



## The bail rule

The Andrabi ruling reaffirms liberty over the stringent UAPA bar

The idea of justice should never allow for the indefinite imprisonment of someone without trial. However, The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), does so, through its stringent Section 43-D(5), which makes bail near impossible once a court is satisfied, on the prosecution's material, that a prima facie case exists against the accused. But on May 18, in *Syed Ifthikhar Andrabi vs National Investigation Agency, Jammu*, the top court delivered a welcome restatement of the principle that bail should be the rule even in cases related to the UAPA. The Bench granted bail to Andrabi, who had spent over five years and nine months in pre-trial custody. The Bench also clarified the legal position where an undertrial has spent years in custody without any realistic prospect of the trial concluding. By reiterating that the right to personal liberty and a speedy trial cannot be subservient to the provision in Section 43-D(5), the judgment disapproved the reasoning in two two-judge Bench rulings, *Gurjit Singh (2024)* and *Gulfisha Fatima*, decided earlier this year. Both had sought to dilute the principle laid down by a three-judge Bench in *K.A. Najeeb (2021)*, which held that the "rigours" of Section 43-D(5) would "melt down" where there was no likelihood of the trial concluding within a reasonable time and the incarceration already undergone was substantial. The Bench also held that the two-judge Benches could not have departed from a binding three-judge ruling in the first place.

In *Gulfisha Fatima*, the Delhi Riots "larger conspiracy" bail decision, the Court denied bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam and even foreclosed their right to renew the plea for a full year, despite both having spent over five years in prison. Now in *Andrabi*, the Court has disapproved the *Gulfisha Fatima* Bench's reading that *Najeeb* was confined to its own facts and was not a constitutional limitation on Section 43-D(5). Consequently, Khalid and Imam should have been granted bail on the basis of the *Najeeb* ruling, and not denied it on a narrower reading of it. This is a welcome intervention, provided it is binding in all such cases, even if it is only about the favourable consideration of bail pleas where the accused have been in custody for long periods without trial, and not about a right to bail under the UAPA. Tellingly, a day after *Andrabi*, Additional Solicitor General S.V. Raju told another Bench that under the UAPA's statutory bail bar, "the presumption of innocence takes a backseat" which is precisely the position *Andrabi* has now set itself against, in line with constitutional principles.

## Measure for measure

Courts should not react defensively to every line of criticism

While it is the courts' prerogative to punish contempt, how well they have separated contemptuous attacks from constitutionally protected criticism, especially by journalists, lawyers, activists, and scholars, has varied widely. This is because the judiciary has not been able to draw consistent lines between fair and exaggerated criticism, politically motivated and defamatory comments, and speech that obstructs justice. The judiciary faces misinformation, political pressure, abusive on-line discourse, and declining public trust, and the ways in which judges can respond to these attacks are limited. Rhetorical excess in oral observations must also not be confused with legal doctrine. However, recent comments by the Bench have created the appearance of a judiciary increasingly intolerant of external scrutiny. Last week, when hearing a lawyer's petition over not having been elevated to a senior rank, CJI Surya Kant described certain actors in the legal ecosystem as "parasites" and certain young lawyers engaging in RTI-based activism as "cockroaches". While he later said the remarks were directed at persons entering professions with bogus degrees, rather than critics of the judiciary, such language is unbecoming of the CJI. The tenor follows the NGERT textbook controversy, with the Supreme Court focusing its manifest ire on three academics involved in drafting the chapter, effectively excluding them from work on public school curricula without prior hearing. The action evoked concerns about the Court being aggrieved party and arbiter. In the Ali Khan Mahmudabad matter, the Court granted him relief from coercive action but also imposed a gag order. Then, in a display of willingness to discipline the norms of public conduct rather than determine legality, it urged the state to decline to prosecute him as a concession.

When a CJI's comments of this nature appear outside formal contempt proceedings, they render a chilling effect as they amount to institutional condemnation without the safeguards of due process. The comments on using the RTI Act as a basis for activism have a similar effect, beyond the Act being a legitimate instrument. Recently, when a journalist (with a law degree) sought data on complaints against specific judges, the Supreme Court Registry declined the existence of such information. When the journalist produced a Law Ministry disclosure to the contrary, the Registry's legal representative doubted the inquiry "fishing and roving" — a moving goalpost that was, again, under-concerned with legality while raising questions of the Court arguing its own case. Former CJI D.Y. Chandrachud said that judges are public actors exercising state power and courts should not react defensively to every line of criticism. That attitude improved how the bar, the press, and the academy experienced courts. The recent comments have set the clock back.

# Preparing India for a credible digital Census



K. Narayanan Unni

Retired officer from the Indian Statistical Service

The house listing phase of the 2027 Census is now progressing in some States and the work in other States will be taken up soon. The questionnaire for this phase was pre-tested last year. It was reported that the inclusion of questions on caste has delayed the pre-testing of the questionnaire for the population enumeration phase of the Census. Field testing of the schedules is essential to ensure that the concepts and definitions are easily understood by the enumerators and respondents.

The question on caste is being included in the Census for the first time since Independence. The only recent experiences on the issues relating to enumeration of caste are from the surveys in Bihar and Karnataka. I am sure that the Census organisation would have conducted extensive research on the issues and possible solutions, and the pre-testing would help streamline the questions and instructions. The experience of Karnataka and Bihar suggests that, whatever the results, there will be communities that are not ready to accept their numbers.

The population figures from the 2027 Census will be used for the next delimitation of Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly constituencies. Neither the Constitution nor any other law talks about whether the Census has to count people on *de jure* or *de facto* basis. Census on *de jure* basis would mean that people have to be counted at the place where they reside. On the other hand, a *de facto* census would count people at the place where they are present during the Census.

### The method used

The Indian Census has been following an extended *de facto* method. People found at their usual/normal place of residence when the enumerator visits the household, as well as members who are absent at that time but have stayed there for at least one night during the Census enumeration period, which normally lasts 20 days, are also enumerated. Also included are visitors who stayed with the household throughout the entire period of Census enumeration period. A household is defined to include all members, even if unrelated, who partake food from a common kitchen. Thus, household help living with household and paying guests should be enumerated there, if they have food from the same kitchen.

This enumeration process implies that the number of voters in an area may not correspond to the population enumerated there. A six-month residence is required for registration as a voter. Further, the voters' list would include those living abroad (non-resident Indians, or NRIs) who chose to register as a voter, whereas they are not part of the census at all. According to the website of the Ministry of External Affairs, there are about 1.58

It requires accuracy, safeguards, training and careful planning

crore NRIs living abroad. This is more than 1% of the population of the country. If they were all counted in the Census in one State, it would get at least five Lok Sabha seats in the next delimitation. While the NRIs may be from across the country, some States have proportionately more NRIs than others. Kerala, Gujarat, Punjab, Telangana and Tamil Nadu are known to have a significant number of people living abroad. The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 has estimated that about 22 lakh people from the State are living/working abroad. Not including them in the population of the State would result in the loss of one Lok Sabha seat. Some other States may also be similarly affected.

Some countries collect data on non-residents in the census by enumerating family members, if any, living abroad. This process cannot collect information on those households that have migrated abroad with all their members. Still, it would be a useful starting point and would provide better data for delimitation purposes. Therefore, I suggest pre-testing an appropriately worded question on NRIs.

### The problem areas

The next Census is unique because the entire data collection process is planned to be carried out using mobile electronic devices, mostly smartphones. This can save time for the computerisation of data. Consistency checks on responses during data collection can result in improved quality of data and faster processing.

However, one has to allow for a significantly large portion of enumerators who are not savvy with smartphones, and tablets. During the recent Socio-Economic and Caste Survey in Karnataka, there were reports of enumerators finding it difficult to handle the equipment for the survey. During the planning for the 2021 Census, it was indicated that enumerators would have the option to collect data using printed paper schedules, which could later be transferred to the electronic database from home. It is highly probable that a family member or a student of the teacher appointed as the enumerator may assist with this work. This could lead to accountability issues and may also compromise the confidentiality of the data. Therefore, a mechanism to detect and control data-entry errors is essential. There will also be an option for respondents to self-enumerate using a computer or smartphone as provided in the house listing phase.

The questions in the population enumeration stage are more complex when compared to those in the house-listing phase. Many of the questions require a thorough understanding of the instructions that even many enumerators find difficult. For example, the explanation of disability in the 2011 Census ran to about six printed pages. Even the seemingly simple

question, "Have you worked at any time during the last year?" was accompanied by more than two pages explaining what constitutes 'work'. The follow-up questions on industry, occupation, and related matters are also not easy for most people to understand.

It is too naive to expect that the respondents would read all the instructions before clicking on an item in the drop down menu. The three million plus enumerators may not equally understand the concepts, definitions and the need to ask the questions in an appropriate manner. The self enumeration facility can become worse unless the questions are well worded and explanations are given within the question. It is difficult to achieve this without significant simplification of the concepts and definitions.

### Guard against respondent fatigue

Including too many questions in the online schedule in an attempt to obtain better responses can also lead to respondent fatigue, as the form has to be completed for every individual in a household. The possibility of respondents deliberately providing incorrect answers to certain questions in order to avoid follow-up questions cannot be ruled out.

Post-enumeration surveys from past censuses have indicated that distant relatives of the head of the household and unrelated persons, such as domestic helpers living with the household, have higher rates of omission. In a self-enumeration system, the chances of missing such persons are even greater. There is also the possibility of including children who are living in hostels and are therefore not eligible to be enumerated as part of the household. Better structuring of the questions may help ensure more accurate enumeration of such persons. For example, questions such as, "Is the person currently present in the house and, if not, was he or she present at any time after February 9 or likely to return before February 28?" (assuming that the census enumeration takes place during that period as in the past censuses), could be asked for every individual. Similarly, questions such as "Is there any other relative of the head of the household, or any unrelated person such as a servant, helper, or nurse, who shares meals from the same kitchen and lives with the household?" may also be included. While such measures may not ensure completely error-free enumeration, they could help reduce omissions and improve accuracy.

The possibility of fraudulent enumerations in some areas or by some groups using the self enumeration facility cannot be ruled out. The memory of cancelling the Census in some areas in 2001 is still fresh. The organisation needs to be vigilant and steps to prevent such incidents need to be field tested.

# Drone mania, separating hype from battlefield reality

Operation Sindoor started with a bang at 1.02 a.m. on May 7, 2025 and the surprise ceasefire at 3.30 p.m. on May 10, 2025, was akin to an "out-of-syllabus" event. On the first anniversary, discussion of the four-day engagement between India and Pakistan has been dominated by events concerning India's long-range strikes on Pakistani terrorist and air force infrastructure; what has been missed out, however, has been the use by both sides of small unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), including loitering kamikaze munitions, colloquially referred to as drones.

Drones have acquired an outsized image for three reasons. First, there is their aura of being relatively "unstoppable" because their small size makes detection difficult. Second, their relatively low cost *vis-à-vis* a manned aircraft makes them very appealing to number-crunchers. Lastly, the fact that they do not place a combatant in harm's way is an argument that undercuts most of their limitations. In the recent past, the advent of fibre-optic-guided first-person-view drones used by Hezbollah against Israel has further added to the hype.

So, the question whether drones have revolutionised warfare needs a professional analysis *vis-à-vis* the basic tenets of warfare through a prism of doctrine and strategy.

### Doctrinal issues

The first question is whether the arrival of drones represents a revolutionary change in warfare or merely an evolution enabled by new technology. Evolutionary developments merely enhance existing capabilities, whereas revolutionary technologies fundamentally reshape warfare by opening up new domains. The advent of the air domain was transformational because it revolutionised warfare. UAVs, however, are merely another weapon system — albeit one with unique advantages — that has evolved within the



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Retired Air Vice Marshal and a former Additional Director General of the Centre for Air Power Studies

Drone technology is advancing rapidly, alongside equally important counter measures

air domain. Second, since drones fly at low altitudes, some strategists have coined the term "air littoral", suggesting the creation of another domain of warfare unique to drone operations. This is misleading because drones operate within a restricted airspace layer — from the ground up to the coordinating altitude, a pre-designated level that separates fast-moving conventional aeroplane from slower-moving assets such as helicopters and UAVs. This has forced surface forces to devise methods to protect themselves. In effect, as an essay in the *Air & Space Forces Magazine* argues, drones are not reshaping air warfare but are actually reshaping ground combat. The importance of attainment and maintenance of air superiority through manned systems, therefore, remains undiminished.

### Strategic considerations

First, the innovative strike by Ukraine, deep in the interior of Russia through drones inserted in specially constructed containers as part of its Operation Spider's Web, points to a new strategic requirement of possessing good counterintelligence to thwart such long-term strategies in the adversary's planning stage itself. In the event, the strategic air fleet of Russia had lost many costly assets.

Second, such innovative use has shifted the boundaries of kinetic warfare hundreds of kilometres inland. This is akin to a cyberattack that can be launched by anyone, from anywhere in the world, against any target globally. Consequently, a new requirement has emerged to protect assets located deep within a nation's interior on a 24x7 basis. Incidentally, the United States has introduced new laws restricting the purchase of land by foreign entities near military bases and critical infrastructure.

Third, the field of unmanned flight is, in many ways, still developing. The integration of artificial intelligence will bring about an exponential

increase in capabilities, leading to fully autonomous operations. Allowing a machine to make life-and-death decisions comes with enormous consequences, and a United Nations committee is currently examining the ethical and moral issues involved.

### Counter UAS strategy

In warfare, a new weapon brings in counter-measures and counter-counter-measures. As more counter unmanned aerial systems (CUAS) are fielded, the drone threat would be addressable to a great extent.

In Operation Sindoor, waves of individual drones that had been sent into India by Pakistan were neutralised by an integrated CUAS network. On the other hand, drone swarms that are being developed would be an integration of multiple drones to overwhelm air defence systems by sheer numbers. This is the next challenge, and counter-measures under development would basically be directed energy weapons such as the Israeli Iron Beam laser system which ensures rapid engagement at just \$2-\$3.50 per laser shot instead of the \$40,000 to \$50,000 per missile of its Iron Dome system.

The Europeans are launching a drone-wave initiative which will use a layered mesh of detection and interception capabilities of drones of European Union member states. The U.S. is planning its Golden Dome system with space based and hypersonic interceptors to address incoming projectiles.

It is good that India too is envisaging a nationwide terrestrial and space-based "Sudarshan Chakra" to be in place by 2035 for addressing multifarious air defence threats. That is still at least a decade away and, therefore, such a system would require phase-wise operationalisation along with enormous and committed funding. It is imperative that New Delhi finds the monies to support it.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Bail ruling

The Supreme Court of India's reflection on its earlier bail ruling is a welcome reminder that justice must not be delayed into denial. When trials stretch endlessly, liberty becomes collateral damage. Bail is not mercy but a constitutional right tied to freedom and fairness. The Court's acknowledgment

that prolonged incarceration violates the spirit of justice should guide all future decisions under stringent laws. Upholding personal liberty while ensuring accountability is the true test of judicial balance. India's great democracy depends on courts that correct themselves and reaffirm that the rule of law protects citizens, not just

prosecutes them. **K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru**

### Rationality in politics

The recent and stunning electoral success of the fledgling Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) party in Tamil Nadu has paved the way for several youngsters to become Members of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly.

This will naturally encourage more young people to view politics as a career option, which is healthy for a democracy. However, what message does a TVK MLA send to youngsters when she claims to hold an "honorary doctorate in astrology" and conducts meetings with Corporation officials, who reportedly "voluntarily" met her at her "astrology

consultancy office" (Tamil Nadu page, "TVK MLA criticised for meeting officials 'in astrology office'", May 20)? Will not youngsters influenced by her political success begin to think that a degree in astrology is a desirable qualification for securing an MLA ticket from the TVK, and start pursuing such qualifications? As a political party seeking

to govern Tamil Nadu, the TVK cannot shy away from its responsibility to curb pseudoscientific practices, which have the potential to erode rational thinking, in the public sphere.

**A. Venkatasubramanian, Trichy, Tamil Nadu**

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

# Analysing India's budgets for justice

The lack of any targeted funding to improve justice outcomes in the Union Budget 2026-27 shows that India continues to overlook the importance of rule of law to economic growth. To understand government priorities within competing constraints of financial resources, one just has to follow the money.



**Valay Singh**  
Lead and Co-founder,  
India Justice Report

A recent study of the budgets for the justice system, which includes the police, prisons, judiciary and legal aid departments, has found that across 11 high-GDP States in India such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh, there has been a cumulative spend of ₹2 lakh crore towards justice in 2024-25. On average, this accounted for 4.6% of State budgets. In comparison, the Council of Europe's European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice study, which excluded police services, and was based on information from 2022, shows that Europe only spends about 0.3% of its GDP on justice. Nationally, India spends about ₹450 per capita on the judiciary, ₹9 on free legal aid, ₹150 on prisons and about ₹1,500 on the police.

