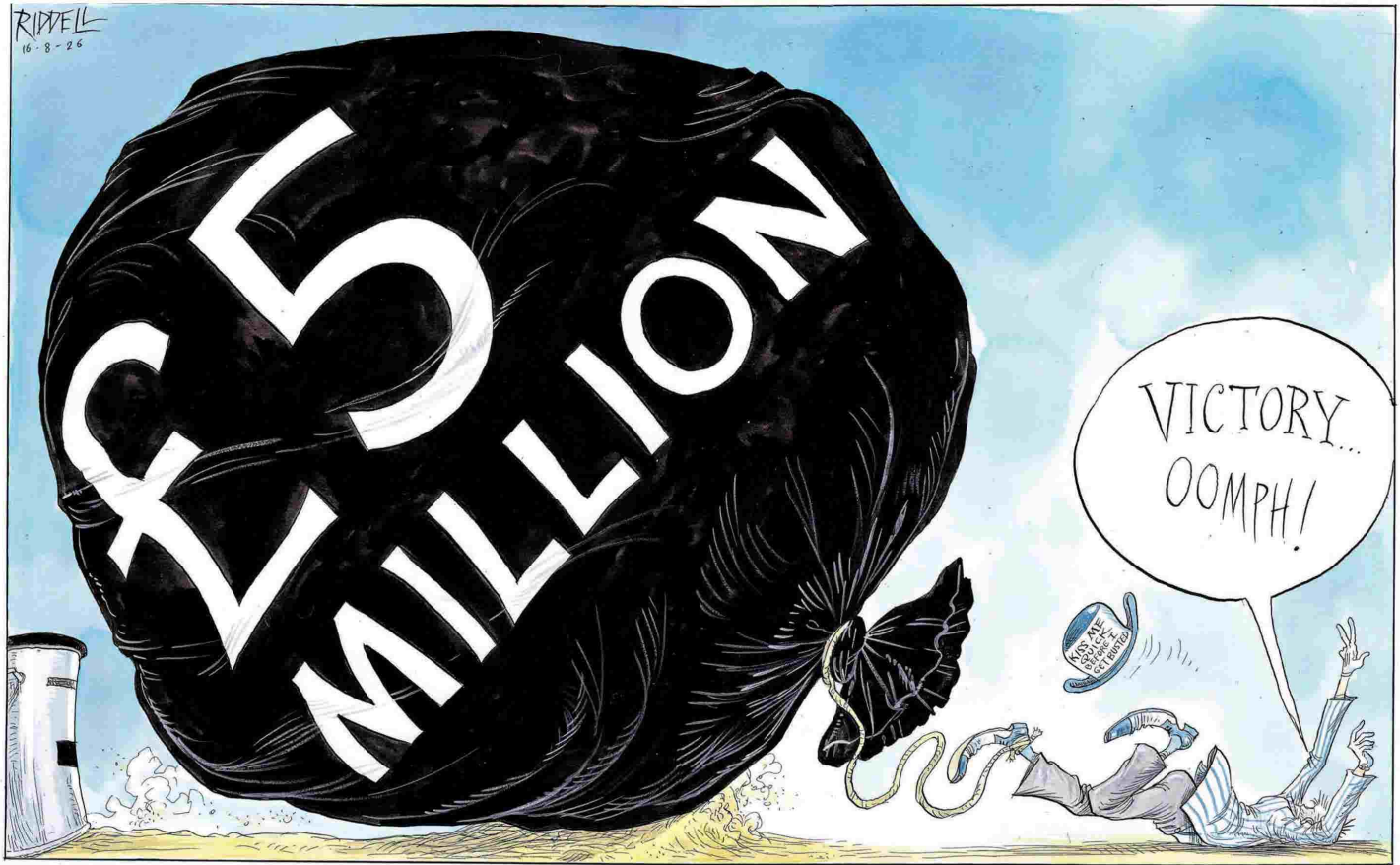
White Sox's inspired play

We Cleveland Guardians fans never anticipated the "inspired" play of the White Sox this season. My relatives in Chicago claim it was just my imagination, but I swear I thought I saw a benevolent glow hovering over certain Sox players at different times in two games of the recent weekend series.

And for the life of me, it looked like Pope Leo XIV wearing a Sox cap!

—Stephen Gladstone, Cleveland, Ohio

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Beware the demise of public companies Will Hutton



We are living through a revolution as profound as the emergence of artificial intelligence or the disintegration of the international order. It is the privatisation of capitalism. Readers will shake their heads. Isn't capitalism already the quintessential preserve of the private?

Apologies – but no. One of the important reasons the dark predictions of Marx never came to pass was the emergence of the concept of the public company whose shares were traded on public stock markets. To avoid fraud and malfeasance, listed companies thus had to surrender to demands for common standards of commercial decency and accountability. The first Companies Act in 1862 created new basic accountabilities. Capitalism was one step ahead of the great revolutionary who published *Das Kapital* five years later. Successive amendments to the act would create accountabilities and transparencies that would channel its destructive dynamics into something better.

Today's familiar landscape – a public stock market listing Britain's leading companies, all conforming to high regulatory, auditing, environmental and behavioural

standards in which you, I and our savings institutions can safely invest – is a great progressive achievement. Quoted companies disclose an astonishing range of information, from their approach to environmental standards to gender pay. They offer careers and opportunity, and anchor economic activity in our towns and cities. They are business citizens.

I admire Feargal Sharkey and his effective campaign against the disaster of our water. But it is not privatisation that is the root of the problem; rather, it is the behaviour of *privatised capitalism* driven by the emergency of extraordinary private wealth; the world of private equity, private credit, private banks, private family offices and private foundations that some predict could constitute nearly half of world gross domestic product within a decade.

In the water industry, this reached its apogee in Thames Water when owned by the private consortium led by the Australian investment bank Macquarie, and the self-interested orgy of underinvestment, tax avoidance and disregard for the environment that followed. Instead, it is the publicly quoted companies, accountable to their shareholders, stakeholders and the regulator, that have been the best performers on the key financial, customer

satisfaction and environmental metrics. Nationalisation is a simpler battle cry. But it is not the solution.

Yet if Britain's docile compliance with privatised capitalism continues – spearheaded by the US and its political right – it may be all that is left. British public companies have increasingly been at the wrong end of a feeding frenzy led by US private interests. This year alone, five FTSE 100 companies have been or are in the process of being taken over.

Since 2023, Charles Hall, research director of the British investment bank Peel Hunt, calculates that 156 middle-sized quoted companies worth £169bn have been swallowed up – and others worth £126bn have upped sticks seeking quotations in New York. Forget the fertile interdependence of public and private that has driven our capitalism; private is now set to rule the roost, with avaricious short-term shareholders, the majority of whom are foreign, delighted to be offered a profitable exit.

Less so is anyone with British interests at heart. Peel Hunt has been sounding the tocsin for years, while Richard Marwood, head of UK equities at the Royal London Asset management, warns that "is almost like we're sawing through

the branch we [asset managers] are sitting on".

I'll say. Twenty years ago, Britain boasted 1,700 publicly quoted companies; now there are 909, estimates Hall – and the downward trend is accelerating. Unless something changes by 2040, public companies will become extinct. Part of the problem is that too few new public companies are coming forward to fill the hopper: there have only been 11 initial public offerings in the UK of businesses with market caps of more than £100m since 2023. This matters.

A precondition for growth is a critical mass of consequential

British PLCs have been at the wrong end of a feeding frenzy by US private firms

British companies that are constantly being replenished in a vibrant stock market that values them highly – a far cry from where we are.