The India Justice Report noted that across India's 11 wealthiest and most populous States, policing accounted for over 80% of all justice-related allocations with a spend of ₹1,616 per capita. Such a distribution raises questions about the state's priorities in delivering justice.

quality of policing. For instance, less than 1.5% of the police budget is allocated to training, and roughly only 1% to forensics. Judiciary budgets accounted for less than 1% of the total State budgets, despite unprecedented caseloads. Across the 11 States, there are 3,500 district courts, which handle seven times the cases of the High Courts and receive only three times the budget. Budgetary allocations are directed towards infrastructure, the salaries of judges and support staff, and training. However, training accounts for just about 1% of judiciary budgets. Based on the population projections of March 2025, the actual strength of the Bench stands at 15 judges per 10 lakh population, which is well below the 1987 Law Commission recommendation of 50 judges per 10 lakh population. Analysis shows that for every judge position in the district judiciary, at least 5-9 other positions are needed for secretarial and clerical functions. While the financial cost of adding judges is not insignificant, India's economic growth should not be stalled because of severely inadequate judge strength.

Prisons in these 11 States hold 60% of India's prisoners. The occupancy in these States, which stood at 137% in 2023, was higher than the national average (131%). Prisons accounted for only 0.14% of State budgets. On average, of every ₹100 spent on prisons, only ₹0.23 was spent on training. The Justice Report also noted that prisons across India functioned with at least 30% vacancies.

When policing takes the majority of funding for justice systems, it brings to light an architecture which is structured primarily around enforcement and surveillance

Legal aid received the least amount of funds. Given that legal aid is the primary mechanism through which low-income and marginalised individuals access the justice system, this underinvestment has consequences: limited reach, inadequate representation, and delays in securing legal assistance for those who need it the most.

**Systemic priorities**  
When policing takes the majority

of funding for justice systems, it brings to light an architecture which is structured primarily around enforcement and surveillance, not access, adjudication, or rehabilitation. The priority appears to be maintaining law-and-order capacity rather than promoting fairness, and strengthening the broader ecosystem of justice delivery.

A justice system is only as strong as its weakest component. The current distribution of funds suggests that those components most essential for protection and equal access — legal aid, judicial and prison staff training, and independent oversight bodies — are the least supported. An overemphasis on just one component comes at a cost; a crisis in the system which needs to be managed by the other pillars.

The National Crime Record Bureau's Crime in India 2024 report shows us that 26 lakh people were arrested, a majority of whom belonged to communities which were socially and economically marginalised. This is indicative of a system that is highly efficient at generating cases, arrests, and detentions, but inefficient at supplying remedies.

Another clear example is the treatment given to State Human Rights Commissions (SHRC). Despite their clear statutory mandate to investigate rights violations, review safeguards and provide independent oversight, SHRCs in the highest-GDP States receive a mere 80 paisa per capita. Several operate with over 40% vacancies, and many struggle to perform even basic functions.

This does not imply that policing should be de-prioritised, but it does paint a clear picture of an imbalance.

A recalibration of justice budget priorities, one that is firmly grounded in evidence and aligned with what the Constitution mandates would move India closer to a system that is accessible, and people-centred; capable of meeting the needs of all.

# Boosting climate action in Tamil Nadu

The new government should prioritise and accelerate climate action in the State

## STATE OF PLAY

Arivudai Nambi Appadurai



A new political mandate in Tamil Nadu arrives at a time when climate risks are no longer distant projections but lived realities. From rising heat to coastal vulnerability, the urgency to embed climate action into governance has never been clearer. This political transition offers an opportunity to accelerate the State's climate action response.

Tamil Nadu is among the most climate vulnerable States of India. Increasing sea-levels, frequent cyclones, heatwaves, water stress and rapid urbanisation exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, making the transition of climate action into policy and implementation an absolute necessity.

In the past, Tamil Nadu has actioned several policies to manage climate risks. The government has introduced various programmes such as the Climate Change Mission, Coastal Restoration Mission and the Green Tamil Nadu Mission, in addition to the creation of institutions such as the Tamil Nadu Green Climate Company (TNGCC) and the Tamil Nadu Green Energy Corporation. Further, the Governing Council on Climate Change, a high-level body with experts headed by the CM, is a first-of-its-kind State-level body designed to provide strategic policy direction, and accelerate climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Some of the key initiatives under the Climate Change Mission have been the establishment of climate resilient villages as a pilot in 11 districts; district-level decarbonisation plans; carbon-neutral hubs; afforestation; climate-resilient

green temples; green schools; and the Green Fellows programme. The role of the State Planning Commission cannot be ignored here for it was instrumental in conceiving many targeted studies across a spectrum of priority areas, which fed into both policy and implementation processes.

On the financial side, Tamil Nadu pioneered the launch of the first State-owned Green Climate Fund with a corpus of ₹1,000 crore to support clean energy transition, mobility and water security. Besides this, the State has been successful in acquiring significant funding from the World Bank and other multilateral agencies to execute the TN-Shore Mission focused on building coastal resilience.

**The next step**  
All these measures have placed Tamil Nadu as a forerunner in climate action. Furthermore, institutions such as the TNGCC can be leveraged to attract private capital to achieve climate action goals. It could translate ambition into opportunity at scale and create the next generation of industrial winners.

The new government should not only look to sustain current initiatives to shape better outcomes but also be innovative in putting together forward-looking policies. It must also ensure inclusive decision making in order to create an enabling environment.

As Tamil Nadu is one of the most industrialised States, the scope for emission mitigation programmes is wide and pertinent. The new government's environment mandate has an organic link with the past government's climate actions and ambitions. It aspires to come out with a dedicated climate budget plan to the tune of ₹3,000 crore, achieve 100% renewable energy through the Vetri Solar Mission, install 20,000 EV fast charging stations by 2031, and electrify 5,000 State-owned buses.

And while mitigation-related priorities are important, the new government should not lose sight of adaptation actions, which include measures to safeguard the lives and livelihoods of the poor and the vulnerable. A separate framework and plan of action for adaptation strategies would not only help the State's climate-resilient policies but also strengthen its contributions to the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plan (NAP) and other existing international mechanisms.

Further, investments in research, training, and capacity-building would enhance the value of climate action. The new government should strive to mobilise funds, both domestically and internationally.

Tamil Nadu enters its next phase of governance at a time when the climate action platform is well-positioned for accelerated implementation. The new government guided by its grand social agenda must ensure that every rupee spent on development is also an investment towards a cleaner and resilient future.

Arivudai Nambi Appadurai is Director of the Climate Resilience Practice at the World Resources Institute India. Views expressed are personal.

# Patterns from Gujarat's 2026 local body elections

Of the 9,986 seats in the State's local body polls, 732 were won by the BJP without a single opposing candidate

## DATA POINT

Pradeep Kumar Dontha  
Vignesh Karthik K.R.

In April 2026, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept Gujarat's local body elections across 9,986 seats spanning four administrative tiers: Municipal Corporations (MCs), Nagarpalikas (NPs), District Panchayats (DPs), and Taluka Panchayats (TPs), winning 73.03% of all seats. The BJP's seat share falls in a near-perfect gradient from 89.75% in MCs to 70.29% in DPs (Table 1), indicating that while its dominance is real, the terrain becomes more contested as governance gets closer to the village level.

This urban-rural gradient holds across both seat shares and vote shares (Chart 1). In 2015, the Congress led the BJP in both DPs and TPs. Rural Gujarat has since been systematically realigned, but the realignment is incomplete. The residual resistance at the Taluka tier is Congress's most viable terrain for recovery.

The three-cycle trend is useful evidence of structural, not cyclical, consolidation (Chart 2). The BJP improved its overall vote share across all administrative tiers by 7.6 percentage points, from 46.69% in 2015 to 54.28% in 2026. The Congress, meanwhile, shed 14 percentage points in its overall vote share, from 44.77% in 2015 to 30.76% in 2026. Importantly, it secured fewer absolute votes in 2026 (1.8 crore) than in 2015 (2.3 crore) despite a substantially larger electorate, a clear sign of the party losing ground. The vote share of the Others category, including independents and minor parties, has more than halved from 8.55% to 3.98%, as the political space has consolidated into a three-party frame after the entry of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

The AAP secured a 6.21% vote share in its first local body elections in Gujarat in 2021 and in-

creased it to 10.98% in 2026, adding 29 lakh votes over that period. The correlation data is unambiguous: the AAP's vote share correlates at +0.98 with the BJP's growth and at -0.96 with the Congress's decline across tiers, showing that it is cannibalising the Opposition and not eroding the BJP's vote base.

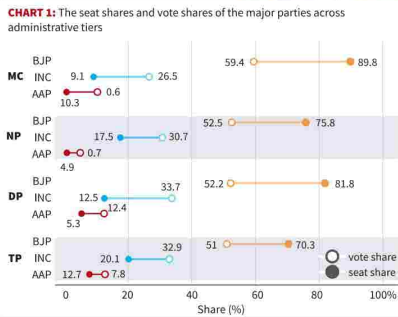
The BJP won 94.87% of Scheduled Caste (SC) (General) seats at the DP tier and performed consistently above 79% in SC categories across all tiers. The historic KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) coalition's SC pillar, built by former Congress Chief Minister Madhav Singh Solanki in the 1980s, is structurally absent from these results. The Congress's most durable electoral asset has effectively dissolved at the grassroots. Its SC pillar has migrated to the BJP, and its Scheduled Tribes (ST) pillar is now split three ways.

In TPs, the BJP won 65.59% of ST (General) and 61.72% of ST (Women) seats — its weakest numbers at any tier-and-category combination. In the north Gujarat tribal corridor, the BJP's ST (General) win share dropped to 52.1% and ST (Women) to 55.3%. The Kutch showed a similar dip, with the ST (General) win share at 57.1%. The tribal belt, where the BJP, the Congress, and the AAP are in a triangular contest, remains the only competitive terrain in Gujarat's local body elections.

The most alarming finding in the 2026 data is the disappearance of contest itself. Of the 9,986 seats, 732 (7.3%) were won without a single opposing candidate. The BJP claimed 717 of these (Table 2), of which 435 were in women-reserved categories. The historical escalation is stark: 37 uncontested seats in 2015, 237 in 2021, and 732 in 2026. Whether this reflects the Opposition's inability to recruit women candidates, or a judgment that reserved seats are unwinnable, the consequence is the same: in over 700 pockets, the democratic contest has effectively ceased.

## Collapsing contests

The data were sourced from Gujarat State Election Commission. Pradeep Kumar Dontha is a political consultant. Vignesh Karthik K.R. is a postdoctoral research affiliate of Indian politics at KITLV-Leiden



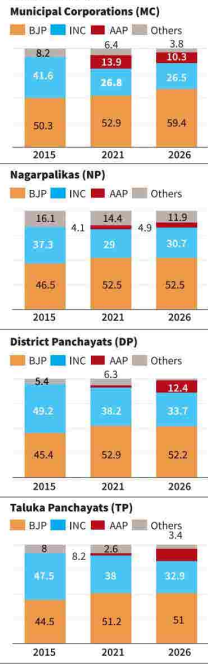
**TABLE 1:** The seat share of the BJP across different reservation categories and administrative tiers

	MC	NP	DP	TP
UR (G)	89.6	73.9	82.5	70.4
UR (W)	91.4	76.6	86.3	73.5
BC (G)	90.8	74.6	78.4	72.7
BC (W)	87.8	75.4	87.4	73.3
SC (G)	79.1	82.7	94.9	76.4
SC (W)	87.9	82.3	94.3	74.1
ST (G)	89.5	74.2	73.9	65.6
ST (W)	100.0	80.0	70.5	61.7

Tier	(Col A) Seats won unopposed	(Col B) Seats won by BJP among Col A	(Col C) Seats reserved for women among Col B
MCs	43	43	33
NPs	385	370	232
DPs	52	52	27
TPs	252	252	143
Total	732	717	435



**CHART 2:** The party-wise change in vote shares over the past three local body elections (in %)



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 21, 1976

## Nevelvi success in transplanting trees

When the mining operations in Nevelvi were extended in 1968, the Nevelvi Lignite Corporation authorities had to shift and re-lay an orchard with 924 plants like grafted mango, lemon, acid lime, jack, coconut, arecanut and grape most of them procured from the Government Model Orchard-cum-Nursery at Timmapuram in Salem district. At the time of shifting most of the trees had established themselves well with a trunk base ranging from 9 inches to one foot and were just then in yield.

Test excavations around the trees up to their branch spread revealed they had put forth network of roots up to 3 and 4 feet from the base. For transport and transplantations of trees on a large scale cranes and tractor trailers were used. No watering was done around the trees to be lifted to their new location to keep the soil harder and drier for better shape. The roots of the trees under normal conditions were found to travel underground to the extent of the branches over the ground. It was noticed during the transplantation operations that if the trunk of a tree was 12" in diameter, the ball of earth would be between 4 and 5 feet diameter. In all the cases trenches were cut around the trees beyond the diametrical length the trenches being sufficiently broad for tying and lifting plants operations inside the pits. The ball of earth was sectioned off in such a way as to taper down underground where root fibers were thicker. Wherever the soil was found sandy and likely to crumble, the ball of earth was wrapped with sack or tarpaulin bits and then securely tied. Special signs were used around the ball of earth before lifting plants with cranes.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 21, 1926

## Reform of Afghan coinage

Simla, May 20: Recently the whole of the Afghan coinage and system of weights and measures have undergone a change. The Metric system has been adopted. The present rupee is called the *Afghani*, as opposed to the old *Kabuli*, and is declared to be of slightly higher value. 10 *Afghanis* being equal to 11 *Kabulis*. The *Afghani* is divided into 100 *Pais*. Only 2.5, and 10 *Pal* coins are issued. 20 *Afghanis* go to make one *Amani*, which is the standard gold coin. The coins are well minted.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

## Heroin seized near the Jammu border in a drone drop

**3** In kilograms. Police in Jammu recovered around 3 kg of heroin suspected to have been dropped by a drone near the International Border in the Bishnah sector. Officials said the consignment, estimated to be worth over ₹15 crore in the international market, was intercepted during an operation targeting narco-smuggling networks. **PTI**

## Tamil Nadu healthcare surveillance vehicles flagged off

**40** Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay flagged off 40 new vehicles worth ₹2.9 crore for the Directorate of Medical and Rural Health Services. The vehicles will be used to monitor hospitals, inspect scan centres, investigate quackery cases and support emergency medical relief operations across the State. **PTI**

## Ships allowed through the Strait of Hormuz by Iran

**26** Iran's Revolutionary Guards said 26 vessels, including oil tankers and container ships, were allowed to transit the Strait of Hormuz over the past 24 hours. Iran has largely blocked shipping through the strait, a vital global energy conduit, since the outbreak of war with the United States and Israel on February 28. **AFP**

## Temperature recorded in Rajasthan's hottest city

**46.5** In degrees Celsius. Sriganganagar recorded a maximum temperature of 46.5° Celsius, making it the hottest place in Rajasthan. Most parts of the State are likely to continue experiencing heatwave conditions with temperatures ranging between 42 and 46 degrees Celsius over the next week. **PTI**

## Matches scheduled in BCCI domestic season 2026-27

**1,788** The BCCI announced that the 2026-27 domestic season will feature 1,788 matches across men's and women's tournaments in multiple age groups and formats. The season will begin with the Duleep Trophy on August 23. **ANI**  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Oral remarks and institutional limits

Chief Justice's 'cockroaches' remark from the bench, and the clarification that followed, have revived a question the Supreme Court has tried to settle twice; the standard the court has set out asks the public to read bench remarks as distinct from the formal opinion, and asks judges to keep that distinction from collapsing

## LETTER &amp; SPIRIT

V. Venkatesan

Chief Justice Surya Kant's remarks from the bench on May 15 and the clarification that followed the next day have revived a question Indian law has tried to settle twice. When a judge speaks from the bench and the speech wounds, what standard governs? Hearing applications relating to the designation of senior advocates, the Chief Justice remarked that "there are youngsters like cockroaches" and that some advocates were "parasites of society." The clarification confined the criticism to fake-degree-holding designees. The clarification has not closed the controversy.

The court has named the convention twice. The first was the Restatement of Values of Judicial Life, adopted by the Full Court on May 7, 1997. The second was *Chief Election Commissioner vs M.R. Vijayabaskar*, decided by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justice M.R. Shah on May 6, 2021. A century before either, Benjamin Cardozo, in his Storrs Lectures at Yale in 1921, named the standard that constrains all judicial utterance. The judge, Cardozo wrote, "is to draw his inspiration from consecrated principles. He is not to yield to spasmodic sentiment, to vague and unregulated benevolence. He is to exercise a discretion informed by tradition, methodized by analogy, disciplined by system, and subordinated to the primordial necessity of order in the social life."

### The Vijayabaskar standard

The trigger for *Vijayabaskar* lay in the Madras High Court. In April 2021, during the second wave of COVID-19, the Madras High Court was hearing a petition on COVID protocols at a Karur polling booth, with Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee presiding. The Bench, exasperated at the Election Commission for permitting large political rallies during the Assembly elections then under way, remarked that the Commission was "singularly responsible" for the situation and that Commission officers "should be put up for murder charges probably." The remarks were not in the formal order but were widely reported. The Election Commission moved the Supreme Court for a direction restraining the media from reporting oral observations of judges.

Justice Chandrachud refused that restraint. The judgment did three things. It defended bench questioning as a form that provides "clarity to the judges" and lets lawyers develop arguments "with a sense of creativity founded on a spontaneity of thought." It cautioned against scathing language directed at persons or institutions, calling the Madras High Court's metaphor "inappropriate" and the remarks "harsh." And it held, as the doctrinal centrepiece, that "the formal opinion of a judicial institution is reflected through its judgments and orders, not its oral observations during the hearing." Two faces of the bench remark were thus named by the court itself: the question that tests and the language that wounds. The same standard, drawn from Cardozo and codified in Item 8 of the 1997 Restatement, applies to both.

### The bench question that tests

The first face is the bench question that tests an argument. The judge states a position she may not hold, to see how the lawyer defends against it. The form is



GETTY IMAGES

## THE GIST

▼ Bench questions are meant to test arguments and aid judicial reasoning, but "intemperate remarks" and "scathing language" that wound individuals or institutions cross a recognised judicial standard.

▼ Drawing on Cardozo, the 1997 Restatement of Values of Judicial Life, and *Vijayabaskar*, the article distinguishes between the "bench question that tests" and the "language that wounds."

▼ As oral observations now travel instantly into the public sphere, clarifications that narrow or deny controversial remarks leave "the wound on the record and the standard unanswered."

unscripted; the function is rigorous. The judgment is the considered position; the bench question is the testing that precedes it. Three instances show the form at work. During the second round of hearings in *Brown vs Board of Education* before the United States Supreme Court, Justice Felix Frankfurter asked Thurgood Marshall what he meant by saying the Constitution required "equal" treatment in schools. Marshall answered: "Equal means getting the same thing, at the same time, and in the same place." The bench question forced the petitioner to define his term in a phrase that would travel. The answer entered the American civil rights doctrine.

On September 12, 2023, the Israeli Supreme Court sat as a 15-judge panel to hear petitions against an amendment that stripped the courts of their power to review government decisions for reasonableness. President Esther Hayut told government counsel from the bench: "We are not concerned with our prestige but with the vital interests of the public." She pressed the government on whether reasonableness could survive as a legal obligation if no judge could enforce it. The questioning was widely read as foreshadowing the 8:7 majority that struck down the law in January 2024.

In April 2023, hearing the marriage equality petitions in *Supriyo vs Union of India*, Chief Justice Chandrachud told Solicitor General Tushar Mehta that "there is no absolute concept of a man or an absolute concept of a woman at all... the very notion of a man and a woman is not an absolute based on genitals." The exchange was widely read as signalling that the bench would read same-sex unions into the Special Marriage Act, 1954. The judgment delivered six months later went the other way. Chief Justice Chandrachud himself was in the minority. The bench question had done its work of testing. The considered position lay elsewhere.

### The intemperate remark

The second face is the intemperate remark. The standard against "scathing language" is most strained when the language reaches for the dehumanising.

In December 2015, hearing *Fisher vs University of Texas* at Austin on race in university admissions, Justice Antonin Scalia observed from the bench that there were those who contended that African-American students did better at "a slower-track school" than at competitive universities. The remark went to the empirical question of whether affirmative action helped its intended beneficiaries. The language he used to put the question carried its own weight. The remark was widely condemned as racist. Justice Scalia did not retreat. He died two months later, leaving the remark on the record.

On March 1, 2021, hearing the bail plea of a government employee accused of raping a school student in Maharashtra, Chief Justice S.A. Bobde asked his counsel: "Will you marry her?" The accused's lawyer informed the court that his client was already married. The Chief Justice withdrew the suggestion. A week later, he said the remark had been "completely misreported": he had asked whether the accused was going to marry, not directed him to do so.

Hearing a PIL on urban housing for the poor in February 2025, Justice B.R. Gawai, who would assume office as Chief Justice three months later, wondered aloud whether freebies were producing "a class of parasites." That he was urging the homeless to be drawn into the mainstream did not redeem the epithet. Justice Surya Kant's remarks of May 15 belong to the same category and have followed the same arc: utterance, criticism, clarification confining the scope of what was said.

The same standard applies off the bench. In July 2016, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg of the United States Supreme

Court called Donald Trump, then the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, "a faker" in media interviews, and said she did not want to think about his winning the White House. After Mr. Trump called for her resignation, she issued a statement: "On reflection, my recent remarks in response to press inquiries were ill-advised and I regret making them. Judges should avoid commenting on a candidate for public office. In the future I will be more circumspect." Item 8 of the 1997 Restatement, which directs an Indian judge not to "enter into a public debate or express his views in public on political matters or on matters that are pending or are likely to arise for judicial determination," would have reached the same conclusion in fewer words.

A pattern runs through the intemperate remarks. Each was followed, where it was followed at all, by a retreat that did not match what had been said. Scalia did not retreat. Justice Bobde said the remark had been misreported. Chief Justice Surya Kant said the criticism had been narrower than reported. Only Ginsburg, in withdrawing, acknowledged the standard she had crossed. The retreat that names the rule is the rarer kind. The retreat that denies the speech is the more common one.

The standard *Vijayabaskar* identified has not changed. What has changed is the audience. Bench remarks now travel from the courtroom to the news cycle in real time, before the formal opinion of the court is written. The discipline Cardozo named, and Item 8 codified, now operates in public. The clarification that denies the speech leaves the wound on the record and the standard unanswered. A clarification that names the rule is what *Vijayabaskar* asks of the bench. The first occasion to apply it has come and gone. A second is now in play. (V. Venkatesan is a journalist and legal researcher.)

CACHE

# How States are managing the surging summer power demand

India's electricity demand has surged sharply, with peak demand touching an all-time high of 256.1 GW in April, making it harder for States to manage supply during high-demand hours and exposing them to costly short-term market purchases and stressed distribution networks

Rishu Garg

India's electricity demand has surged earlier than expected this year, with peak demand touching an all-time high of 256.1 gigawatts (GW) on April 25. (The country followed up with higher records on May 19 and May 20). Nearly one-third of this peak demand was met through renewable energy (RE) sources. While the national grid held up without any shortage during solar hours, the non-solar hours saw a deficit of 2% (4,243 megawatts) on the same day.

### What is peak demand?

Peak demand refers to the highest point of electrical power consumed on a grid over a specific period, typically a 15-minute interval. While peak demand is a single instant, it occurs during 2 to 4 hours of higher-than-average demand or 'peak demand period'. Summer months may cause longer peaks from late afternoon to evening hours and then during the night due to cooling loads (from air conditioners and coolers). Similarly, winter peaks can last longer in the morning (between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m.) and evening (between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m.) due to increased heating and lighting loads during these hours, particularly in the northern States.

Paying heed to the duration of these peaks is important because even though they occur only for a short period, the grid needs to meet the peak load instantly. In fact, the entire power sector infrastructure (generation, transmission, and distribution capacity) needs to be planned to deal with this peak. But this is easier said than done. Building a system to serve the periods of highest load that last only for a few hours is neither resource-efficient nor economical. If enough capacity is built to meet the peak demand, it will remain underutilised during off-peak hours. On the other hand, if enough capacity is not available to meet the peak demand, then the system will face issues like load shedding and grid instability.

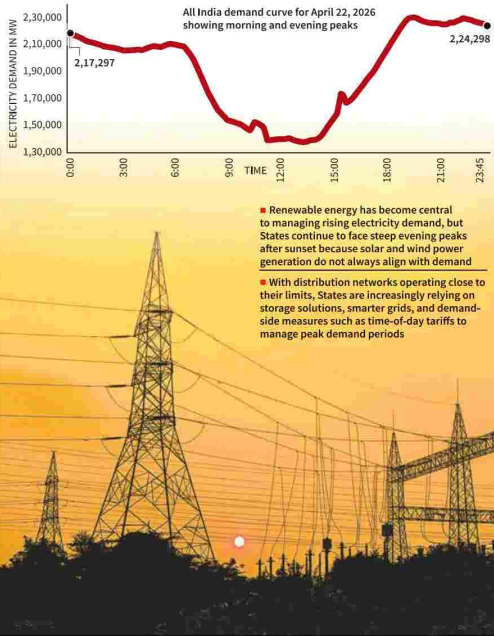
### How do States manage demand?

States meet demand through two mechanisms: contractual supply and power exchange purchases. Contractual supply comprises the long-term power purchase agreements (PPAs) that State distribution companies (DISCOMs) sign with power generators to ensure power supply over several years. This helps the DISCOMs in meeting the average demand for their consumers. Almost 85%-90% of the demand in India is being met through contractual supply or bilateral contracts between the DISCOMs and generators. In the event of real-time mismatches or when the contractual supply falls short due to sudden spikes in demand or power plant or transmission failures, DISCOMs turn to the second mechanism - buying power from power exchanges. At present, around 10%-15% of the electricity is traded on the power exchanges.

For managing peaks, States often undertake demand-side measures. Most States have relied on advisories urging consumers to reduce usage during peak hours, typically between 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. Delhi has increasingly utilised measures such as time-of-day tariffs

## Stress on the grid

While renewable energy helps States meet daytime demand, steep evening peaks during non-solar hours continue to strain grids and increase dependence on short-term market purchases



(electricity charges that vary based on the time of day) and smart metering to flatten evening peaks that are driven by cooling demand.

### What are some challenges faced by States due to rising demand?

A steady growth in household electrification, use of air conditioners, electric vehicle penetration, and agricultural power consumption has been driving the increase in India's electricity demand. In the last 5 years, the country's peak demand has risen by 37% - from 183 GW in December 2020 to over 250 GW in April 2026. This surge has made it tougher for States to fulfil the electricity requirements.

With DISCOMs committed to long-term agreements that are signed at a fixed capacity and price, any shortfall has to be met through power exchanges, which are short-term markets. This exposes the States to price volatility because prices in these markets increase during peak periods. Indian Energy Exchange data shows that electricity prices in the day-ahead market have seen sharp spikes during peak periods, with rates touching the regulatory ceiling of ₹ 10 per kilowatt-hour on several occasions during April and May this year.

Another challenge relates to the inadequacy of the distribution network. Infrastructure expansion and upgrades in

India's power distribution segment often lag demand growth, leading to issues with last-mile delivery of power to the end-consumer. Over the last decade, India's generation capacity has increased by 76% (from 303 GW to 532 GW), its transmission lines have expanded by 47% (from 3,41,551 circuit kilometres [ckm] to 5,01,766 ckm), and the transformation capacity has increased by 115% (from 6,58,949 megavolt-amperes [MVA] to 1,41,63,76 MVA). However, a corresponding expansion in the distribution infrastructure has not happened, and distribution networks continue to face major stress. Recent assessments by the Central Electricity Authority indicate that nearly 13 lakh distribution transformers (DTs) fail annually in India. Some States have low DT failure rates of less than 2%, such as Kerala, while some (particularly the northern States) experience DT failure rates as high as 20%. Further, overloading of transformers and feeders, ageing equipment, and inadequate maintenance continue to compromise last-mile power delivery. Many States experience local outages, especially during peak demand periods, highlighting that their distribution networks are operating close to their limits and need upgradation.

The challenge posed by demand surges becomes acute for financially stressed States because they are neither able to

procure costly short-term power nor invest in distribution network upgrades. States like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar continue to grapple with high losses, ageing distribution infrastructure, and overloaded transformers.

### How does RE help?

RE has become central to the management of rising electricity demand, particularly during summer peak periods. Since solar and wind power plants have low operating costs, higher RE penetration can also reduce overall power purchase costs for DISCOMs.

States with high RE capacity, such as Gujarat and Karnataka, are able to meet daytime peak comfortably as the solar power generation aligns reasonably well with daytime commercial and agricultural demand. But these States face steep evening peaks after sunset, for which they need to increasingly depend on energy storage technologies such as pumped hydro storage (PHS) and battery energy storage systems (BESS). Similarly, Tamil Nadu, with a high wind capacity, benefits significantly from wind generation during the monsoon months, reducing dependence on thermal power. But the State has to resort to market purchases during periods of low wind output to meet the high evening urban demand.

However, Punjab, which has a meagre RE capacity and a dominant agricultural load during the paddy-sowing season that coincides with the summer peak, has to rely heavily on hydro imports and short-term market purchases.

### What needs to be done?

Despite its growing contribution, RE cannot help in ensuring a reliable round-the-clock power supply because of its variable nature. Also, electricity demand and RE power generation do not always align. Solar power generation falls sharply after sunset, though electricity demand often remains high during evening hours. Similarly, wind generation is seasonal and highly dependent on monsoon conditions. Because of this, States now face the challenge of managing variability and steep evening demand.

This is where energy storage technologies like BESS and PHS that enhance flexibility become critical for India's power system, as they help to balance the grid when the output (power) generated by RE changes suddenly. PHS is already emerging as a key solution in States like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. At the same time, the grid itself needs to become smarter and more flexible through stronger transmission networks, upgraded distribution systems, and energy efficiency initiatives.

With Indian States witnessing more peak demand periods, the challenge is shifting from simply generating more electricity to building a system capable of managing power efficiently across regions and time periods. This calls for substantial investments in storage solutions, along with adopting more demand-side measures like ToD tariffs and agricultural load scheduling. (Rishu Garg is a senior policy specialist in the Energy Policy and Regulations group at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP), a research-based think tank)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of the idiom "to bring home the bacon"? (S. Madhusudan, Tiruchy) (T.N.)

Bacon is the salted or smoked meat that comes from the back or sides of a pig. Bacon and eggs is a popular American breakfast. When someone "brings home the bacon", he or she is providing food for the family. What do you need in order to buy food? Money, of course! When you say that someone "brings home the bacon", it means that he or she has a job and is earning a salary. He or she is the breadwinner.

"Bhaskar is married, but it's his wife who brings home the bacon."

In the old days, weekly and monthly fairs were very common in villages. On these occasions, farmers used to bring vegetables, meat, cattle, sheep, etc. and sell them at the market place. As a form of entertainment, a well-greased pig was let loose in the market. Any man or woman catching the pig could claim it as his/her prize. Since the animal had grease all over it, it was very slippery and hence very difficult to catch. But the person catching it could take it home. The man or woman catching the pig was literally bringing home the bacon! Nowadays, of course, you don't bring pigs home, instead you provide food for the family by bringing home a salary. But things haven't changed all that much. These days in order to "bring home the bacon", you often have to grease someone's palm!

Why do we call the spare tire that we carry in our car a "stepney"? (N. Chandramouli, Hosur, Karnataka)

Although this word is quite common in India, hardly anyone uses it in Britain. The Americans, of course, have never used it. The word is not included in most dictionaries! What we call a "stepney", native speakers of English refer to as a "spare". In America, the spare wheel is much smaller than the normal wheel.

Where did the word "stepney" come from? Well, actually, the word "stepney" is the name of a street in Wales. A mechanic in the street of Stepney in the town of Llanelly, was the first to provide the ready to use spare wheels. And the product, namely the spare wheels, began to be referred to by the name of the street where they were produced.

What is the difference between "in the end" and "at the end"? (T. Sandhya, Hyderabad)

"In the end" means "finally". It is normally used when you want to give the impression that a conclusion was arrived at after a lot of confusion or uncertainty. For example:

"In the end, the hero runs away with all the money."

"At the end", on the other hand, means at the point when something stops. Here we are thinking of a single event, and not a series of events. Take for example, the following sentence. "At the end of the song, the hero jumps into the river." The single event that we are thinking of here is the end of the song. When we say, "in the end", what we have in mind is a sequence of events, not just one event. You cannot say "In the end of the song." Here are a few more examples.

"At the end of the third day, the little boy ran away."

"In the end, the little boy runs away." It is wrong to say "in the end of." It always has to be "at the end of".