The heart of the problem is that British institutional savers, notably our pension funds, shun investing in UK public and private companies to an extent unparalleled globally. Britain's growth in the first half of this year was the fastest in the G7, while foreign buyers may think our

companies are so dirt cheap that they scramble to take them private – neither of which entice our pension funds. Indeed, it's because they don't that they are so cheap. Yet the tax relief on pension fund contributions totalled almost £60bn in the last financial year. We are paying these funds to desert us.

There is no doubt, as a coalition including former Bank of England chief economist Andy Haldane and Tory peer and pensions expert Ros Altmann argues, that pension fund tax relief should be made conditional on a promise to invest more in UK equities – say, at least 15% of their total equity portfolio. British companies need and deserve to be valued more highly by UK investors. On top, stamp duty must be lowered to encourage more transactions, and a capital gains tax cordon sanitaire thrown around company founders and innovators. The alternative is a barren land.

The paradox is that it falls to a Labour prime minister and chancellor to make the case for a buoyant stock market and for public limited companies. But this isn't just about growth; it is about challenging the privatisation of capitalism and its associated barbarism that will finally prove Marx right. It has become the most important progressive cause in town.



Apprentice hairdressers train with practice heads.
Jean-François Fort, Hans Lucas/AFP, Getty

what comes next



the UK. What surprised me most is how many struggle with the move from education into adult life. This is not simply a problem affecting those who leave education early: about 15% of young people who are not in education, employment or training have a degree.

One young graduate put it bluntly: "You are told this simple

'It has been almost a year... and I am still struggling to secure a role'

story: go to college, go to uni and get a job. But that is not the case at all. I feel like I did what I was told. But it has been almost a year... and I am still struggling to secure a role."

Another described discovering too late how much else mattered: "There's a big emphasis now on experience and gaining internships before you graduate. I just didn't

know that was a thing... Go to uni, get good grades, get a job – that's the simplified mindset. There's a lot of information that I didn't know."

Universities need to provide excellent teaching, meaningful contact with employers, careers support, opportunities to build the networks that more privileged students can take for granted, and serious preparation for what comes next. But we have to acknowledge that universities are in a precarious financial position, and some will struggle to equip students with what they need. Manchester Met has been able to make progress because of years of sound financial management and less reliance on international student income.

The wider challenge is how to make the required level of support the norm rather than the exception.

Shuab Gamote is a strategic adviser to the Milburn Review



My year 10 biology class agreed that the only way to succeed was to memorise the mark scheme, which proved that GCSEs were essentially rote memorisation. This kind of rote learning doesn't feel like it has much connection to the world we're moving into. Another issue is the lack of information about money.

Looking back, I'm glad to say that my feelings about my time at school are largely positive. The increasing emphasis on mental health meant that stigmatised subjects, such as anxiety, became much easier to talk about. Yet in the state system, large classes and overwhelmed

teachers were common, and that could be tough. In year 8, I was put in bottom-set maths because I was near-silent in my 30-strong classes the year before. I became even more insecure in a subject I hated. But my teachers went the extra mile to support me. Their passion is the force keeping these state institutions alive despite the lack of respect (and salary) they receive, and I owe them almost everything.

Romilly Cox attended Marylebone Church of England School in London, and will study history and Spanish at the University of Oxford

Both mortar boards and hard hats can lead to work security

Graham Watts



After achieving decent grades at GCSE, Kristian Tomas didn't want a desk job or to get into student loan debt. "I wanted a job that was practical, where I could progress and earn well if I put in the work." Aged 16, he started a level 1 bricklaying course, and an early piece of great advice encouraged him to combine college learning with work on site.

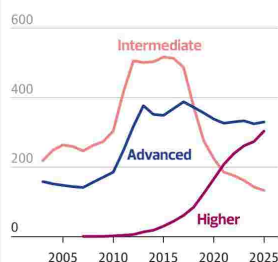
Just six years later, and now a supervisor for GSQ Brickwork, Tomas is already leading a team building an estate of 50 houses. "I love the variety and the challenges of running a busy job, but I get my trowel in my hand as often as I can." He's even turned his trade into a sport, competing in the UK's largest bricklaying competition. "I'm officially the sixth fastest bricklayer in the UK. Not bad from 42,000 in the trade!"

More than 25 years ago, Tony Blair set out the ambition for half of all young adults to go to university, a target that was finally achieved in 2019. Last Thursday, the Ucas chief executive, Jo Saxton, announced that a record quarter of a million school leavers (262,820) had achieved a place at university this year – 3% up on 2025.

However, on the same day, the skills minister, Jacqui Smith, told BBC Radio's *Today* programme that the government would take action to stop the expansion of university courses that were not a good investment. This is in line with Andy Burnham's recent announcement of a major overhaul of England's education system, allowing 14-year-olds to choose technical and vocational pathways alongside core academic subjects from September 2028. This would have enabled Tomas to get a two-year head start on his ambition to work with bricks.

So the pendulum swings, from one Labour prime minister's reliance on academia to another's focus on technical education. The simple fact is that nothing has changed since CP Snow's influential Rede Lecture in 1959. Snow identified "The Two Cultures" as science and the humanities, but it is reasonable to broaden his

Apprenticeships in England
By academic year-ending and level (thousands)



Sources: Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions

thesis into a segregation between academic and technical education, and those whose work is either desk-based or out in the open air.

The key must be to channel young people's education and career pathways at an early age, and Burnham's ambition to bring the focus forward to year 10 is sensible. At the moment the system is clearly not working. The labour market is saturated with graduates, and a report from The Centre for Social Justice earlier this year noted that 700,000 graduates were jobless. On the other hand, many young people learning a construction trade don't progress into working in that

The key must be to channel young people's career pathways at an early age

sector. The Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering has recently noted that completion rates for plumbing apprenticeships are less than 27%.

I agreed with Aled Williams of the University of the Built Environment when he told me: "Putting technical education on an equal footing with academic learning is the right ambition. But this cannot become a binary choice between the hard hat and the graduation cap. The built environment needs people across a spectrum of technical and professional roles, with those boundaries increasingly blurring.

The real challenge is ensuring our skills system prepares people not just for today's vacancies, but for the capabilities we will need... as AI, digitalisation and new methods of delivery reshape our industry."

Mark Farmer, skills lead of the Construction Leadership Council and chair of the Built Environment Futures Assembly, reinforces this view: "The advent of AI is already creating a perception of reduced future job security for some professional roles.

"The prospect of undertaking full-time degree study, incurring a student loan burden with potentially no job at the end of it, is unattractive. There is a real chance that the next generation of talent and their key influencers are already going to actively pivot towards what they perceive to be 'AI-proof' jobs, including trade and technician roles, irrespective of any prevailing government message."

However, Farmer feels there is a risk that the pendulum may go too far the other way, making apprenticeships even more oversubscribed than they already are with insufficient jobs available for young entrants wanting employment-led training pathways. "This implies that much better support, incentives and economic conditions might be needed by employers to increase their demand for post-16 trainees. This is less of an education and skills challenge as it is a fundamental employment market challenge. If this is not resolved, we risk a growing Neet backlog for both hard hats and graduation caps."

Tomas is someone who successfully made an early choice to pursue technical education in tandem with real work experience. He concluded our chat by saying: "I totally support construction as a career choice. There's the opportunity to earn, learn and build a career, and so long as you're willing to work hard, the rewards are available to all."

Graham Watts has been chief executive of the Construction Industry Council since 1991 and a member of the Construction Leadership Council since 2020

Profile

Jon Ossoff

Is the Democrats' young, savvy star of the South their next political hope, asks
Edward Helmore

While US political debate was focused on Democratic party turmoil last weekend, Senator Jon Ossoff was in the pulpit at Divine Faith Ministries International in Jonesboro, Georgia, drawing parallels between King Ahab of the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible and Donald Trump.

"Accountability is coming," Ossoff said. "Scripture is full of wicked kings brought low by their own arrogance." The parallels raised applause from the congregation in the Black, non-denominational megachurch.

Ossoff is a special animal in the Democratic habitat, as the only US senator up for re-election in a state Trump won in 2024. He looks to be heading for a win over the Trump-backed candidate Mike Collins.

At 39, Ossoff is young. He's Jewish and has noted that his ancestors were "exterminated in Nazi death camps". He professes "ironclad" support for Israel but is also a critic of the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He has supported the Vermont senator Bernie Sanders in his efforts to curb US munition sales to Israel. And he speaks in the code of the wealth divide, talking of "the Epstein class... ruling our country".

Ossoff received plaudits last month for the confirmation-hearing grilling he gave Jay Clayton, the nominee for post of director of national intelligence, pressing him on why the former Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández had been pardoned by Trump some 18 months after being convicted of drug trafficking and sentenced to 45 years in prison. He also played Democrats' rhetorical loyalty test game, asking Clayton who won the 2020 election.

Clayton squirmed. "Isn't it humiliating to be unable to answer this question?" Ossoff asked. "To have to indulge the president's

delusions? We know, you know, everybody in this room knows the truthful answer to that question. Why can you not give it?"

Ossoff has largely avoided being caught in the Democrats' progressive-centrist political traps. In 2017, Sanders said he "didn't know" if Ossoff, who has distanced himself from universal healthcare and Green New Deal platforms, was progressive. But YouTube pundit Hasan Piker has called Ossoff his "dark-horse pick" for 2028.

When the midterms are resolved, attention will inevitably turn to political presidential candidates. The Democratic field is wide open, less

'He's acceptable to people who live in suburbs, rural and urban areas'

so with the Republicans, who must wrestle with projecting a post-Trump identity. Ossoff's name has been coming up in recent weeks.

There are more prominent names – the former vice-president Kamala Harris, California governor Gavin Newsom – but each bears political scars and can be easily tarred as a member of a coastal elite.

Ossoff, says Democrat strategist Hank Sheinkopf, is well positioned to bridge the rift in his party. "He comes from the South, so people see him as more conservative. But he's sounded a less conservative ideology."

"He's acceptable to people who live in suburbs, rural and urban areas. He's not all the way left or right. He's somewhere centre-left depending on the issue. People are looking for the middle. They're offended by the deep left, which the Democratic Socialists of America represents, and they're offended by the deep right, which Trump represents."

Ossoff also resolves Democrats' age problem. "He's generationally correct," says Sheinkopf, but he will have "to dance left, right and middle". Ossoff's Jewish faith is not an issue because he's perceived as Southern before Jewish: "It doesn't apply here because he's accepted in Georgia... it means he can play in most places."

Jon Ossoff
Born Atlanta, Georgia
Alma mater Georgetown University, London School of Economics
Work US senator
Family Married, with two children

Illustration by
Andy Bunday



Jew can't get elected are Jews. It's like when Democrats say a Black woman will never be elected as president. It's a crutch for Democrats. I'm not a buyer in that market."

Michael Morris, publisher of the *Atlanta Jewish Times*, described Ossoff's commitment to Israel as "smoke and mirrors". "Stop lying to me and your constituents," he wrote. "When a bill offers Israel tangible strategic support – munitions, rifles, bombs, military and financial assistance – your record is abysmal, and you throw Israel under the bus."

In Georgia, Ossoff has the support of churchgoing, homeowning Black voters that progressives in northern states typically lack. He's adept at social media, racking up millions of views for his fast takes. And he's a prodigious fundraiser, raising more than \$81m in this political cycle. Ossoff criticised Trump's decision to attack Iran, building support among progressives. Trump called Ossoff "terrible" likening him to Pee-wee Herman, though he said "Pinky Herman" before correcting himself. The White House calls him "a total phony pretending to be a moderate", citing his support of trans rights.

Ossoff does not come from a political dynasty. He grew up in Georgia – his father, Richard, ran an Atlanta publishing company; his mother, Heather was born and raised in Sydney, Australia. Ossoff studied at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and the London School of Economics. An internship under the late civil rights leader-turned congressman John Lewis was followed by a period working for the Georgia congressman Hank Johnson. He then became a documentary maker, producing films for the BBC and others on international corruption, war crimes and human rights abuses in Africa. He is married to Dr

Alisha Kramer, an obstetrician-gynaecologist in Georgia. The couple dated in high school and married in 2017. They live in Atlanta with their two daughters, Eva and Lila.

One of Ossoff's political virtues, says Pete Fuller, Democratic chair of Jackson County, Georgia, is that he has been relatively quiet. "He hasn't been giving speeches and going on TV every chance he gets. He's actually just been doing the work."

Compared with Newsom, he adds, "there's authenticity to him" and he comes across as "a nice, good guy from the South who can get votes from both sides." That is a rare asset that may take him further than he says, for now, he intends to go.

Ossoff himself has said he has "zero interest" in running for president in 2028. Polymarket odds place him narrowly behind Newsom for his party's nomination.

"Is Ossoff turning out to be the star of this political cycle? I think that's fair," says the Democratic strategist James Carville, who helped steer the last Southern Democrat, Bill Clinton, to the presidency. "He's not only skilled, he's getting better," he says.

But, Carville cautions, "there are other talented people out there. What about [Kentucky governor] Andy Beshear? Or [Pennsylvania governor] Josh Shapiro?" Carville also discounts the question of Ossoff's faith, saying "the only people who say to me a

SUNDAY OPINION

Japan's guilty pleasure: A tribute to the largest battleship ever built

BY ALEXANDER WOOLEY

Aug. 6 is typically a solemn day in Japan, the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. A record 121 nations and regions were represented at the city's anniversary ceremony this year. That's of a piece with increased tourism elsewhere in Hiroshima: The local memorial museum in the Naka Ward welcomed 2,580,926 visitors in fiscal 2025, about a third of whom reportedly came from overseas.

World War II remains a difficult, politicized topic in Japan. One consequence is that its museums frequently insert "peace" into their names. The word has thus become a bland passe-partout that few can quibble with and under whose banner a broad array of things can be described. Such institutions largely succeed in avoiding controversy domestically — as well as with neighbors like China and South Korea — but ultimately communicate little. A passerby, for instance, couldn't obviously tell that the Chiran and Hiroshima peace museums are about kamikaze pilots and the atomic bomb, respectively.

Yet there is an exception. A short train ride from Hiroshima is the port city of Kure, home to one of Japan's most popular museums, which reopened in April after a lengthy renovation. There is no ostentatious signage marking the large \$65 million harborside glass-and-redbrick facility that celebrates the life of the largest, most powerful battleship ever built: the Imperial Japanese Navy's Yamato. The vessel was sunk by the United States while on a kamikaze mission to Okinawa in April 1945, consumed in a mushroom cloud eerily similar to the fate that was to befall Hiroshima four months later.