Published in *The Hindu* on September 19, 2000

## THE DAILY QUIZ

Here is a quiz on how Ebola infects, spreads, and survives

Vasudevan Mukunth

### QUESTION 1

Filoviruses come in five (known) genera. The two most famous are Ebola and \_\_\_\_\_. Their natural reservoir is almost certainly fruit bats of the Pteropodidae family of fruit bats, which are able to carry the virus without getting sick. Fill in the blank.

### QUESTION 2

The Ebola virus does not directly destroy tissue. Instead, it infects macrophages and dendritic cells early. This prompts the immune system to release a deluge of proteins called \_\_\_\_\_, which encourage inflammation and damage the vascular endothelium. Fill in the blank.

### QUESTION 3

The Ebola virus has a protein called VP30 that mimics X, which is a kind of RNA that the immune system's sensors

have learnt to recognise as a sign of infection. However, VP35 binds to them in such a way that they're occupied but not activated, and they can't "trigger" the immune system's defence. What is X?

### QUESTION 4

The Ebola virus can persist in immune-privileged sites in the body long after it has been cleared from the blood. These include the eyes' \_\_\_\_\_ and the central nervous system. Fill in the blanks.

### QUESTION 5

The Ebola virus first latches onto proteins on the cell surface. Then the cell swallows it whole, enclosing it in a bubble called a Y. Inside the Y, the cell's digestive enzymes accidentally help the virus by trimming part of its outer coat, revealing a hook that grabs on to a protein called NPC1. Then the virus fuses with the Y wall and gets into the cell proper. Name Y.



Questions and Answers of the previous day's daily quiz: 1. On this day in 1873, which clothing company's founders were granted a patent for trousers reinforced with rivets? **Ans: Levi Strauss**  
2. Which American actor born on this day is known for his roles in films 'You Can't Take It with You...', 'The Philadelphia Story...', among others? **Ans: James Stewart**  
3. This Asian country became independent on this day in 2002. On May 20, 2002, this became the first new sovereign state of the 21st century. **Ans: Timor-Leste**

### Visual Question:

Name this country. The disease is called Ebola virus disease, the virus is called Ebola virus, and the species label is "Q ebolavirus", where Q is the former name of this country.

4. This English philosopher and political economist conceived of liberty as justifying the freedom of the individual in opposition to unlimited state and social control. Who was he? **Ans: John Stuart Mill**  
5. This French novelist and playwright was born on this day in 1799. Who was he? **Ans: Honoré de Balzac**  
Visual: Identify this singer. **Ans: Chher Early Birds:** Soumendra Banerjee | Alok Kumar Giri | Sayandeep Das | Abhay Krishan | Yashica

Please send in your answers to [dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in](mailto:dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in)

## Word of the day

**Boffo:** resoundingly successful and popular

**Synonyms:** outstanding, triumphant, phenomenal

**Usage:** The singer made a boffo comeback this year.

**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/boffo

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /bofɔ:/

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

# Sperm whale 'clicks' have complex patterns similar to human speech

Researchers have revealed that sperm whales, which communicate using clicking sounds, also vary the sounds in ways that resemble how humans use vowels; these vocalisations show clear parallels with human phonology – the system of rules that organises sound patterns in human language

Anirban Mukhopadhyay  
NEW DELHI

**S**perm whales communicate using short sequences of clicks known as codas, which they exchange while coordinating within their groups. Scientists have long classified these sequences using the number of clicks and the timing between them.

A study published on April 15 in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* has however reported that there is more to it than meets the ears: the codas also vary in their acoustic structure in ways that resemble patterns found in human speech.

"Before this work, sperm whale vocalisations were often treated as a kind of Morse code – simply patterns defined mainly by timing," Casper Beguš, associate professor of linguistics at University of California, Berkeley, and senior author of the study, said. "What we are showing here is that there is another layer of structure within the clicks themselves."

## A learnt structure

Until now, classification relied on two measurable features: the number of clicks in a sequence and the spacing between them, known as inter-click intervals. These patterns produce distinct coda types. For example, a 1+1+3 coda consists of two clicks separated by pauses, followed by three clicks in rapid succession, while a 5R coda contains five evenly spaced clicks. Because different whale groups use different sets of these patterns, the system is unlikely to be entirely inborn. Instead, scientists think at least part of it is learnt within groups.

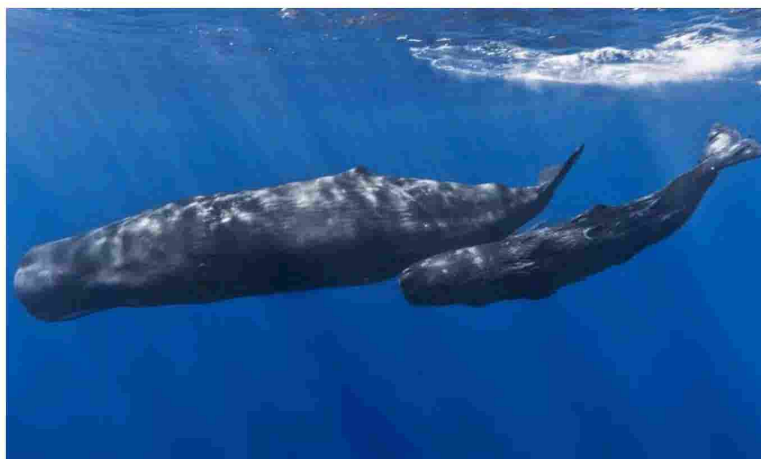
When the researchers broke each click down into its frequency components, they found that the sounds fall into two distinct categories: some have a single dominant frequency peak, while others have two. In human linguistics, such peaks are known as formants – the resonant frequencies that allow us to distinguish an "ah" sound from an "ee." Consequently, the authors label these whale categories "a" and "i." These two types are clearly distinct, and the same pattern of clicks – for example, a 1+1+3 coda – can be produced using either the "a" click or "i" click.

Calling it a "fascinating finding," Mason Youngblood, a behavioural scientist at Stony Brook University, said the study shows that sperm whale communication "varies not just in timing but also in tonal quality." In ways similar to human vowels, suggesting the "signals may be able to convey more information than previously thought."

## Two layers, then three

The two click types are not used in the same way across all codas. In some, such as the 1+1+3 pattern, both appear in roughly equal numbers. In others, one dominates, and in a few it is almost absent.

If click type were simply a side effect of sound production, this variation would be random. Instead, the patterns are consistent, suggesting that sperm whales control not just when they click, but also what kind of click they produce – treating timing and type as two separate features of their signals.



A sperm whale and her calf off the coast of Mauritius. Sperm whales communicate using short sequences of clicks known as codas. GABRIEL BARATHEU (CC BY-SA)

The researchers also identified several additional layers of variation in how codas are produced.

Codas in the two click types differ in length. Even when the pattern of spacing between clicks is the same, "a" codas are typically longer than "i" codas. In addition, the "i" category splits into two groups – some codas are short, while others are long – whereas the "a" category does not. This is similar to how the length of a sound can matter in human speech, where longer and shorter vowels can serve different functions.

They also found consistent differences between individual sperm whales. Even within the same coda pattern and click type, some whales produce longer sequences than others.

For example, the length of an "a" coda can differ by about 170 milliseconds between individuals. Despite this, "a" codas are still longer than "i" codas across all sperm whales, showing that while whales may sound different from one

There are clear similarities, but also important differences... The fundamentally rhythmic nature of sperm whale codas, for example, sets them apart from human speech

MASON YOUNGBLOOD  
Behavioural scientist,  
Stony Brook University

another, they follow the same underlying patterns.

Finally, they found that one coda can influence the next. Most codas consist of a single click type, but in a few cases, the first click is different from the rest – for example, a coda made up of "i"-type clicks may begin with a single "a"-type click. These mismatches occur most often when whales switch from one type of coda to another.

This suggests that the first click of a coda is affected by the coda that came before it, showing that codas are not

produced in isolation – the previous one can shape how the next begins.

## What it means, what we don't know

The results show that sperm whale vocalisations show clear parallels with human phonology – the system of rules that organises sound patterns in human language through combinations of discrete sound categories, timing, and position. Prof. Beguš, provides a hypothesis of convergent evolution playing out over grand timescales to explain the observations, "Humans and whales diverged tens of millions of years ago, but both evolved complex vocal systems that show striking structural parallels."

Dr. Youngblood added that the rich social and cultural lives of sperm whales relies heavily on communication within their family and clan groups. He believes this might support such a complexity in whale phonology. At the same time, he cautioned that one must not be quick to call it a language just yet. "There are clear similarities, but also important differences," Dr. Youngblood said. "The fundamentally rhythmic nature of sperm whale codas, for example, sets them apart from human speech."

What these patterns mean remains unknown. The study does not identify what information codas convey or whether different patterns correspond to specific contexts. What it does show is that sperm whale communication is built from multiple features that can vary independently and in relation to one another – a level of organisation that is uncommon in animal communication systems. "Determining whether these patterns map onto specific meanings will require much more work," said Dr. Youngblood. "I know these are the goals of Project CETI, and I'm really looking forward to seeing what comes next." (Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from New Delhi. [anirban.genetics@south.du.ac.in](mailto:anirban.genetics@south.du.ac.in))



The study also found consistent differences between individual sperm whales. Even within the same coda pattern and click type, some whales produce longer sequences than others. GETTY IMAGES



A nearly hollow piece of trinitite backlit to reveal how light flows through it. WEIRDMEISTER (CC BY-SA)

## New crystal found in the detritus of the first-ever nuclear blast

Vasudevan Mukunth

**O**n July 16, 1945, the U.S.'s 'Trinity' nuclear test in New Mexico changed history. The explosion released energy equivalent to 21,000 tons of TNT, vaporised a steel tower, and melted the surrounding desert sand into a glassy green crust called trinitite. Decades later, this mineral still holds secrets.

In a new study published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, scientists from the University of Firenze, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Carnegie Mellon University, and Princeton University have said they have found a rare, cage-like crystal – called a clathrate – in the trinitite.

The researchers, led by Luca Bindi and Paul Steinhardt, were motivated by the discovery in 2021 of a quasicrystal in red trinitite – a specific variety of the glass tinted by copper from the test tower's wiring. Quasicrystals have ordered but non-repeating atomic patterns that scientists once thought to be impossible in nature. Because both the quasicrystal and the newly discovered clathrate were found in similar copper-rich droplets, the team wanted to know if these two rare forms of matter could be related. In other words, they wanted to check if the extreme conditions in the nuclear blast could have been a natural laboratory that created materials impossible to synthesise using conventional laboratory methods.

To find the new crystal, the team examined a sample of red trinitite collected shortly after the 1945 test. They used high-resolution nano-CT scans to peer inside the glass, where they identified small droplets of metal.

They identified one promising candidate, a grain just 10µm across. Then they determined the arrangement of its atoms and its chemical makeup using advanced instruments. The team also used supercomputer simulations to test its stability and its potential relationship to other rare materials. This is how the team discovered a previously unknown calcium-copper-silicon crystal. They said it is a type-I clathrate, which is characterised by a framework of silicon atoms forming small cages that trap other elements inside.

This is the first time a clathrate has been identified among the solid-state products of a nuclear explosion. According to the study paper, the newfound crystal is metastable: meaning could only form under the extreme, fast-changing temperatures and pressures of the Trinity test – conditions reaching over 1,500 °C and pressures up to 8 gigapascals – and then frozen into place by cooling rapidly.

The researchers also checked whether the Trinity quasicrystal could have been derived from the clathrate structure. Their computer models showed that while a clathrate framework would indeed be stable with a small amount of copper, it would fall apart when the copper content reached the high levels found in the Trinity quasicrystal. In other words, the two materials formed in the same event but belong to separate structural families. Per the study, extreme environments can shape matter in ways that challenge scientists' understanding of chemistry and could pave the way for creating new synthetic materials that mimic these high-energy conditions.

The researchers wrote in the paper that their work, by ruling out a connection between clathrates and quasicrystals, also deepens the mystery of where and how complex, non-repeating can structures form in nature.

## THE SCIENCE QUIZ

### Conditions and diseases with animals names

Vasudevan Mukunth

#### QUESTION 1

\_\_\_\_\_ is the name of the condition that results when parasitic worms block the lymphatic system, causing fluid to accumulate in the limbs over years. The affected leg or arm can swell to enormous proportions while the skin can become quite thick and rough. Fill in the blank.

#### QUESTION 2

Medieval physicians who saw patients with the raw, ulcerated facial skin caused by X thought the wounds looked as though a wolf had been gnawing at the face. This condition attacks the body's own tissues and in some forms also produces a rash across the nose and cheeks. What is X?

#### QUESTION 3

In certain bone diseases, including Paget's disease, the bones of the face and skull

gradually become thicker and expand outward. The brow becomes heavy, the cheekbones more prominent, and the jaw becomes enlarged. What is this effect – like a coarsened mask physicians once thought bore an unsettling resemblance to a lion's face – called?

#### QUESTION 4

A stubborn variant of alopecia areata is a condition called Y – an autoimmune condition that causes patchy hair loss. But instead of appearing in random patches, the resulting baldness manifests in a continuous band around the back and sides of the scalp, following a serpentine path. Name the condition.

#### QUESTION 5

In people with a connective tissue disorder called Marfan syndrome, the fingers and toes tend to be unusually long, slender, and flexible. When the individual displays their fingers or toes, they look remarkably like spider legs. What is this condition called?



#### Answers to May 7 quiz:

- Measure of the number of atoms bonded to an atom – **Ans: Ligancy**
  - Force resulting from surface atoms lacking 'lacking' material on one side – **Ans: Surface tension**
  - High value of this attribute leads to Gibbs-Thomson effect – **Ans: Vapour pressure**
  - Collective oscillations of electrons in a material – **Ans: Plasmons**
  - Formation on surface that allows a material's surface to melt first – **Ans: Liquid film**
- Visual: **Pearlescence**

#### First contact:

K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Prem Nath Tiwari | Anmol Agrawal | Prem Raj P.

**Visual:** Name this condition, which gets its name from a common aquatic animal. The condition also played an important part in the Sherlock Holmes story *The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier*. CREDIT: GZZZ (CC BY-SA)

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in) with the subject: 'Daily page'

## Taking charge

EV charging stations should be vehicle-agnostic

In a recent development, Heavy Industries Minister HD Kumaraswamy cleared proposals for installing over 1,200 EV charging stations in Karnataka under the PM E-DRIVE, the tenure of which has recently been extended by two years. The PM E-DRIVE scheme, which initially ran for about a year and a half till March 2026, had aimed to set up 22,100 fast chargers for 4Ws, 1,800 for buses and 48,400 for e-2Ws and e-3Ws. The Centre recently said that there were 29,000 charging stations in the country — which suggests the need for expansion.



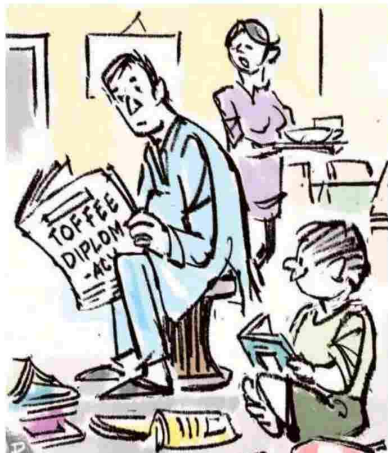
The current crude oil crisis underscores the importance of this push. EV demand hinges on availability of charging facilities and batteries for short and long distance travel. A couple of issues here need to be taken into consideration: compatibility between charging facilities, batteries and EVs; and the need to ensure that private charging facilities run by EV majors do not privilege their products over the rest. Most large OEMs have converged on the CCS-2 standard, the global norm for EV charging. Yet, digital fragmentation persists as some private operators mandate proprietary apps and pre-funded wallets to lock in loyalty — an inconvenience to consumers. Conversely, the two-wheeler industry is cleaved between two dominant, non-interoperable physical charging standards — the Type 6 and Type 7. Even if a vehicle happens to be physically compatible with a station's hardware, lacking the corresponding app negates the impact. In this context, an app-based approach to discovering charging stations, booking slots and paying for charging your vehicles around the public sector OMC network is a useful step forward. However, standardising the physical layer — the interface where the charging gun couples with the vehicle — remains a critical need.

Last year, the Centre mandated Type C chargers for new mobile phones sold, to curb electronic waste. Motorists pulling in for liquid fuel can use any petrol pump. EVs should likewise be agnostic to the charging stations. The retail user has so far tolerated inconveniences by charging overnight at home. For EVs to take off, charging stations available within a three-km radius inside cities is the way to go. Notably, public sector oil marketing companies have about one lakh outlets. They have created 11,000 charging stations, but there is scope to improve on this tally. This is crucial for EV adoption.