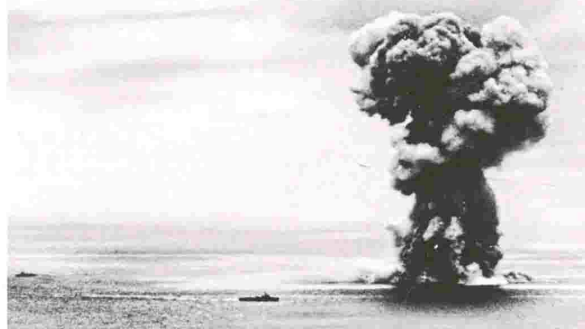
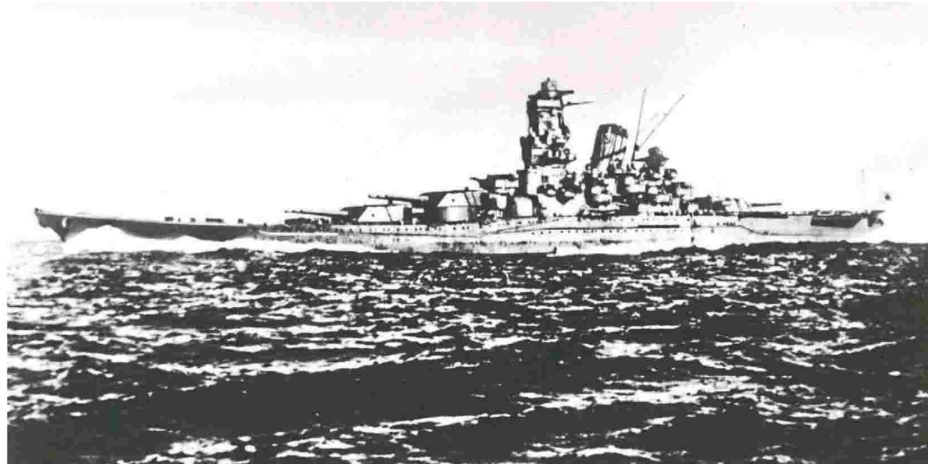
The ship is a cultural icon across the archipelago. There have been high-grossing biopics made about it, as well as novels, artwork and a television anime that has been running for more than 50 years. The latter is called "Space Battleship Yamato," and it features the ship rising from the depths of the sea to travel to faraway galaxies in order to save Earth from aliens and environmental disaster.

Takashi Yamazaki may be familiar to readers as the director of "Godzilla Minus One" (2023), a surprise global hit and Oscar winner for best visual effects. But before he became a hot commodity in Hollywood, Yamazaki had already directed a live-action feature film version of "Space Battleship Yamato" (2010), as well as "The Great War of Archimedes" (2019), about the ship's construction. "For the Japanese people, there is no greater icon of the Pacific War than Yamato," he said several years ago, according to the Asahi Shimbun newspaper. "In 'Space Battleship Yamato,' there is a deep-seated grudge about IJN Yamato, and the desire for a dream that could not be fulfilled."

In 2015, journalist Hiroyuki Ota wrote a serial called "Following Space Battleship Yamato," in which he examined the unique cultural aspects of the anime. "We have not yet completely recovered from the pain," he wrote of the 1945 sinking. "With 'Space Battleship Yamato,' there is an imaginative aspect that heals the pain by spinning the story of IJN Yamato's loss."

The Yamato Museum is very much Japanese. Its guides don't routinely speak English, and only a few exhibition signs aren't in the native language. In some ways, it is Hiroshima's rebellious, iconoclastic twin sister. The academic Helen J.S. Lee sees it as upending what is otherwise a consistently morbid narrative in Japan. As she wrote in the journal *Japanese Language and Literature*: "Prior to the establishment of the Yamato Museum, historical relics in Kure were mostly connected to memorializing those who died during intensive air raids between March and July 1945." The museum, she added, "interpolated an alternative narrative for relating to the past, one that does not dwell simply on bereavement, but on a rejuvenating rhetoric of courage and pride transcending sorrow and defeat."

From Hiroshima, the Japan Rail line follows the coast, passing through towns hugging the shore, hemmed in by surrounding hills. Oyster farms ride gentle swells offshore. Inland Sea islands come in and out of view. It is compact scenery, a model diorama. The Australian novelist Shirley Hazzard arrived from the sea to a still-destroyed Kure in 1947, a teenage girl accompanying her parents. "It was just full of sunken ships, lopsided, capsized," she



Top: The Japanese battleship Yamato. Bottom: The Yamato's destruction on April 7, 1945.

observed. Met by an Australian army jeep, her family drove along an unrepaired road, "skirted large craters and dipped prudently into small ones."

Modern Kure, with its bustling port, would probably be unrecognizable to Hazzard. Before and during the war, it was a major dockyard and naval base for the Imperial Navy. Now, the rail station serves as a commuter stop for those working in Hiroshima. As the scholar Luli van der Does has written: "Despite being only about 40 minutes apart by train, tourists rarely visit both cities, partly because their contrasting images of 'military' and 'peace' differentiate the motivations of tourists. This, however, gives a false impression of separation. Both communities were built around the military."

A short walk from the train station is the Yamato Museum, which opened in 2005, 60 years after the ship sank and over the protests of local peace groups. It is officially the Kure Maritime Museum, but most locals identify it by the ship's name, considering the majority of the building is given to the battleship. Its centerpiece is a 1:10-scale model of the vessel, which dominates the large central atrium. Measuring 86 feet in length, the model is made of fiber-reinforced polymer and wood, presented as it appeared on its final mission. Visitors can observe it from several different levels, including beneath it. A newer exhibit offers a 1-millionth-scale model, 0.263 millimeter in length, created using submicron 3D printing. It is too small to be seen

with the naked eye, so visitors are offered a magnifying glass.

The museum opened the same year as the blockbuster live-action film "Men of Yamato." The producers commissioned a massive replica of the ship, 600 feet in length, built at Onomichi, a port city roughly 50 miles east of Kure. The replica was made available to the public, and in a testament to the hold Yamato has on many Japanese, 1,002,334 people visited it in the six months after filming ended.

For some, Yamato's suicide mission is in keeping with ancient folk tales of the noble hero who dies young, denied reaching his full potential. Some Japanese take pride in the ship as a pure technological achievement — the view that its final mission was the launching pad to a prosperous postwar Japan. They recall that before and during the war, Westerners considered the archipelago to be racially, industrially and scientifically backward. And yet, the country was able to produce Yamato.

A short film in the museum explains how the advances in industrial technology used to build the ship later helped Japanese companies build cars, cameras, bullet trains, electric appliances and other items that were essential to the country's rise as an economic superpower. The ship's sinking was thus not entirely in vain. A placard next to the model reads: "The construction of Battleship Yamato was the crystallization of shipbuilding tech-

nology in prewar Japan and laid the foundation of postwar reconstruction." The model, it adds, was "built to symbolize the feelings of all of those who made and boarded Yamato, and their families, as well as the important message of peace for the coming generations."

For others, like historian Hiromi Mizuno, celebrating the technological achievements of Japan's 20th-century military industrial base is problematic. "It depoliticizes not only the very technology ... but also efforts that go into developing the technology," she wrote in the *Journal of Studies in Asia*. "As a historian, I insist that we care about ... the historical context of technological development in the past," Mizuno added. "Romanticization of technology is problematic because it is how wartime technology have come to be celebrated in Japan."