Globally, a 5 per cent EV market share marks an inflection point for exponential EV adoption. In India, passenger EV sales have breached 5 per cent in recent months; two-wheelers are nudging 6.5 per cent. To ensure that EVs remain in vogue even in the event of crude prices softening, the infrastructure push should be sustained. To be sure, charging infrastructure for long distance travel has improved. With rapid DC fast-charging, a mere 15-minute top-up can elevate a battery from 30 per cent to 80 per cent. In addition, solar-powered charging stations will drive home the energy advantage.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"For a couple of days, please don't ask him what he wants to become when he grows up!"



PRITAM BANERJEE

For the first half of the 20th century, the banks of the Hooghly River served as one of major industrial heartlands of Asia.

Stretching nearly 100 km, this vibrant corridor was a metallurgical and engineering powerhouse that provided the inspiration for Japan's burgeoning industries.

Today, that legacy is a distant memory. A region that once defined economies of scale and sophistication in Asian manufacturing now accounts for less than 6 per cent of India's metallurgical output. Decades of industrial decline, rooted in the anti-industry political culture of Bengal starting in the 1970s, and exacerbated by five decades of misgovernance by the Left and Trinamool governments, have led to widespread factory closures and capital flight.

Despite this stagnation, the region retains an immense, untapped potential for a renaissance. To realise this, the West Bengal government must implement a dedicated package specifically tailored to the Greater Kolkata region, focusing on its comparative advantages in metallurgy and the burgeoning sector of Global Capability Centres (GCCs). Here are some ideas how.

## METALLURGY, A GLOBAL HUB

The Greater Kolkata region still hosts a specialised ecosystem of approximately 3,000 registered metallurgical units, including a core of 320-500 foundries. This MSME-driven landscape possesses a niche expertise that can return Bengal to the centre of the global supply chain for advanced industrial materials and metalworking.

However, this cannot be achieved through cosmetic efforts involving minor subsidies or development of small-scale industrial parks that characterized the approach of previous state governments.

We must "dream big", with ambitious, seemingly outlandish targets. The goal should be achieving an industrial output exceeding \$50 billion and exports of \$25 billion within a decade, while creating one million direct and ancillary jobs. This is a realistic goal if we leverage the region's proximity to the mineral-rich belts of Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh.

Furthermore, the State should collaborate with the Centre to develop a customised PLI (Production Linked Incentive) scheme for metalworking, metallurgy and advanced materials industries going beyond the existing PLI for specialty steel, which specifically designed to allow small and



## Industrial vision for the Greater Kolkata Region

**ECONOMIC AGENDA.** The existing metallurgical units can be turned into a global hub through a PLI scheme, brownfield expansion, and tapping port potential

medium-sized industries to benefit from.

## BROWNFIELD DEVELOPMENT

The cornerstone of this revival must be brownfield development. Rather than relying solely on greenfield projects that face significant land acquisition hurdles, the focus should shift to revitalising "sick units" or those under litigation through a specialised Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) scheme. Here are the advantages of brownfield retrofitting.

**Reduced lead times:** Setting up in a brownfield zone can help units becoming operational within 6 to 12 months, compared to the 24 to 48 months required for greenfield clearances and construction.

**Capex efficiency:** Retrofitting typically reduces capital expenditure by 25-30 per cent.

**Policy alignment:** The Centre's Bharat Audyogik Vikas Yojana (BHAVYA) scheme explicitly supports

Rather than relying solely on greenfield projects, the focus should shift to revitalising "sick units" or those under litigation through a specialised Special Purpose Vehicle scheme

infrastructure modernisation for brownfield projects, serving as a significant force multiplier. Complementing state government resources to support Kolkata's revival.

## PORT POWER

The Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port can be a primary catalyst for this industrial transformation. As Kolkata's largest landholder, the port authority controls approximately 11,000 acres — a land bank that offers significantly cheaper real estate than competitor hubs like Mumbai, Pune, or Chennai.

**Greenfield potential:** Lands near the Haldia dock system are uniquely suited for large-scale manufacturing and attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

**The GCC revolution:** Land parcels within 5-8 km of Kolkata's central business district are ideal for commercial GCC facilities. While the initial IT revolution bypassed the city, Kolkata's high-skilled manpower and lower operating costs make it the logical "next stop" for India's services export revolution.

**Self-sustaining finance:** By utilising SPVs, revenues from these lands can be reinvested into commercial assets that help finance port operations and industrial development of port held lands over the longer-run.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The primary barrier to replicating a

London or Hamburg Docklands style revitalisation is a lack of political will to confront the "dockland mafia". Illegal occupations and the influence of political strongmen have deterred legitimate investment for decades. The port has failed to reach its potential because previous State administrations refused to support federal initiatives.

A comprehensive, courageous plan for urban and industrial revival would resonate with a middle class desperate for economic opportunity.

By aligning the port's development with a clear industrial roadmap, the government can replace a culture of litigation and stagnation with one of growth and entrepreneurship.

Renaming the port after Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee was a symbolic beginning. The true tribute to his legacy lies in reclaiming the economic pride of the city he defended. Transforming the Kolkata corridor into a global economic hub for advanced metallurgy and metalworking should be treated as Bengal's strategic industrial imperative.

Bengal under the new BJP led government must move beyond "small potatoes" thinking and implement a large-scale "Kolkata region" industrial plan that restores this region to its rightful place among the world's great economic clusters.

The writer is Head, Centre for WTO Studies, Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT). Views expressed are personal

## Why credit guarantees don't help a range of MSMEs

Bankers are hard-wired into overlooking enterprises that are too large for MUDRA, and yet unfamiliar with banking systems

Srinivas Ramanujam  
Meera Siva

In March, the government launched CGSMFI-2.0 — a ₹20,000-crore credit guarantee scheme for microfinance institutions. The sector was in genuine distress: bank lending had contracted 8.5 per cent in the first half of FY2026, credit costs had surged to 15.5 per cent, and smaller MFIs were being frozen out.

The scheme was necessary but not sufficient.

This pattern, repeated across sectors, reveals a structural problem. When banks are offered a sovereign guarantee, they do not suddenly lend to the most excluded. Credit flows to larger, better-rated institutions which are already closest to being fundable. A guarantee does not change a lender's read of the borrower but only changes the cost of being wrong. And if the lender cannot read the borrower at all, the guarantee changes nothing.

## LOST MSME DECADE

Similar dynamics have been at play in MSME lending at a larger scale. The MSME credit gap stands at ₹20-25 lakh crore and has not materially shifted in a decade, despite successive guarantee schemes starting with CGTMSE, established in 2000.

After a decade of voluntary participation and modest uptake, RBI made collateral-free lending mandatory for MSE loans up to ₹10 lakh in 2010. In the same breath, it urged that compliance be made a branch staff performance criterion — an early signal the mandate was already being ignored. Industry bodies later documented banks nudging borrowers to waive their CGTMSE cover so loans could be processed with collateral instead.

In February, the RBI raised that ceiling to ₹20 lakh. Inflation-indexing a broken compass does not show you the true North.

The aggregate evidence is damning. Only 14 per cent of MSMEs access formal credit; nearly 80 per cent remain self-financed or rely on moneylenders. CGTMSE's data show 93 per cent of its guarantees are for loans below ₹10 lakh — the segment banks were already mandated to serve. The enterprises that genuinely stall — too large for MUDRA, too unfamiliar for commercial banks, sitting between ₹20 lakh and ₹1 crore — remain unserved.

And the lender's reluctance cannot even be explained by default risk: gross NPAs in the MSE segment stood at under 4 per cent as of March 2024, down from over 9 per cent in 2022. Risk perception and risk reality are disconnected.



CREDIT. Helping the small player

they can present themselves effectively. Together, these build the track record that eventually makes the guarantee unnecessary — provided guarantee institutions, development finance bodies, and enterprise support organisations work in concert rather than in silos.

We have seen this work. An agri-tech enterprise serving smallholder farmers — the kind that commercial lenders routinely decline — received a guarantee-backed loan of ₹25 lakh paired with structured technical support. Within six months it graduated to a loan without a guarantee. Within four years of that first loan, it listed on the BSE SME Exchange. That listing represented over 50,000 smallholder farmers with higher incomes. It followed from the guarantee structure opening the door, technical assistance building the path, and an enterprise that learned to stand on its own.

The MFI guarantee scheme launched in March will provide necessary liquidity support to some institutions in the short term. The MSME amendments in February are steps in the right direction. But if the pattern holds, the credit gap will look much the same two years or even two decades from now.

Ramanujam is CEO, Vilgro Innovation Foundation, and Siva is CEO, Individe Impact Foundation. Both work on enterprise finance and innovation in India

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## Redesigning MBA

This refers to the article "Short-term vision" (May 20). It is rightly stressed that MBA education in India should not be a copy of what is taught in developed countries. The curriculum for MBA should maintain required balance in teaching production, finance and human resource management along with latest technology. Besides, MBA programmes should train both job-seekers and job creators. For this the success story of start-ups and their failure as well

tells that learning entrepreneurship attributes is different from learning to run enterprises. As such MBA programmes could be run as two streams. Indian industry needs both.

## YJ Chouksey

Pune

## Creating entrepreneurs

It refers to "Short term biz vision". Uday Kotak has hit the nail on its head. Tata, Birlas, Hindujas, Godrejs all of them have created solid businesses and empires which have stood the test of time. Today's start-ups need to ask

themselves how many of them see their companies doing sustainable business even after 2-3 decades. Chasing valuation should not be the sole objective of our start-ups. MBA curriculum also needs to be overhauled go under an overhaul. MBA colleges should produce real entrepreneurs who can create something innovative and sustainable. For that to happen the government must increase their focus and budgetary support on R&D.

Bal Govind  
Noida

## Fuel price hike prices

Appropriately, diesel prices raised by 90 paise per litre (May 20). Fuel price hikes, even in small increments like 90 paise per litre, create disproportionate disruptions. Petrol pumps are forced to recalibrate meters repeatedly, adding operational costs and inconvenience. Opposition parties seize the moment, staging protests, amplifying public frustration. Dealers, anticipating further hikes, often resort to manipulative tactics — putting up "No Stock" boards

despite having fuel, to profit from the next increase. This erodes consumer trust and sparks unnecessary panic. Frequent minor revisions also blur transparency, making citizens feel cheated rather than informed. Instead of incremental tinkering, a more predictable and rational pricing mechanism is needed. Stability in fuel pricing reduces administrative hassles, ensures fairness and curbs political and social unrest.

Os Prasad Rao  
Hyderabad

# Test of rupee resilience

RBI has done a good job in tough times

Manas Paul

The rupee has been slipping to fresh lows across successive trading sessions, pushing India's external-sector vulnerabilities back into focus. Concerns around oil prices, capital outflows, and global financial tightening are once again shaping market sentiment. How serious are the pressures building around India's external sector?

The Dollar Index, which measures the strength of the US dollar against major global currencies, remained elevated around 99.3-99.4 on May 18, after hovering near 98 earlier in the week. Higher US Treasury yields, geopolitical tensions in West Asia, and investor preference for safer dollar assets have all strengthened the dollar's appeal.

Whenever the dollar rises sharply, emerging-market currencies are usually the first to come under pressure. For India, the challenge becomes sharper because of the economy's dependence on imported energy.

That combination — a stronger dollar and higher oil prices — creates a difficult economic environment. Import costs rise, demand for dollars increases, and pressure on the rupee intensifies. The impact is visible in trade data. India's merchandise exports in April 2026 stood at \$43.56 billion, while imports climbed to \$71.94 billion, leaving a merchandise trade deficit of roughly \$28.38 billion for the month.

At the same time, capital flows have turned more volatile. Higher US interest rates and global uncertainty have encouraged investors to move money towards dollar-denominated assets and AI trade-driven equity markets of Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Between March and May 2026, foreign portfolio investors reportedly withdrew more than \$23 billion from Indian equity and debt markets. Such outflows add to the rupee weakness.

## WHERE INDIA DIVERGES

Taken together, these developments resemble the pressures that have destabilised several emerging economies in the past. Yet this is also where the Indian story begins to diverge from that of crisis economies such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Argentina. India's vulnerabilities are real, but so are its buffers. The country continues to hold one of the world's largest foreign-exchange reserve cushions, with RBI reserves hovering around \$700 billion.



COMFORTABLE. Forex reserve cushion eases

Those reserves give policymakers room to intervene when markets become disorderly and reassure investors that India can continue meeting its external obligations even during turbulence.

Equally important is the way India manages its exchange rate. Unlike economies that rigidly defend fixed currency values, India operates under a managed-float regime. The rupee is allowed to depreciate gradually, while the RBI intervenes mainly to prevent disorderly market conditions. That flexibility matters because many currency crises become severe when governments exhaust reserves defending exchange rates, and markets no longer trust them.

The current episode also reflects the classic "impossible trinity" in international economics — the idea that no country can simultaneously maintain a fixed exchange rate, free capital flows, and an independent monetary policy. India wants monetary policy flexibility to manage inflation and growth while remaining integrated with global capital markets. As a result, some of the pressure is inevitably absorbed through the exchange rate itself.

The RBI, meanwhile, has moved beyond direct intervention alone. It has reportedly tightened daily limits on Net Open Positions in the onshore currency market and imposed restrictions on authorised dealers in the NDF market to curb arbitrage loopholes. Policymakers also retain the option of routing oil-marketing companies outside the spot FX market, reviving special FCNR (B) deposit schemes, and expanding rupee-based international trade settlements. These measures underline the adaptability of India's central bank, which has historically shown considerable innovation during periods of external stress.

The writer is Professor & Chairperson, Economics & Sustainability Area, IIT Ghaziabad

# Minimum export price on agri items will lift forex coffers

REVENUE PUSH. India should emulate Malaysia and Indonesia. They impose an export tax on crude palm oil to ensure value addition. Basmati export would benefit



S CHANDRASEKARAN SUBRAMAN RA MANCOMBU

On May 11, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged Indian citizens to conserve precious foreign exchange in view of the West Asian crisis. Since then, the government has come up with a slew of measures, more than doubling the import duty on precious metals, hiking prices of fossil fuels and imposing curbs on silver imports.

These measures will go a long way in cutting foreign exchange (forex) outgo. However, the government should have looked at increasing forex earnings, particularly on the agricultural commodities export front. Concerned over surging retail prices of sugar, it has banned the export of the commodity.

India's exports increased by 4.22 per cent to \$860.09 billion in the 2025-26 financial year, while imports grew even faster by 6.47 per cent to \$970 billion, resulting in a widening of the overall trade deficit.

## THE CASE OF BASMATI

The government should try to increase the realisation of products in which it enjoys a premium or is among the top exporters of the commodity. For example, basmati rice enjoys a premium in the global market. However, its unit value realisation declined to \$868 a tonne during the April-February period of the 2025-26 fiscal.

It is an 11 per cent decline from the \$980 realised in the 2024-25 fiscal. In 2023-24, the unit value realisation was \$1,114 a tonne.

The volume of basmati exports was higher in 2025-26 (April-February) compared with the previous fiscal, but the value of shipments was lower by over \$650 million.

With the support of the Geographical

## Export tax playbook, the world over

Country	Primary Products Taxed	Primary Motive
Argentina	Soybeans, soy meal, soy oil, corn, wheat, and milling products	Revenue generation and keeping domestic food prices down
China	Rare earth elements, critical minerals, fertilizers, and metal scrap	Retaining raw materials for high-tech domestic manufacturing
Indonesia	Crude palm oil, unrefined mineral ores (like nickel and bauxite)	Forcing "downstream" domestic processing and refining
Russia	Crude oil, natural gas, timber, and certain grains	Protecting domestic supply and capturing resource windfall revenue
Vietnam	Raw minerals, scrap metals, and specific timber products	Keeping raw materials available for local industries

Indication status, the government should have tried to get better returns. Exports of basmati rice have increased from 7.7 lakh tonnes (Tt) in 2003-04 to over 60 Tt in 2024-25. Yet in real terms, taking into consideration inflation and rising input costs, per unit realisations have been negative.

India enjoys nearly 65 per cent share of the global basmati rice trade. Why has the government not considered fixing a minimum export price (MEP) or levying export duty? At least, it should recover \$250 an acre spent on subsidies to provide fertilizers and power used for irrigating the land.

Similarly, the per unit realisation on non-basmati rice during the April-February period dropped by 15 per cent to \$393 a tonne. Though exports nearly matched the previous fiscal's volume, the value was lower by over \$1 billion.

In the non-basmati rice segment, India enjoys over a 40 per cent market

share in global trade. In the parboiled sector, India almost enjoys a monopoly, with Pakistan and Thailand trailing far behind. Notwithstanding these facts, Indian rice continues to trade at a discount compared to other countries.

Basmati and non-basmati rice exports fetch over \$12 billion annually. Shouldn't the government try to increase it at least by an additional couple of billions without hurting their prospects in the global market?

## LESSONS FROM ABROAD

India should take a leaf out of Malaysia and Indonesia, the largest exporters of palm oil. Both nations impose an export tax on crude palm oil to ensure value addition is done and the commodity is exported as refined and bleached palm oil.

Many African countries use export taxes to encourage domestic processing. For example, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire impose levies on raw cocoa beans. They have adopted the same measure to encourage raw cashew nut processing. Kenya and Uganda use such measures on raw coffee.

After a long time, demand for guar gum has surged in the global market in view of soaring crude oil prices. With crude oil prices near \$100 a barrel, investors are looking to take advantage by looking for higher extraction. However, its per unit value of exports is down by \$145 a tonne.

The government has cut the MEP on natural honey when it could have got additional revenue. It is here that the Commerce Ministry's role assumes significance.

## Export realisation (in \$ per tonne)

Commodity	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26 (Apr-Feb)
Basmati rice	1,114	980	868
Non-Basmati rice	411	462	393
Pulses	1,096	1,078	971
Processed vegetables	1,465	1,459	1,282
Other fresh fruits	511	506	489
Processed fruits, juices	1,356	1,395	1,265
Guar gum	1,297	1,294	1,149
Onions*	276	396	260
Gherkins, cucumbers	1,051	1,059	987
Natural honey	1,644	2,049	1,838

\*Per unit value down despite the government scrapping 20% export duty

When crude oil prices have soared, shouldn't the government have acted to milk its best from this export?

Natural honey is another example. The government has cut the MEP when it could have got additional revenue. It is here that the Commerce Ministry's role assumes significance. As the nodal ministry for exports and imports, its officials should look not only at cutting the forex outgo but also at increasing its income. It should look at various ways of earning more from products in which India enjoys an advantage in the global market.

Apart from rice and other products mentioned above, India can also look at buffalo meat, pulses, processed vegetables, fresh fruits, honey, mango pulp, processed meat, organic products, cashew nuts, spices and poultry products to raise additional forex income.

Chandrasekaran is the author of 'Basmati Rice: The Natural History Geographical Indication'

## thehindu businessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 21, 2006

#### No plan to re-introduce long-term capital gains tax

The Government has no intention to re-introduce long-term capital gains tax on securities traded in recognised stock exchanges, according to the Finance Minister, Mr P Chidambaram. He also ruled out any unilateral revision to the double taxation avoidance agreement (DTAA) with Mauritius. With the Sensex falling more than 1,300 points in the last two trading sessions, the CPI (M) had demanded re-introduction of LTCG tax and review of the DTAA with Mauritius.

#### TN, UP may introduce VAT soon: Shome

Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Pondicherry are expected to introduce value-added tax (VAT) soon, Dr Parthasarathi Shome, Advisor to Union Finance Minister, said here on Saturday. He said adoption of VAT by all States would be completed soon.

#### Bandra-Worli sea link to be ready by 2008

The Bandra-Worli sea link is expected to be ready by 2008. Over 30 per cent of the work on the 6.5-km bridge has been completed. The bridge will reduce the travel time from Bandra to Worli by at least 30 minutes. The 10-km distance by road now takes 45 minutes to an hour during peak hour traffic.

# China spending cut comes as a surprise

Bloomberg News

China scaled back government spending at its fastest pace in six months in April, a move that contributed to an unexpected slowdown in the economy across the board.

A broad measure of public expenditure fell 7.3 per cent from a year ago, accelerating from the 2.5 per cent decrease in March to mark its sharpest decline since October, according to Bloomberg calculations based on Ministry of Fin-

ance data released Wednesday. By contrast, broad fiscal revenue rose 2 per cent.

The data helps explain a surprising contraction in fixed-asset investment that China recorded in April, which followed a rebound earlier this year. Combined with sluggish consumer spending, the investment downturn outweighed booming exports, dragging down overall economic activity.

Economists have pointed to several reasons for the fiscal pullback. Solid economic growth in the first quarter may have reduced the impetus for authorities to step up spending. Others noted a potential funding gap in April, as some construction projects were moved from late 2025 to early 2026 while new projects had yet to receive approval.

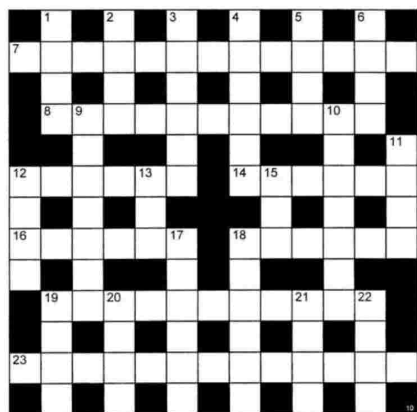
Officials may also have faced pressure to repay arrears to companies. Infrastructure-related expenditure under China's main budget plunged 17.7 per cent in April from a year earlier, worsening from the

8.5 per cent drop in March, according to Bloomberg calculations.

China will likely increase infrastructure spending to shore up growth. Some economists estimate that China's economic expansion slowed to roughly 4 per cent in April, tracking below the government's official full-year target of 4.5 per cent to 5 per cent.

In April, the Communist Party's decision-making Politburo pledged to accelerate the construction of infrastructure networks.

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2684



### EASY

#### ACROSS

7. Consisting of several kinds (13)
8. Formidable, valiant (11)
12. Loose fragments of ruined building (6)
14. Forest, park officer (6)
16. Tooth decay (6)
18. Gash, cripple; frustrate, quash (6)
19. One partaking of Holy Communion (11)
23. Mode of articulating words (13)

#### DOWN

1. Jetty, wharf (4)
2. Sour, biting (4)
3. Article, part of contract (6)
4. Pancake mixture (6)
5. Flavouring plant (4)
6. Train of combustible material (4)
9. Prohibition, ban (7)
10. Get lighter (7)
11. Accomplished, pre-eminent (4)
12. Seaside sweetmeat (4)
13. Untruth (3)
15. Discharge of electricity across gap (3)
17. Strabismus (6)
18. Ghost (6)
19. Middle of apple (4)
20. Member of religious community (4)
21. Divisions of play (4)
22. System of weights for precious stones etc (4)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

7. Of the different sorts of muscles one might all with (13)
8. Valiant to be a rebel, but do the twist (11)
12. Building debris from British Rail turning blue (6)
14. Forest officer who telephoned King Edward (6)
16. One minds about dental decay (6)
18. 18 Down will frustrate one's plans (6)
19. One receiving the host, comic man nut turns to (11)
23. The way one says it can ruin caption on resetting it (13)

#### DOWN

2. The wharf is ripe for redevelopment (4)
3. Something that bites will help if it contains carbon (4)
4. Part of the sentence Santa gets on 7th December (6)
5. Knock one about with coating cook uses (6)
6. Mother Beeton kept something for flavouring (4)
9. In an iron, an American safety device (4)
10. Trade stoppage when amber turns to green light (7)
11. Remove some of the load to make things brighter (7)
15. 15 finally aspired an archaic abbreviation (4)
16. Sort of music suitable for a cradle-song? (4)
17. It isn't true it's the position golfer must play ball from (3)
18. From where Joan didn't come full-circle (3)
19. An oblique look to one of five children in the street (6)
20. One in the wrong strip for an angel (6)
21. Remove middle of apple in picnic or entertainment (4)
22. A brother Scotsman starting to keen (4)
23. Those of the Apostles that make up play (4)
22. It gives some weight to Conservative confusion (4)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2683

ACROSS 1. Pleasurable 7. Rebound 9. Over 11. Burst 12. Follow 14. Flourishing 18. Taught 20. Toxic 22. Rate 23. Succour 24. Waywardness  
DOWN 2. Liberal 3. Undo 4. Level 5. Tribe 6. Drawl 8. Untruths 10. Pathetic 13. Pit 15. Noxious 16. Storm 17. Scarf 19. Ultra 21. User

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY -

RAMNATH GOENKA

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

### Europe's shift to centre of Delhi's frame is welcome

**P**RIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's trip to the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and Italy underscores how far India's perception, and engagement with, Europe has evolved. Throughout the Cold War, India's approach to Europe shaped largely by its close economic and defence ties with the Soviet Union and its rivalry with the West. A prolonged neglect is now giving way to expanding cooperation. Buoyed by the India-EU FTA signed in January this year, following the 2024 India-EFTA agreement, Europe has been increasingly entering India's strategic imagination despite the friction around Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The shift comes at a time when traditional alignments are under growing strain — an unpredictable American president, an ever-deepening partnership between India's ally Russia and competitor China, and a fragile détente between Beijing and Washington, reflected in the Trump-Xi summit.

Europe is now central to India's pursuit of export markets, capital, advanced technology and green-energy partnerships. The PM's tour itinerary reflects the enormous potential that collaboration with some of the continent's smaller but highly capable economies can unlock. The Netherlands, with a population of just 18 million, is a pivotal player in the global chip race because of ASML, the sole manufacturer of the advanced lithography machines needed to produce the most advanced semiconductors. The deal between ASML and Tata Electronics will support scaling up of the latter's fabrication plant in Dholera. In defence, India seeks to diversify procurement away from Russia, and in renewable energy, it requires both technological expertise and capital. Europe also offers opportunities for India's youth as the diaspora around the continent continues to expand, driven by highly skilled workers and students. For Europe, meanwhile, India is a critical partner in its efforts to de-risk from a rising China.

While the EU functions as a bloc of 27 member states, each country retains its own strategic priorities and foreign policy outlook. Europe's sub-regions, too, differ sharply in their perceptions of external powers. India already enjoys strong partnerships with key western European powers such as France, the Netherlands and Germany, and it has moved to deepen engagement with the Nordic countries while strengthening ties with Italy in the Indo-Mediterranean. More must be done to engage with these sub-regions and cultivate cross-linkages for mutual gains. With geopolitical realignments, a fraying rules-based order, and the decreasing relevance of international institutions, India's ties with Europe can no longer be peripheral to its foreign policy.

### In Manipur, pull back from edge, build trust

**A**FTER MONTHS of brittle calm, Manipur could once again be on the edge. The immediate provocation — the ambush and killing of three Kuki church leaders travelling back to the Kuki-Zo majority Kangpokpi district — has degenerated into a broader atmosphere of fear. There have been retaliatory abductions, disappearances and mounting tensions between Kuki and Tangkhul Naga communities across the hill districts. In a state mired in ethnic conflict for the last three years, and burdened by layers of historical grievance, incidents such as these could turn into communal flashpoints.

The present crisis, that began in Ukhrul earlier this year, however, cannot be understood through the lens of the violence between the state's Meiteis and Kukis that has riven Manipur since May 2023. It can be traced back, instead, to the older, more serene Naga-Kuki fault line, shaped by decades of territorial contestation, insurgent rivalry and competing visions of political belonging. The Nagas remain among the Northeast's most politically influential communities, with powerful tribal bodies, longstanding armed networks, and aspirations tied not merely to demands of autonomy within Manipur, but to a wider Naga political settlement that transcends state boundaries. Instability in the hill districts, therefore, echoes far beyond Manipur, intersecting with unresolved questions of autonomy, territory and ethnic representation. The Kukis, meanwhile, carry their own histories of displacement and grievance. In an already militarised landscape, where weapons continue to circulate freely and trust in state authority has eroded sharply, these unresolved antagonisms threaten to pull Manipur back into another cycle of violence.

The return of an elected government led by Yumnam Chenchang Singh in February had raised cautious hopes of rapprochement in a state exhausted by prolonged conflict. Presented as a conciliatory figure capable of balancing Meitei, Kuki and Naga interests, Singh cannot afford to fall back on the political equivocations of his predecessor. His inclusion of both Kuki and Naga deputy chief ministers offers an opening, but representation alone cannot substitute for trust. His government must move beyond reactive measures towards sustained political mediation: Securing the unconditional release of hostages, guaranteeing safe movement across districts, prosecuting the guilty and establishing credible inter-community dialogue mechanisms. This moment must be decisively defused, too much is at stake.

### Beer wins over wine, snobbery is still on top

**W**HAT HAPPENS when the land where wine snobbery is supposed to have originated suddenly finds itself to be a nation of beer drinkers? According to the International Organisation of Vine and Wine, France is for the first time consuming more beer than wine — 10 million litres more, to be precise. For the land of Burgundy, Merlot and Bordeaux, that is sobering news indeed.

Part of the reason could well be generational. Gen Z's aversion to drinking has been spreading across the US and Europe, where alcohol sales have fallen by about 20 per cent. When they do drink, beer is the tipple of choice, thanks to the rising cost of living and the decline of the "hang-out" culture in favour of digital socialisation (or isolation). Not only is beer cheaper, it is also considered a more "casual" drink. In France, in particular, wine — still associated with the daily ceremony of sit-down meals — is considered too stuffy by a generation that prefers to eat on the go.

Yet, those celebrating the end of what they see as elitist circus around wine should perhaps hold off on ordering another round. The boom in France's craft beer industry, with brewers and consumers bringing their appreciation for "terroir" and other wine-related concepts to "biologie", indicates that the affections have merely been displaced onto a new subject. In other words, what was once prized in wine, is now sought in beer. *Le snobbery est mort, vive le snobbery.*

**T**HE BJP's victory in West Bengal represents a moment of peak political performance and a landmark achievement. A resounding endorsement for Narendra Modi in 2025 is the only way the party can exceed the electoral peak it's attained in Bengal. At the same time, the BJP's shandling of the economy has hit a low with no guarantee that it cannot go lower. The burning question is: Are the two events coincidental, or simultaneously determined? The latter — details follow.

Four agents are responsible for the economic derailment. The first and most important is the government itself. It recognises the problem but is satisfied with blaming others for the crisis — in this case, the second agent: Major industry. The third agent is the Congress party, which is so comfortable being led by the Gandhis that a BJP one-party democratic rule is all but guaranteed. The fourth agent is the puppeteer controlling the top three: The Deep State. The crisis persists because the economy continues to expand at a pace proudly touted as the fastest among the world's major economies.

The political high is self-evident — the emphatic win in West Bengal and the near one-party democratic rule in India. For some, the "economic low" may be an exaggeration: Isn't India the fastest-growing major economy in the world, with GDP growth around a 35-year historical average of 6 per cent a year? The catch lies in that word "major" and in measuring against a 35-year average. For the period of BJP rule from 2014 onwards, India's rank in terms of GDP

growth is ninth, in terms of per capita GDP growth, the rank is eighth, and it's placed 16th in terms of per capita growth in US dollars. Bangladesh is the first in terms of US dollar growth, with an average per capita growth of 8.3 per cent per annum. Ethiopia is 2nd at 7.2 per cent, India is 16th at just 4.7 per cent. No matter how one slices the data, it is time to dispense with the moniker of the fastest-growing major economy.

India has also moved from being one of the "Fragile Five" economies in 2013 to possibly becoming one of just two (along with Turkey). The Indian rupee has depreciated approximately 12 per cent against the US dollar in the last year, the seventh consecutive year of decline, and was ranked among Asia's worst-performing currencies in 2025. India 2024 presents a macroeconomic paradox: Inflation has been contained, the current account deficit is manageable, growth remains steady, and political stability is unusually strong. In theory, those conditions should support currency confidence, not extreme fragility.

The government response has been to apply band-aids instead of performing the surgery needed to make investment in India — by Indians and foreigners alike — more attractive. One such band-aid is an appeal to Indians to invest more at home. It was established long ago that investors vote with their feet: Individuals and firms respond to economic incentives, not to moral appeals or what rulers perceive as national interest. And the incen-



SURJIT BHALLA

**The government response has been to apply band-aids instead of performing the surgery needed to make investment in India — by Indians and foreigners alike — more attractive**

tive for investors today is to leave India, or not enter it. Why? For starters, there is the much-discussed "business climate": Domestic firms are deeply uncertain about government policy.

A major driver of GDP growth, export performance, and manufacturing competitiveness is the presence and scale of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). FDI brings foreign technology, capital, and linkages with global supply chains. The higher the FDI, the higher the investment and the higher the growth. This is accepted wisdom around the world — and was accepted in India, until 2015. The new mindset believes India can, and should, dictate terms to the foreign investor; that investors are "dying" to enter the "large" Indian market. To put that market in perspective: India's GDP in 2025 was smaller than that of the state of California. It is likely that this same mindset drove the radical revision of the Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) framework in 2015. Soon after, Quality Control Orders (QCOs) surged from just 14 in 2017 to 765 by December 2024 — nothing more than an additional instrument of protection for domestic industry, especially firms with foreign tie-ups.

The revised 2015 BIT required that a foreign investor, before exiting their Indian venture, wait five years before proceeding to arbitration — and that the arbitration take place before an Indian judge. If Indian citizens are wary of going to Indian courts regardless of subject or grievance, why require a foreign investor to do the same?