These competing views are one example of the elliptical ways in which many Japanese discuss the war. Conservatives acknowledge the tragedy but also point to the technological and economic benefits realized after the war. Liberals often don't think the technological achievements should be celebrated at all — or, at least, not without appropriate context.

Navigating these treacherous shoals is the chameleon-like Yamato, embraced by both sides according to their versions of the historical narrative. The ship served for less than four years but has lived on in the popular imagination for another 80. The Yamato's sinking marked the end of Japan's totalitarian period. In the postwar era, the country turned on a dime, adroitly transitioning from feared hard power — of which the ship is held up within Japan as a prime example — to one of the world's premier exporters of culture.

Foreign consumers and tourists can't get enough of Japan. But the Yamato Museum's reopening comes as many Japanese have to wrestle with the idea of becoming a hard power on the global stage again. For the first time since 1945, Japan is seriously rearming, with shipbuilding deals with Australia, weapons development plans with the U.S., the easing of self-imposed restrictions on military exports and the concession that the country might one day have to engage in offensive operations.

To some, Yamato was the culmination of the imperial period, which led directly to the suffering brought on at Hiroshima. Scholars generally agree that Japan has been less successful than Germany at acknowledging and atoning for its sins of aggression. Consider Yamato, then, a literal vessel for the unresolved and sometimes conflicting feelings that linger in the country's consciousness, constantly being reinterpreted.

Alexander Wooley, a former British Royal Navy officer, is the author of "Battleship Yamato: The Ship, The Myth, The Legend."

Virginia is putting military chaplains in an impossible position

BY DOUGLAS L. CARVER AND
THOMAS J. SOLHJEM

During the French and Indian War, Colonel George Washington repeatedly urged Virginia's governor and legislature to provide a chaplain for his regiment. He found it unconscionable to ask his troops to prepare to make the ultimate sacrifice while denying them crucial religious support. Then, as commander of the Continental Army, Washington expanded and professionalized the chaplaincy, persuading the Continental Congress to make it a permanent special branch of the military. More than 250 years later, chaplains continue that legacy by meeting the religious needs of troops wherever duty calls, including in harm's way.

Now Washington's home state is discriminating against its chaplains. Virginia requires chaplains serving in the Virginia National Guard to obtain a theology-related master's degree. Yet despite providing tuition assistance for other types of degrees, it recently denied tuition assistance to Trace Stevens, a National Guard member enrolled in a master's program at Liberty University to pursue the type of theology degree necessary to become a chaplain. The state claimed that such degrees are too religious to receive state support. Stevens sued, and his case is now before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit. Its outcome will broadly affect Virginia National Guard chaplains pursuing religious degrees.

As retired chaplains who served as chief of Army chaplains, we spent more than 90 years combined serving the United States and its warfighters. We

view Virginia's position as blatantly discriminatory and profoundly dangerous. If the 4th Circuit upholds the decision, it will be the first appellate court in the country to allow a state government to defund the educational assistance it requires of its military chaplains while providing it to other service members.

The military chaplaincy's protection of the free exercise rights of men and women in uniform is a solemn constitutional duty. When military service members leave home, they are also separated from the local religious communities to which they belong. To guarantee their free exercise rights, the First Amendment requires the government to furnish access to worship and spiritual care where they are stationed.

As chaplains, we carried out that duty by leading religious services, conducting memorial ceremonies, officiating burials, offering prayers and providing pastoral care to service members through long separations, dangerous assignments and loss of life. And we did that not as generic counselors. We, like all military chaplains, did it as religious leaders, endorsed and sent out by our respective churches, synagogues or mosques to provide religious support to men and women in uniform.

The Virginia National Guard has long fulfilled its constitutional duty through its chaplaincy corps, which is tasked with providing "the highest levels of religious support" across military operations. Virginia sustains that mission by maintaining a formal chaplaincy structure, paying chaplains when they are called into state active duty and requiring them to complete advanced religious training, including theology coursework.



A chaplain blesses a F-22 Raptor fighter jet during a ceremony at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in 2010 in Honolulu.

Yet when National Guard members pursue master's degrees in divinity precisely to satisfy those educational requirements, Virginia denies them tuition assistance. While their fellow Guard members are given funding to pursue nonreligious degrees, aspiring chaplains are shut out. The state deems their degree "religious training or theological education," and so excludes it. That's an unconstitutional catch-22, and flagrant religious discrimination. The Supreme Court has said time and again that a state may not exclude religious people or institutions from a benefit it offers everyone else.

To defend itself, Virginia retreats to *Locke v. Davey*, a 2004 Supreme Court ruling that allowed a civilian scholarship program to exclude devotion-

al theology degrees because of a historic concern about using taxpayer money to train private religious leaders. But the Supreme Court has stressed that *Locke* is narrow. And tradition here runs precisely the other way. America's military chaplaincy is older than the nation itself, and governments have long supported the religious education of chaplains because the Constitution requires, not merely permits, them to provide for the religious needs of men and women in uniform.

Both tradition and common sense condemn the dilemma Virginia has created for its chaplains. The state can't fairly or constitutionally exclude from tuition assistance the very degree it requires its chaplains to obtain.

Vindicating constitutional common sense is important here. Through combat deployments and commands across the Army, we witnessed how deeply service members depend on their faith and how their free exercise of religious beliefs and practices sustains them when all else fails. They serve our nation with courage amid hardship and uncertainty. State governments must not place needless obstacles between service members and the spiritual care that sustains them.

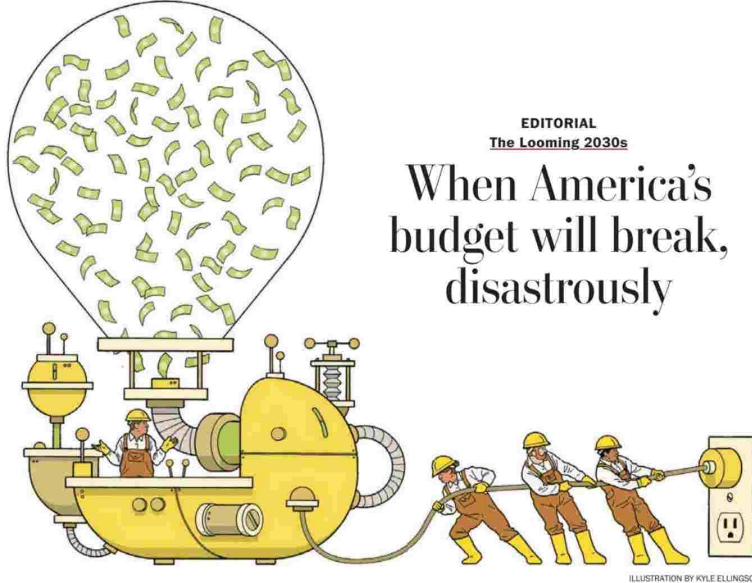
General George Washington once described chaplains as "point[s] of light" for America's service members. The 4th Circuit must not allow his home state to dim that light. It should reject Virginia's effort to defend the next generation of National Guard chaplains.

Douglas L. Carver and Thomas J. Solhjem are retired major generals who served as the 22nd and 25th chiefs of chaplains of the U.S. Army, respectively.

OPINION

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

EDITORIAL
The Looming 2030s

When America's budget will break, disastrously

THE BUDGET of the federal government is the largest of any organization in human history. It's larger than the entire economy of every foreign country except China. And it mostly grows automatically, without regular input from elected officials.

In the past, huge surges in the national debt were largely caused by wars or recessions. They were temporary. When the war concluded or economic growth resumed, debt as a share of the economy would fall.