The most damaging provision was the requirement that foreign investors exhaust local remedies for five years before accessing international arbitration. Is there any marriage in history, of whatever kind, that needs a five-year cooling off? Even now, the government's promised revamp appears aimed only at softening, not rethinking, that design.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced in Parliament in February 2025 that the BIT framework would be reviewed and a new version released. The reform release is still awaited. Speculation is that the fundamental architecture has not changed — except that the five-year waiting period has been shortened to "just" three years. And the requirement to exhaust Indian courts first — the defining departure from pre-2015 BIT norms — is likely being retained.

The deeper danger of overwhelming political success is that it can encourage the belief that policy is already good enough. It is not. India still holds the advantages of stability, scale, and global relevance. The present West Asian crisis is a perfect storm — for economic reforms. Unless the government uses this moment to improve the investment climate, restore treaty credibility, and signal seriousness about reform, political dominance will begin to look less like strength and more like a substitute for it. Elections can deliver power. Only policy can deliver prosperity. The world is watching.

Bhalla is chairperson of the Technical Expert Group for the first official Household Income Survey for India. Views are personal

### Keeping exams clean: From Kerala, a personal example



K J ALPHONSO

**A**FTER A stint in DDA, I returned to my home state, Kerala, in 2000. I was appointed as Transport Commissioner of Kerala. I got out onto the streets with my staff, and we brought down the accident rate by 60 per cent. But I lasted only three months in the job as the Transport Minister wanted to transfer RTOs, which was my job, and I wouldn't let him do that. I was appointed Secretary, Higher Education, and Commissioner for Entrance Examinations — my job was to conduct entrance examinations for all professional colleges in Kerala.

The Education Minister told me, "Entrance examinations have always been a mess. Can you set it right?" I told him: "I will try". Every year, the examination results are declared after a waiting period of three months. Then, some parents would invariably approach the High Court with the plea that some questions were wrong and these should be deleted from the evaluation. The court would set up a committee of experts and take three months to dispose of the case, ordering the deletion of some questions and re-ranking the successful candidates. For six months, candidates and their parents would have sleepless nights; some attempted suicide.

I went to the Entrance Commissioner's office with much apprehension. On the first day, I had a meeting with all the staff I told them, "We have the reputation of being the worst office in the world; let us make this the best office in the world." They said, "Yes, I did not buy new computers or scanners. We did not recruit any new staff."

I decided that only I would know who sets question papers and where they would be printed. Nobody else in my office would know. I resolved to have three sets of question papers. After I had zeroed in on a question setter, I would go and meet him personally. How did it travel? Of course, under a fake name. If the question setter was in Delhi, I would change flights three times to get to Delhi from Thiruvananthapuram. Once I landed at Delhi airport, I would change taxis three times to reach the question setter's residence.

Why all this drama? I didn't want anybody to tail me. I never stayed at the government guest house, but at a low-end hotel and under a fake name. Once the questions were pre-

pared, I would collect the physical copies personally; no emails or couriers. I would take it to two experts and re-validate the questions and keys. Again, no emails and no couriers. After that, I would take it to a printer. Nobody knew my travel plans, not even my PS. All the flight and hotel bills were kept in a secret, sealed cover. The printed question papers were brought to Kerala only two days before the date of the examinations under a Gujarat police escort. They were sent to the districts and stored in the treasury and sealed under the supervision of the District Collector. They were sent to the examination centres under police protection.

Like NEET, the Kerala entrance was objective-type multiple-choice questions. The OMR answer sheet was just one page. To ensure absolute secrecy, I introduced an innovation. The coded top portion of the OMR sheet was made tearable. Once the students entered their roll numbers, the top portion was torn off (part A). Soon after the entrance test, these were taken to the Commissioner's office, scanned, and the information was stored on a disc, which would be in my possession. All details were deleted from the digital systems.

Then, the OMR sheets (part B) were scanned, and these contained the scores of candidates. Nobody in the office knew who scored what, as only Part A had the candidate information. The matching of Part A and Part B was done by me personally, only an hour before the results were declared. This ensured that nobody in the office was able to manipulate the marks, not even me.

When we declared the results on the seventh day after the examinations, six newspapers in Kerala wrote editorials: "Entrance Commissioner's Office gets first rank". Postgraduate medical entrance examination results were declared on the second day. Super speciality medical entrance examination results were declared on the same day. What a transformation, from being the worst office in the world to the best.

Would the NTA like to learn some lessons? Twenty-two lakh candidates and their parents could have been spared the agony. In this digital age, it is much easier to do what we did.

The writer was from the 1979 batch of the IAS and is a former Union Minister

### Our highway policy needs a green reset



VINOD B MATHUR, RAJKUMAR SAPRA AND VINOD KUMAR

**I**NDIA is expanding its highways at an unprecedented pace. Under Bharatmala and Vision 2047, thousands of kilometres of expressways and highways are reducing logistics costs and accelerating economic growth. This transformation is creating an ecological and public-health burden. Highway corridors are increasingly becoming zones of pollution, landscape fragmentation and agricultural risk. Since many highways pass through densely populated agricultural regions, the impacts extend beyond the carriageway itself.

Highways must no longer be viewed merely as transport infrastructure, but as ecological and socio-economic landscapes. One promising solution is Highway Farm Forestry (HFF) — a market-linked agroforestry approach in which farmers adjoining highways voluntarily cultivate commercially viable tree crops instead of pollution-sensitive food crops. These "Tree Crop Buffer Zones" can reduce pollution exposure, improve ecological connectivity and generate additional income. Unlike earlier social-forestry programmes, HFF is profitability-driven. Species such as poplar, bamboo, teak, Malabar neem and gajarhar have strong industrial demand. With assured buyback and extension support, roadside agroforestry can become a viable rural enterprise.

India imports nearly Rs70,000 crore worth of wood and wood products annually. HFF could reduce import dependence, create rural employment and strengthen timber industries in line with the "Make in India" agenda. However, the proposal is not simply about timber production. It is about integrating ecology planning into infrastructure policy. Conventional roadside green belts are difficult to scale across the highway network, given the high cost of acquiring land. A more practical approach is a differentiated "Tiered Zone Framework". Highways close to pollution-affected belts — roughly within 100 m — should prioritise tree-based systems, while areas beyond can continue mixed agroforestry or conventional agriculture depending on ecological and livelihood conditions. This approach recognises that ecological restoration, food security and farmer livelihoods must go together.

Properly designed roadside tree systems can function as ecological steppingstones in fragmented landscapes, supporting pollinators, birds and local microclimates. Plantation biomass can also support carbon sequestration and help farmers participate in emerging carbon markets. At the same time, ecological safeguards are essential. Monoculture plantations could create new environmental problems if poorly designed. Species selection must be science-based, region-specific and groundwater-sensitive. Invasive species should be excluded and native and mixed-species systems should be encouraged. HFF is not a substitute for cleaner mobility systems or stronger environmental safeguards in infrastructure planning; it must complement them.

Implementation will require institutional coordination and farmer support. Farmers need quality planting material, extension services, predictable markets and simplified regulations. The National Transit Pass System introduced in 2023 has already addressed a major bottleneck by enabling seamless interstate movement of timber through a "One Nation, One Pass" framework. India now needs a national policy vision that treats highway corridors not merely as engines of mobility, but as landscapes for ecological and economic resilience.

Mathur is former chairperson, National Biodiversity Authority of India. Sapra is former managing director, Haryana Forest Development Corporation, Kumar is former principal chief conservator of forests, Haryana

### 40 YEARS AGO

May 21, 1986



### Lankan troops abandon plans

THE SRI LANKAN Air Force, for the second consecutive day, bombed the centre of Jaffna as Tamil militants appeared successful in forcing the government to abandon its plans for marching in a large number of troops to west control. Four to six bombs were dropped between 10.35 am and 10.55 am at Jaffna bus stand and First Cross Street, all in the centre of the town.

### Bid to subvert accord: Punjab

THE PUNJAB government has submitted before the Venkataramiah Commission that Ha-

ryana has not chosen to file any claim before the Commission with the apparent object of delaying the proceedings and thereby putting off the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab. The Punjab Government, in its reply, pointed out that the attitude adopted by Haryana was tantamount to questioning the terms of reference of the Commission and was indicative of its attitude of non-cooperation with it.

### Planned sabotage in India

EXTREMISTS in the US had planned to select and train 100 commandos and send five of them to each Indian state to cause widespread sabotage and create panic. Ac-

cording to a document produced during the trial of Gurpreet Singh Bhat, on charges of conspiring to kill PM Rajiv Gandhi during his visit to the US last June, the possible targets of these commandos included the Babha Atomic Research Centre.

### India reproaches UK

India expressed surprise that the British Government had published a white paper in that one of the four Sikhs facing trial for plotting to kill PM Rajiv Gandhi during his visit to Britain had received classified information about its itinerary from someone working in the High Commission in London.

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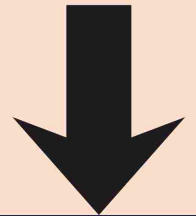
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# The Ideas Page



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## US vs Iran shows why it is not about military power, but manipulating risk



**THAROORTHINK**  
BY SHASHI THAROOR

**A**S THE "phony peace" in Iran drags on, I am reminded of an old lesson: In the annals of strategic thought, few insights have proved as enduring as Thomas Schelling's in his 1960 book *The Strategy of Conflict*: Coercive bargaining is not about the blunt application of force, but about the manipulation of shared risk. In conflicts where neither side can afford outright defeat, Schelling showed that the real contest lies in shaping the environment of danger — raising the costs of escalation, narrowing the exits, and forcing adversaries to calculate how much risk they can bear before they must compromise.

The Trump administration's approach to Iran seemed to rest on the assumption that sufficiently severe bombardment by its overwhelmingly superior military force would compel capitulation. Yet history suggested otherwise. Severe punishment, when it fails to break an opponent's will, does not produce submission; it produces a bargaining environment in which both sides become desperate to find a way out that does not humiliate them fatally. In such an environment, the weaker party has every incentive to make the exit as costly and as visible as possible, ensuring that the stronger adversary pays a reputational and strategic price for its miscalculation.

Iran's position in this confrontation reflects Schelling's logic. Strategically weaker than the US in conventional terms, it nonetheless possesses asymmetric leverage. The Strait of Hormuz is not merely a shipping lane; it is, in Schelling's terms, a hostage whose value rises as American desperation increases. By causing disruption of global energy flows, Iran can manipulate the shared risk that binds both sides, forcing Washington to reckon with the costs of escalation not just in military terms but in



ILLUSTRATION: C R SAKSHIMAR

economic and diplomatic fallout. The more the US insists on punishment without offering a credible off-ramp, the more valuable that hostage becomes.

This dynamic underscores a broader truth about coercive diplomacy. Force alone rarely secures compliance. What matters is the structure of risk, the perception of danger, and the credibility of exit strategies. When punishment is pursued without a parallel effort to manage risk and provide pathways to de-escalation, it hardens resistance rather than softening it. Iran's tactics — calibrated disruption, visible defiance, and the threatened exploitation of chokepoints — are designed precisely to exploit this gap, turning vulnerability into leverage.

History offers ample illustrations. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was not resolved by America's overwhelming military superiority alone. It was resolved by the manipulation of shared risk: Both Washington and Moscow understood that escalation could lead to nuclear war, a catastrophe neither could risk. The crisis ended when both sides found a way out that preserved dignity — removing missiles from Cuba in exchange for a quiet withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey. The lesson was clear: Coercion succeeds not when one side overwhelms the other, but when both sides per-

**By causing disruption of global energy flows, Iran can manipulate the shared risk that binds both sides, forcing Washington to reckon with the costs of escalation not just in military terms but in economic and diplomatic fallout**

ceive that the risks of continued confrontation outweigh the costs of compromise.

Closer to home, the Kargil conflict of 1999 demonstrated a similar dynamic. Pakistan's incursion into Indian territory was militarily unsustainable, but Islamabad sought to leverage asymmetric risk by internationalising the conflict and threatening escalation. India's calibrated response — limited military action combined with diplomatic pressure — was designed to manage risk while preserving credibility. The eventual withdrawal of Pakistani forces was not simply a product of battlefield losses, but of the recognition that the risks of escalation, including the nuclear option, were intolerable. That shaped the outcome: India won.

The Gulf War of 1990-91 also illustrates the paradox of coercion. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait was met with overwhelming American military power, but the coalition's success lay in using force to create a bargaining environment where Iraq's risks mounted daily. The destruction of infrastructure, the isolation of Iraq diplomatically, and the threat of further escalation created a situation in which Saddam's position became untenable.

Yet even then, that war ended with Saddam still in power, a reminder that coercion rarely produces total capitulation. The absence of a credible exit strategy left

the conflict unresolved, sowing the seeds for future confrontation a decade later.

These examples highlight the enduring relevance of Schelling's insight. Coercion is not a mechanical process of applying force until the adversary breaks. It is a psychological and political process of shaping perceptions of risk, creating incentives for compromise, and managing the pathways to de-escalation. When punishment is pursued without attention to these dynamics, it produces resistance, escalation, and unintended consequences.

The Strait of Hormuz thus stands as a symbol of the paradox of coercion. It is a narrow waterway, but in strategic terms it is vast — a "hostage" whose fate shapes the calculations of nations far beyond the immediate conflict. It is not a mere shipping lane, but the embodiment of shared risk, a reminder that in the strategy of conflict, the manipulation of danger is often more decisive than the application of force.

For policymakers, the lesson is sobering. Military superiority does not guarantee compliance. Punishment without pathways to compromise creates bargaining environments where adversaries exploit risk to their advantage. The challenge is to integrate force into a strategy that recognises the psychology of risk, the importance of dignity, and the necessity of credible exits.

Without this, coercion becomes a trap, locking adversaries into cycles of escalation that neither can afford to sustain.

In this case, both Iran and the United States must recognise that the manipulation of risk is the essence of the contest. Severe bombing may demonstrate power and resolve, but without a credible off-ramp, it only increases the value of the other side's capacity to cripple the world economy. The Strait of Hormuz will remain a lever of asymmetric power, and Iran will continue to exploit it until Washington offers a pathway to compromise that preserves dignity on both sides. Schelling's insight, six decades old, remains the key to understanding why mere coercion fails, and why shared risks in the true currency of bargaining in international conflict.

The writer is a fourth-term Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram and chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs

## Kanimozhi, not culture wars, may be star of DMK's revival script



KARTTHICK RAM MANOHARAN

**T**HE DEFEAT of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) by the newcomer Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) took many by shock. Former Chief Minister and DMK leader MK Stalin put a video on his X account, where he graciously claimed responsibility for the DMK's defeat and invited the public to offer suggestions for improvement in the future.

There is no doubt that the DMK needs to evolve and reinvent itself, as Stalin himself noted. For that to happen, however, the party must bring in a real leadership transformation — and the name is Kanimozhi Karunanidhi.

Time and again, women voters have not found much inspiration in the DMK. During Jayalalithaa's time, AIADMK was able to garner women votes in larger numbers than the DMK. Her welfare measures, such as the Anna Mess, greatly empowered women at the local level. In contrast, the DMK leadership is not only seen as male, it is also seen as a space where women cannot aspire to higher positions. Despite welfare measures such as free bus-passes for women, the Kalaingar Magali Urimai Thittam, Pudhumai Penn Thittam and others, the DMK has been unable to project its impact onto its image. Worse, law and order problems also contributed to a negative public perception. Vijay, in contrast, appeared as a protective brother figure and won over a substantial portion of women voters.

To what extent women leaders would be able to achieve actual empowerment in the TVK remains to be seen, but a perception is that the DMK does not promote powerful women leaders. That the DMK is seen to be undertaking corrective measures is important for the party's reinvention. And nothing can make it as visible as a change in the leadership.

Kanimozhi is a seasoned politician, with years of experience behind her, and years of service ahead of her. Born in 1968, a year after the DMK first came to power, she is perfectly placed as a successor to Stalin and as a senior for Udhayanidhi. Her work in the party has won great respect among its leaders and cadres, young and old.

M Karunanidhi's daughter is also an intellectual in her own right. She can hold her ground on conversations on language, literature, culture, history, and Dravidian politics. She has displayed her competence not just as a spokesperson of Tamil interests in the Lok Sabha, but also as an articulate defender of national interests when she led the all-party team to Russia following Operation Sindoore. For the latter, she won praise even from the Centre.