That's not how it works anymore. The debt increases due to demographic trends as the bulk of spending goes to programs that serve an aging population. The budget deficit as a share of the economy in 2025, during a peacetime expansion, was larger than any year of the 1930s, the decade of the Great Depression.

Around 2030, the United States is projected to surpass three milestones that illustrate the lack of precedent for the government's fiscal predicament.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, 2030 is the year when federal debt held by the public as a share of the economy will exceed the record set by World War II. Unlike in the '40s, this debt shows no signs of ever declining.

In 1945, 84 percent of federal outlays were on defense, a tsunami of spending that would ebb once World War II concluded. In 2025, 73 percent of federal outlays were on mandatory spending or interest payments, which are legally obligated to continue.

The year 2030 is also roughly when the ratio of seniors to the total population will reach 1 in 5. As recently as 2008, the ratio was around 1 in 8. Seniors' rising share of the population mechanically raises Social Security and Medicare costs and pushes them onto a proportionally smaller working population.

In 1952, there were six people between ages 25 and 64 for every one person 65 or older. That meant there were six people whose wages could be taxed to pay for benefits for every one senior. In 2011, there were four. Today, there are 2.7.

The U.S. always used to be able to count on a naturally rising population as an engine for economic growth, but that will no longer be the case. The only source of population growth after 2030 will be immigration.

That's because 2030 is also the year when the CBO projects that deaths will begin to exceed births. The entitlement programs making up much of the budget were designed under 20th-century demographic expectations that no longer hold true.

Social Security used to take in more money than it gave out, but that money was spent on other things. The program has run annual deficits since 2010. It is projected to go insolvent in 2032, at which point seniors would receive a roughly one-quarter cut in benefits across the board.

Medicare's budget-busting makes Social Security's look modest by comparison. Of the projected \$138 trillion budget shortfall over the next 30 years, \$109 trillion is from Medicare. Rising health care costs, combined with an aging population receiving far more in benefits than it ever paid in taxes, spells fiscal Armageddon. The Medicare Hospital Insurance trust fund goes insolvent in 2033.

The fiscal challenges scheduled to arrive in the 2030s are actually based on optimistic assumptions. They are from the CBO's baseline estimates, which assume no wars, no recessions, no new government programs or tax changes, and low and stable inflation.

Imagine how much worse the debt will look when there is a recession. If, heaven forbid, the U.S. needs to boost defense spending for a protracted war, it doesn't have much room to grow.

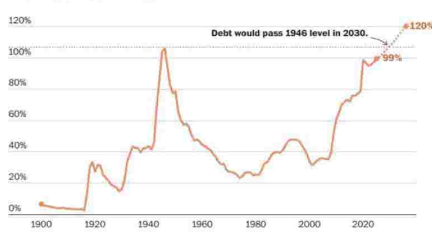
Starting with World War II levels of debt and exceeding Great Depression levels of annual deficits, the U.S. is not prepared to face the demographic challenges that loom, let alone world events nobody can predict.

Budget hawks have been talking for years about many of these problems, and it may feel like not much has happened. The federal budget has been able to withstand more than many expected. But the 2030s is when the bill comes due.

The federal debt would reach a historic high in 2030

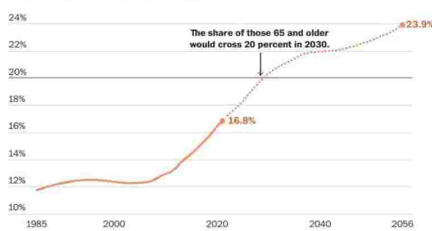
Federal debt held by the public, 1900-2036

Debt held by the public — Projected



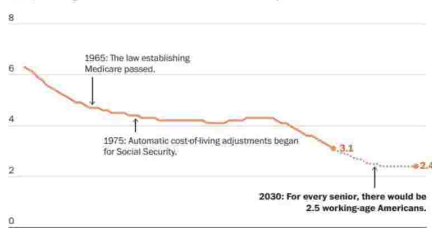
One in five people would be 65 or older in 2030

Share of population 65 and older — projected



There will be fewer working-age people for every senior American

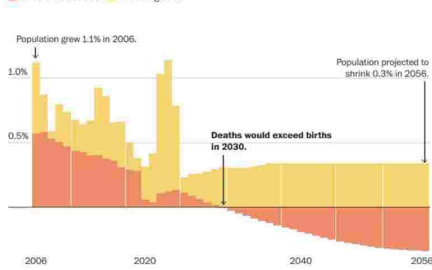
Population aged 24 to 64 relative to those 65 and older — projected



2030 is the year when deaths would exceed births

Population growth as a percentage of population by source

Births minus deaths — Net immigration



Data for 2022 and beyond are projections.

Source: Congressional Budget Office

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



A statue of Caesar Rodney in Freedom Plaza in D.C. on Aug. 5.

America's flawed founders still deserve monuments

Regarding Philip Kennicott's Aug. 11 online Art column, "How an enslaver's statue became the center of Trump's exhibit at Freedom Plaza":

Some Americans may never have heard of Caesar Rodney, but he played an important role in securing our country's freedom from England. He rode all night from Dover, Delaware, to Philadelphia to cast the deciding vote for Delaware in support of the Declaration of Independence. This helped ensure that the Declaration would be passed unanimously by all 13 colonies. Kennicott, however, appears to believe Rodney was not worthy of memorializing because he was an enslaver.

And by presenting historian Woody Holton's beliefs about the Revolution, Kennicott appears to argue that the Declaration of Independence itself is not worthy of memorializing. The column noted that during the Revolution, slaves in the South "saw the best chance for freedom and equality by serving the British." It also said that the English limited "seizing land beyond the original colonies," while U.S. independence allowed slavery to spread beyond those limits. But the English were not opposed to slavery. They freed slaves during the Revolution because doing so weakened the forces of the rebellion. And anyone who believes the English would not have eventually permitted westward expansion from the 13 original colonies is ignorant of British imperialism.

The problem with attempts to cancel memorials to the enslavers who secured American independence is that the history of our country is messy. The same people who displayed great courage and made great sacrifices to secure and maintain U.S. independence were complicit in the atrocities and hardships imposed on Black and Indigenous people.

Cancellation of this history is not the solution. Rather, it is vital that we should teach all of American history so that we can be inspired by the good and vow never to repeat the bad.

Matt Estes, Vienna

Protect children from racial harassment

The Aug. 10 front-page article "Inside school investigations frozen under Trump: Racial slurs, sexual harassment" on the Education Department's suspension of investigations into racial discrimination in public schools in Michigan and elsewhere was extremely troubling. Readers should note that the cases involved blatant, repeated racist attacks on young children. This case had nothing to do with collegiate diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

When attacks are ignored by school districts with the tacit support of the federal government, innocent youngsters suffer lasting trauma with no redress. The Education Department's position flies in the face of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and common decency.

Howard Feinstein, Bethesda

Leadership means taking responsibility

The Aug. 6 front-page article "Trump, Hegseth clash over weaponry" noted that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth defended himself and blamed his deputy, Stephen Feinberg, for the munitions

shortages during the Iran conflict and "for not ensuring Trump was fully apprised of the issue."

Though Hegseth touts his military service and promotes the "warrior ethos," he certainly didn't learn much about leadership. One of the fundamentals of military leadership is to take responsibility for your actions. Regardless of what Feinberg's role in the munitions issue may have been, Hegseth, by shifting the blame to his deputy, demonstrated that he lacks the moral courage to take accountability for his own actions.

Irwin M. Jacobs, Montgomery, Ohio
The writer is a retired U.S. Army colonel.

Who really stood by Biden

Jim Geraghty wrote in his Aug. 12 column, "The Biden cancer news summons uncomfortable realities for Democrats": "You know who didn't have anything to do with the Democratic Party's bad decisions in the 2024 cycle? Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont), along with Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-New York) and other left-wing voices in the party?"

Not quite. In July 2024, weeks after Joe Biden and Donald Trump's debate, Sanders wrote in a New York Times op-ed, "Joe Biden for President," that while "Mr. Biden is old, is prone to gaffes, walks stiffly and had a disastrous debate with Mr. Trump ... he will be the candidate and should be the candidate." Sanders added that Biden was running on "a strong record," an "excellent record" and "a record of real accomplishment."

Ocasio-Cortez said in July 2024: "Joe Biden is our nominee. He is not leaving this race. He is in this race, and I support him." She added that "the matter is closed." Other members of the House Democrats' left flank, known as "the Squad," agreed. Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-Massachusetts) said of Biden in July 2024, regarding the possibility of his leaving the race, "he's our nominee, and I think we're losing the plot here." Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota) added that "outside a few outliers I think everybody's supporting the president" and that "he's been the best president of my lifetime, and we have his back."

Put simply, Geraghty's explanation that increases in support for "left-wing and Democratic Socialists of America-aligned candidates" dates back to the left defiantly breaking with the establishment regarding Biden's viability as a candidate doesn't match what really happened in 2024.

James Schapiro, New York

Letter submissions

Send letters to letters@washpost.com.

Submissions must be exclusive to The Post and should include the writer's address and day and evening telephone numbers. Letters are subject to editing and abridgment. Please do not send letters as attachments. Because of the volume of material we receive, we are unable to acknowledge submissions; writers whose letters are under consideration for publication will be contacted.

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NEWS

EDITORIAL AND OPINION

OFFICERS

OPINION



GEORGE F. WILL

Michigan swaps first-semester freshman grades for participation trophies

This autumn, when the student-athletes who compose the University of Michigan's football team are girding their loins in preparation for Armageddon, a.k.a. the Ohio State game, suppose some freshman players make mistakes in practice. They miss blocking assignments, fumble handoffs, run the wrong pass routes.

Do we think Michigan's coaches will respond therapeutically? If they emulate the university's administration, the coaches will soothe their freshmen by saying:

Golly, to err is human, to forgive is to "curb the mental health crisis unfolding among college-aged individuals." It is unfolding even among individuals who will not line up across the line of scrimmage from Ohio State's stress-inducing student-athletes. As your coaches, our priority is to allow you freshmen to "acclimate to the demands of college and allow intrinsic motivations to guide personally meaningful academic journeys." So, we will not respond to your mistakes with extrinsic motivations — e.g., criticism. We coaches are here to help you transition to academia. Thrashing OSU would be fun, but first and foremost we are "investing in students' well-being and growth by fostering a culture of connection and collaboration — rather than competition."

Granted, the quoted words do not sound like coach-speak from those responsible for filling the Big House, the nation's largest stadium (capacity 109,901). The words sound like what they are, an emanation of today's academic mind.

They are from the official explanation of why, beginning in autumn 2027, classes in Michigan's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts will be pass/fail for first-semester freshmen, who will be

spared the stress of final letter grades. The grades will be given but hidden. They will not appear on transcripts. And they will not be factored into grade-point averages. The least surprising news from Ann Arbor, the self-described "Athens of the Midwest," is that students like the new policy.

The word "journey" (slathered by the university with the adjectival "personally meaningful") is a favorite of people fluent in academic jargon. It trips effortlessly off the tongues of academics who ladle up education as a college "experience," a rudimentary four-year sail on a boundless sea of elective choices.

The rhetorical goo celebrating "connection" and "collaboration," and disparaging "competition" (an implicit reproach of "capitalist culture"), has a practical as well as ideological function. A pass/fail first semester will partially obscure an embarrassing aspect of today's "college for all" culture: the proliferation of remedial classes for students whose high school "experience" left them ill-prepared academically.

The Chronicle of Higher Education is a painfully accurate recorder of campus thinking. It reports that "teaching experts" say Michigan's new policy addresses the question of how colleges can "offer constructive criticism during one of the most formative periods of a young adult's life without crushing their — yes, their — "spirit (or GPA) in the process."

The Chronicle quotes one expert who thinks Michigan's change could relieve undergraduates of "undue" pressure. But how much, if any, pressure is proper if competition is regrettable, and collaboration and cooperation are aspirations?

And if the spirits of today's presumptively frag-

ile freshmen can be crushed by grading their work, will they mature out of this "formative" period by second semester? Or by senior year?

Other universities have or have had variations of Michigan's new policy. Johns Hopkins University abandoned its policy when, the administration said, it delayed "development of study skills and adaptation to college-level work." But delay is obviously Michigan's spirit-protecting intention.

Linda Nilson, founding director (emeritus) of Clemson University's Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation, says what often goes unsaid in academic discourse: the obvious. She says a pass/fail policy "demotivates students," and "learning has got to be a little bit stressful." Is it not possible that Michigan's postulated "mental health crisis unfolding among college-aged individuals" is a self-fulfilling diagnosis? Tell young people that their professors presume them to be crisis-afflicted, and young people might conform to authority figures' expectations.

And if "intrinsic motivations" are sufficient for learning, and are, as Michigan implies, somehow superior to dictated motivations, such as grades, supplied by professors, the university itself seems almost superfluous. Other than as an excuse for the football team.

A president of the University of Oklahoma was presumably being dull when he said he wanted to make the university something its football program could be proud of. But say what you will about the football industry that has been grafted onto institutions of higher education, no one doubts that this industry is something that higher education is not very: serious about what it is there for.

KATHLEEN PARKER

Why Kansas might elect its first Democratic senator in nearly 100 years

About a century ago — in 1932, to be exact — Kansas elected a Democrat to the U.S. Senate. That was the last time. But a newcomer to the political world might change that distinction come November, God willing.

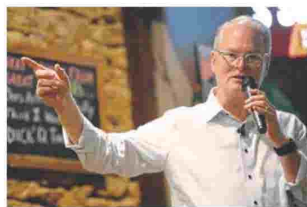
His name is Adam Hamilton, better known to his more than 24,000 parishioners as Rev. Hamilton or Pastor Adam. Hamilton, 62, leads the largest Methodist congregation in the country at the ministry he founded more than three decades ago, the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection. The church has nine locations in multiple states.

Hamilton won the Kansas Democratic primary for Senate on Aug. 4. He'll face Republican Sen. Roger Marshall in the general election.

Talking and listening to Hamilton, it's not hard to understand how he created a megachurch. A plain-spoken Midwesterner, he's easy on the ears and keeps things simple. As a fifth-generation Kansan whose family helped establish a small community called Hope, he replaces fire and brimstone with kindness and common sense imbued with biblical wisdom. He said his congregation includes Republicans, Democrats and independents in about equal numbers.

The leap from the pulpit to politics was the gradual result of his revulsion over what has been happening in Washington since President Donald Trump reoccupied the Oval Office. (Hamilton expressed this more diplomatically.) The policies coming out of D.C. were, the minister said, "an assault on the values I preached and taught for 35 years." While watching the news each night, he would say, "That's not okay with me. Somebody needs to do something."

While he had others in mind, others had him in mind. His wife was not among them. "If you're going to run, you're going to have to find another wife," said the woman he married one week after high school graduation 44 years ago. "She wasn't smiling," Hamilton deadpanned, but he didn't disagree. "My job is to raise people up to run for office, not for me to run."



Kansas Democrat Adam Hamilton.

Then one Saturday, after he had preached at a funeral, LaVon Hamilton walked up to her husband and said, "You know, I think I was wrong."

With that, the two set off on an 18-city listening tour in March. They heard frustration, disappointment and dissatisfaction with Washington. As an agricultural state, Kansas has suffered more than its fair share of consequences from the Iran war, which has led to increased gas prices. It has also dealt with tariffs and billions of dollars in cuts to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Kansas leads the country with 28 rural hospitals at immediate risk of closure. Farmers nationwide paid \$1.4 billion more on diesel fuel for this spring's planting season than last year, according to a report from the Democratic staff of Congress's Joint Economic Committee. Kansas was ranked fifth nationally in percentage increase, with planting diesel costs rising nearly 84 percent year over year. These facts were sufficient to sway Hamilton's decision, but prayer during Lent helped, too.

"When it comes to discerning God's will, you're never quite sure," he said. "I was 87.2 percent sure I was supposed to do this."

Within one week of declaring his candidacy, Hamilton had raised \$1 million. After two months of

campaigning, he had raised \$3.66 million. Though he declared his candidacy just a few months ago and was in a field of 11 contenders, Hamilton easily won the primary. He faces a tough contest against Marshall, a physician who, among other things, is a 2020 election denier and voted to support Trump's agenda 98.3 percent of the time during the president's first term while Marshall was a member of the House of Representatives.

In light of all that's happened under Trump 2.0, this would seem a timely opportunity for Hamilton, but Kansas has long been a solidly red state. In somewhat encouraging campaign news, the Cook Political Report on Aug. 4 shifted its rating for the Senate contest from "solid Republican" to "likely Republican." A recent poll shows Marshall leading Hamilton 46 percent to 45 percent.

There's still plenty of time to move the needle toward a Democratic victory. If nothing else, Americans, including Republicans, ought to welcome an opportunity to elect centrist Democrats to restore a balance of power to Washington.

Hamilton's decades of ministering to people suffering hardships including divorce, suicide and bankruptcy have given him what Washington often lacks — empathy and compassion. If elected, he hopes to bring his pastoral experience to the Senate while also filling leadership gaps that occurred to him during a recent visit to Liberal, Kansas — yes, a town — and its Wizard of Oz museum.

"Lots of people [in Washington] have lost their minds," he said, referring to the Scarecrow's search for a brain. "A lot of them have lost their hearts. And there's a lot of cowardly lions afraid to say what they know to be true. They're so afraid they'll be bullied and primaried that they go along with it until they lose. Then they'll speak up. But it's not courageous when you're on the way out. It's courageous when you have everything to lose and say, 'You know, this is wrong and I'm sorry, I can't support this.'"

Nearly 100 years of Republicanism seems long enough.

Acemoglu's view of liberalism's self-inflicted wounds

BY JULIA R. CARTWRIGHT

On June 16, 1989, a bearded 26-year-old stood before a quarter million Hungarians in Budapest and demanded that Soviet troops leave his country. His fearless call for free elections helped bring down communism in Hungary. The young firebrand was Viktor Orban.

Twenty-five years later, he proudly announced he was building an "illiberal state." What happened in between is a microcosm of what has happened to liberal democracy itself.

That story gives Daron Acemoglu's new book, "What Happened to Liberal Democracy?" its urgency. The MIT economist and Nobel laureate best known for his 2012 title, "Why Nations Fail," has written the most ambitious entry yet in the crowded liberalism-in-crisis genre. Where others blame social media, demagogues or racism, he makes a much more incriminating argument: Liberalism is doing primarily of self-inflicted wounds. And unlike most diagnosticians, he offers an alternative: what he calls "working-class liberalism."

His story begins with the bargain by which postwar liberal democracy earned mass loyalty: It delivered widespread prosperity, functioning public services and genuine political voice for citizens. For three decades, it succeeded spectacularly, as wages more than doubled, hospitals and highways spread, and workers without college degrees entered the middle class. To illustrate, Acemoglu tells the story of Marshall C. Graham, the son of formerly enslaved people, whose Ford factory job launched his granddaughter Pearl Cleage to life as a playwright.

Then the bargain began to collapse. Acemoglu charges liberalism with two sins. First, the "sin of omission": When automation, globalization and deindustrialization severed wages from productivity after 1980, liberal elites failed to respond. Median wage growth collapsed from 2.5 percent a year to 0.45 percent, the jobs anchoring Rust Belt towns vanished, and heroin moved in. A canyon opened between the college-educated and everyone else — a divide Acemoglu traces back to Vietnam draft deferments — and the classes stopped mixing in neighborhoods, in marriages or at the airport bar.

Second, Acemoglu names the "sin of commission": Elites walked away from liberalism's core commitments. In recent decades, they diverged from the working class on immigration and the identity issues that make up the culture wars. When the working class objected, elites reached for what Acemoglu bluntly calls "social engineering": compulsory diversity trainings, ideological litmus tests, language policing. He places these efforts in a lineage of thought policing that includes the Islamic ulama and Maoist China. Social media manufactured outrage and supercharged the cycle of provocation and counterprovocation.

As of 2023, only about a quarter of Americans strongly trusted the president or the Supreme Court, and only 8 percent said the same of Congress. Asked to describe American politics in one word, respondents reached for "corrupt," "divisive" and "chaos." In the 1990s, about half of Americans held a mix of left and right views; today, the parties barely share a planet, and majorities in both oppose meeting halfway.

Yet just when despair seems warranted, Acemoglu plants his flag: "Liberalism is worth saving and remaking." For a man who won the Nobel Prize by showing that institutions are the wellspring of prosperity, a nation losing faith in its institutions is a challenge he is compelled to answer.

Acemoglu's remade liberalism rests on four premises. First, fallibility: No belief is beyond question, which makes humility a necessity rather than simply a virtue. Humanity, after all, was once quite sure the Earth was flat. Second, learning in community: Humans acquire knowledge from others, not through solitary discovery, which makes community the infrastructure of liberalism. The gentle epistemic improvement: With open debate, better ideas slowly win out. Fourth, collective knowledge: Pooled and shared, knowledge is how societies get healthier, richer and freer.

From these premises flows a program. Because human beings are fallible, no elite should impose values from above — hence broad buy-in over top-down policy. Because people learn in community, individual rights must be fused with communal life rather than set against it. And because collective knowledge is what makes societies richer, Acemoglu makes the case for centering shared prosperity and redirecting technology, especially artificial intelligence, to serve workers rather than sideline them.

Not every argument is equally strong. Still, "What Happened to Liberal Democracy?" is a book for these times, when many Americans sense that the nation is at an inflection point. Acemoglu's answer is neither despair nor nostalgia. It is a rallying cry to return to liberal democracy, the system that turns individual freedom into prosperity for all. Right, left or center, the tasks laid out are for everyone: Invest in your community, demand institutions that answer to their citizens and defend the freedoms of people you disagree with.

Orban's arc, after all, was a verdict on what liberalism became once it held power and stopped listening to the people. Acemoglu has written the most rigorous account yet of how that happened. He ends it with a call to action: The defense of liberty and the integrity of liberal institutions depend on everyone. The future success of any liberal nation hinges on whether its citizens will answer the call.

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