On his very first day as Leader of Opposition, Udhayanidhi posed sharp questions to the new Chief Minister Vijay, and reiterated his call for the "eradication" of Sanatan Dharma. But the DMK should note that while these "culture wars" agitate both the right-wing as well as the anti-caste ecosystems, they do not translate to votes. The common person in Tamil Nadu is indifferent to fiery debates on the Sanatan because it is not a term or concept they associate with in their daily lives. Most of the voters, women especially, are believers, but are not political on the basis of religion, an important thing for the spirit of secularism in the state. Women's safety and welfare, however, are important voter issues. Kanimozhi can potentially be that face, which stands for security, order, as well as social justice.

There is also another important factor. Both Vijay and Udhayanidhi were known as cine stars before they became politicians. It is known that Vijay has the greater influence, following, and star power. In a confrontation, Vijay appears, or is made to effectively appear, bigger. The meme was that their followers have unleashed on each other are drawn more from cinema than from any deep political thought. And TVK, in content creation, is more effective.

With Kanimozhi, a different dynamic enters. At the moment, she is the most well-known woman leader from Tamil Nadu. An attack on her could be easily seen as an attack on women. The emotive popularity of the Kannagi story and various Amman deities is a social testimony to that.

As it refashions itself, the DMK should learn that the voter is won over not only by rational choice, but also, and sometimes more, by emotive affect. It may want to tone down its pagutharivu (rationalism), as propagated by Periyar) a bit and invest more in winning back popular appeal among women voters, through not just new technologies, but also with a new face for the party.



The writer is Smuts Visiting Research Fellow, University of Cambridge

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The next pandemic

**T**HE WORLD learned the science of viruses during COVID-19, but failed the morality of distribution ("World isn't prepared for next pandemic", *IE*, May 20). While wealthy nations stockpiled doses and opposed the India-South Africa TRIPS waiver at the WTO, poorer countries faced prolonged shortages. The deeper crisis is that global health still bends before geopolitical interest. International health regulations and pandemic treaties mean little when nations retreat into medical nationalism during emergencies. Future pandemics may spread through inequality and political selfishness.

Hovya Garg, Chandigarh

**T**HE EBOLA outbreak has alarmed the world. Fatality rates have reached as high as 90 per cent in severe outbreaks. The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most devastating events in modern history. The world had no idea about how to deal with such an epidemic. India, with its huge population and limited healthcare infrastructure, faces enormous challenges both financial and structural ("World isn't prepared for next pandemic", *IE*, May 20). Countless people across the world died without proper treatment. Future zoonotic diseases must be handled with far better preparedness and coordination.

S S Paul, Nadia



AMRITA NANDY

**I**N THE award-winning Lebanese film, *Capernaum*, the 12-year-old protagonist, Zain, is asked by the judge why he wants to sue his parents. "Because I was born," Zain says. Through his parents, Zain confronts us, adults, for first turning the world into Capernaum (broadly, a site of chaos) and then bringing children into it.

In the recent debate about the right to abortion beyond 24 weeks, Zain could be many one of us, the unborn child of the 15-year-old rape survivor, or his 15-year-old child-mother. In a remarkable departure from the law and the opinion of the medical establishment, the Supreme Court (SC) permitted abortion.

Among the opinions sparked by this permission, a recent article ("Law is not the problem. Abortion in India needs honest engagement and implementation", *IE*, May 15) mentioned the "spiritual dimension" of the potential birth of the unborn child. Anti-abortion discourse often leans on the religious-spiritual to support its arguments for birth.

However, there are different spiritual dimensions at play as well — for the right of the child not to be born. "Spiritual" here carries its humanistic, existential connotations that centre our shared fibre and invoke our innate oneness. Like Zain, millions are born — many accidentally — in circumstances that are unfit for a child, if not precarious or harmful. It is this unnecessary yet pervasive human suffering that Zain chal-

## Right to life cannot mean duty to reproduce suffering



**l**enges in the fictional court. By allowing the termination of the pregnancy of the minor, the SC has prevented many real-life Zains from reaching their overcrowded courtrooms. The point? Birth is not necessarily a welcome event, even via spiritual and philosophical frames.

This is an upstream argument, and therefore even more fundamental to the debate on abortion. Since suffering is an inescapable reality of human life, every newborn will inevitably suffer repeatedly throughout their life. Suffering implies a range of psychological distress caused by dissatisfaction, anxiety, anger, hatred, depression, besides bodily pain and discomfort. Philosophers such as David Benatar (author of *Better Never to Have Been*) see birth as a moral wrong because it places an innocent being in harm's way without their knowledge and consent. But since the parent knows that the newborn will suffer, they are accountable for their choice to give birth. This act of harm is driven by a spectrum of the parents' own present and future needs of caregiving and receiving.

This cynical perspective is not just held by a global, growing community of antinatalists; the centrality and certainty of suffering are also affirmed by spiritual traditions such as Buddhism. It calls birth the first step in recurrent cycles of suffering that include sickness, ageing, and death. Birth unleashes a continuum of *trishna* (craving), which creates a continuum of suffering that keeps

ust trapped in the world. Buddhism is not antinatalist and does not prohibit procreation for its lay followers. But its ultimate recommendation against the suffering of human life — or "crossing the flood" (*Samyutta Nikaya* or Connected Discourses) — is to transcend birth itself. It can be done by cultivating discerning self-awareness and weeding out self-deception, delusion, and craving. This could mean, including for the issue of abortion, a balanced response between compassion for the trapped minor and her circumstance and a fixed, doctrinaire refusal to abort.

An equally potent consideration is the spiritual distress of the pregnant person, in this case, a child herself. The grip of pronatalism and motherhood on our psyches can blind us to her sense of being overwhelmed around selfhood, existence, and purpose. Bringing a new human into the world, under any circumstance — even through the mother's strong unwillingness and anguish, or coercing her to carry the child to term only to offer the baby for adoption — is a fraught proposition that does not augur well for either the parent or the potential child. There is ample evidence about the relationship between unwanted pregnancies, childhood trauma, abuse, and lifelong psychological challenges for the mother and child.

Between an unborn child and its living mother, the Court chose well not to reproduce suffering from one to two.

Nandy is author of *Motherhood and Choice: Uncommon Mothers, Childfree Women*

## ABOLISH NEET

**S**INCE IT has been proved beyond doubt that NEET is a fraudulent examination and the paper leaks and malpractices have happened with the connivance of the stakeholders of the NTA, NEET should be abolished immediately (NEET paper leak raises larger questions, calls for honest reckoning, *IE*, May 19). The selection of candidates for medical education should again be left to the respective states and determined purely on the marks scored by the candidates in their Plus 2 examination, which has all along proved to be foolproof in all respects.

Tharicus S Fernando, Chennai



SATISH PADMANABHAN

**I**T MAKES FOR an ill-tempered morning if at least Rs 2,000 is not offered at the altar of Blinkit or Zepto or Instamart before nine. Like how mornings used to be spoiled for my father if he couldn't listen to the "Suprabhatham" before leaving for office or for Hercule Poirot if the half-boiled white oblong was placed askew in his egg cup.

"The Greek yoghurt is over," the maid announces as I sit down with my muesli. I lunge for the phone and tap the quick delivery app.

"What else?"

"Order some oats and berry mix."

## The cart brimmeth over — notes from my morning

"OK, anything else? This won't do for free delivery." She wants nothing else. I have to add stuff worth Rs 159 more for free delivery, the first level or *padavu* to cross as Bachechan would say to a KBC quizzer. I rack my brain to think of products that won't expire soon.

"Do we need Hit? It's mosquito season."

"No, you ordered it two days ago, we already have three cans."

What else, what else? Pulses? Coffee powder? Batteries for remotes? Trouble is I went through the same quandary yesterday. Let me focus. Razor blades, maybe. I'm always running out of them and they cost as though they are made of rare earth minerals.

It not only makes up the difference but brings my bill tantalisingly close to the

next *padavu* of Maxxavars. To cross that I have to add stuff worth Rs 316 more. I get 20 per cent off on the total bill, plus a chance to win a ticket to go to Iceland to see the Northern Lights. I scroll up and down. The maid eyes me, takes pity and tries to put me out of my misery. "Olive oil is getting finished, you can get that." Yes, bingo! A big budget item — that should suffice. Well, now I am within kissing distance of the app's new "10-4-10" deal: 10 per cent cashback on all purchases for the next 10 months. But I go blank. All the merchandise listed on the screen makes me dizzy.

It's as if the app has detected my turmoil. Its algorithm kicks in and I get a pop-up; those who bought olive oil also bought mayonnaise. I hate mayonnaise. But I don't want to be rude to all those who bought it along with olive oil. It's like how you feel guilty for not meeting with an acci- FOMO in the negative. Besides, it will take me closer to the real biggie: A one-year membership to the airport lounge. An offer no one can refuse.

Enough, says the Yudhishtira part of my mind. The cart already brimmeth over. The first order, the Greek yoghurt, will res-

onate with Majrooh Sultanpuri's words: *Main akele hi chala tha jaanib-e-manzil/ magar tog saath aate gaye aur karwan banata gaya*. Now all the stuff will come within 10 minutes. As they say, time is money. Or, is it? If you think about it, time is the opposite of money. You either have one or the other. Did I need so many things first thing in the morning? No. Would anything have happened if the stuff was delivered in the evening? Or the next day? Nothing.

The bell rings. This line of thinking is interrupted. I feel smug that the morning ritual is done. I am good to go. Let the day throw anything at me.

"It's a new dawn, it's a new day/ it's a new life for me, ooh/ and I'm feeling good"

Padmanabhan is a journalist and a writer

What else, what else? Pulses? Coffee powder? Batteries for remotes? Trouble is I went through the same quandary yesterday

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

INFRASTRUCTURE

## Behind Kerala govt's scrapping of SilverLine

Shaju Philip  
Thiruvananthapuram, May 20

THE CONGRESS-led United Democratic Front (UDF) Cabinet on Wednesday decided to denotify the semi-high speed rail project, SilverLine, mooted by the previous Left government. Chief Minister V D Satheesan said the government was not opposed to the high-speed rail project, but that the project was "an environmental disaster and financially unviable".

UDF had studied the project and found there was not even a detailed project report. The land acquired by the government was not denotified. This has caused problems for the people living in the project area," he said.

The Rs 64,000-crore project was envisaged to run between Thiruvananthapuram and the northernmost district of Kasaragod to reduce the existing travel time from 12 hours to four hours. A high-speed transport system has long been a crucial need, given Kerala's geography and population density.

### The project

The project was slated to be executed by Kerala Rail Development Corporation Ltd. or K-Rail, a joint venture registered by the Kerala state government and Indian Railways in a 51:49 equity partnership. K-Rail was specifically formed to develop railway infrastructure in Kerala. In 2021, the state Cabinet gave sanction and a token allocation of Rs 2,000 crore from the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board.

The 530 km standard-gauge line was planned to run parallel to the existing railway line and mostly on earthen embankments. The trains were expected to run at a maximum speed of 200 km, and a nine-car rake would carry 675 passengers in two classes. The stretch would have 11 stations en route.

### Opposition to the project

For the project, 1,383 hectares (ha) would have to be acquired for the railway line, including 1,198 ha from private parties. Widespread protests erupted across the state, supported by the Congress and the BJP, with critics raising concerns about the large-scale displacement of families and potential environmental damage resulting from the project.

Activists claimed that the proposed alignment would cut through wetlands, paddy fields, and ecologically sensitive zones, while opposition leaders warned of potential financial losses. The railways concurred with the latter view, questioning its viability in Kerala, where the six-lane national highway development is under way. It ultimately did not give its sanction for the project, saying the project would affect the expansion plans of the existing railway tracks.

Satheesan justified the denotification, saying the project was abandoned and no transactions could be carried out regarding the lands notified for acquisition. The state had abandoned the project, while the Centre did not give its approval, he added.

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POWER

## How thorium as nuclear fuel can help India meet its long-term energy needs



### EXPERT EXPLAINS

ANIL KAKODKAR

FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ATOMIC ENERGY

IT IS heartening to see indigenously developed pressurised heavy water reactors (PHWR) getting into the mainstream of India's energy push towards a net-zero compliant Viksit Bharat. The 100 GWe (gigawatt electric) nuclear energy mission launched by the government is to be realised by 2047. The high rate of capacity addition necessary for such deployment would need a credible implementation framework and

standardised mature, commercially competitive technologies. PHWRs are a fit case. The attendant steep increase in uranium imports is, however, a matter of concern. Given the uranium demand-supply mismatch, expected rise in uranium demand consequent to global nuclear generation growing three to four times, and the lack of nuclear-related geopolitics, nuclear fuel supply security could be at risk in 10-15 years.

**A much-needed shift**  
So, a quicker shift to thorium — that India has in abundance — remains critical to India's energy independence. Large reactor capacity that can produce uranium-233 U-233 from thorium at scale while also producing electricity is a prerequisite for this. Thus, the first criticality of the 500 Mw (megawatt electric) prototype fast breeder reactor (PFBR) that would open the path to growing such a capacity through fuel breeding marks a key milestone for India. Thorium can also enable India's transition to a significant energy exporter from being a major importer.

New developments beyond PFBR would also be necessary for the growth of thorium irradiation platforms. These include reactor and nuclear fuel cycle technologies based on mixed oxide, metallic, and molten salt fuels. The start of thorium utilisation at scale is thus three to four decades away. Pursuing this development is nevertheless critical. Fast reactors breed new fuel. They are necessary to expand energy-generating systems that would run as long as thorium is available. Nuclear generation capacity through uranium-fuelled reactors is soon expected to cross 10 GWe, the target set for the first stage of the three-stage nuclear power programme. The spent fuel from these plants already constitutes the required inventory waiting to feed the second stage as planned. The experience with PFBR so far suggests that in addition to moving closer

to large-scale thorium utilisation, fast reactors can provide economically competitive electricity without dependence on fuel imports. Nuclear generation capacity of a few hundred GWe can be established in this mode. **Timeline for transition**  
But what about the timeline for transition from uranium to thorium? The intention behind opening international civil nuclear cooperation was to remove the hurdles in accessing uranium — priority for thorium was to be speeded up. Access to imported uranium is now expected to make the first stage 10 times bigger, that is 100 GWe. PHWRs could constitute around 60 GWe. Apart from electricity supply, such a substantive PHWR capacity between now and 2047 would also enable a capacity for production of U-233 at scale through thorium irradiation in PHWRs. This would happen much earlier than build-up of similar capacity with fast reactors. One can see at least three-decade

time difference between the two. Use of thorium-HALEU (high-assay low-enriched uranium) fuel in place of natural uranium in PHWRs would enable thorium irradiation at scale while leading to several advantages in terms of safety, economy, waste minimisation, proliferation resistance, and some savings in the mined uranium. One can start building inventory of spent fuel to produce fuel for third-stage thorium reactors. In my view, the thorium molten salt reactor (TMSR) operating in the near thermal neutron spectrum offers an ideal choice for the third stage. This would enable significant electricity generation capacity sustainably fuelled by thorium. Rough estimates suggest that PHWRs running on thorium-HALEU fuel could support new TMSR capacity comparable with the mother PHWR annually. The availability of thorium-HALEU fuel recycle technology for feeding TMSRs and development of TMSRs would need to be ensured in about 10-15 years to start producing

electricity from thorium. These technologies are anyway a part of the technology development agenda for the three-stage nuclear power programme. Advancing their deployment will enable us to get on with thorium utilisation at scale without having to wait for completion of second-stage development and scale thorium irradiation therein. With fast reactor capacity scaling up to the required level, one can assure U-233 supply and required energy availability at least till fusion energy arrives on the scene. The world has restricted the use of uranium only in once-through mode. This is due to the fear of potential for malevolent diversion. Utilisable energy potential in uranium thus remains two orders of magnitude lower for such countries. Proliferation resistance of the thorium-U-233 fuel cycle should enable realisation of fuller energy potential of thorium. Thorium systems are thus destined to play a greater role in coping up with base load energy demand of the world. This is a unique opportunity for India.

CLIMATE

## Rising night-time heat an urgent health hazard



AMITABH SINHA

WHILE MOST conversation about extreme heat during Indian summers centres on peak daytime temperatures and warmer spells, it is slowly becoming evident that heatwave nights could pose a greater health risk to human beings, particularly those living in low- and middle-income housing units.

Both day and nighttime average temperatures are rising in India, but recent data suggest that nighttime temperatures may be increasing at a faster rate. Experts say indoor thermal exposure could be a bigger threat to public health than exposure to daytime heat outdoors.

A cooler evening and night allow the human body to recover from the heat experienced during the daytime. But if nighttime temperatures also remain high, the body is unable to recoup, and exposure to heat becomes prolonged and sustained, without any relief. People are confined in small spaces for several hours at a stretch. The situation gets aggravated in access houses without natural ventilation or indoor conditioning.

A recent study by Climate Trends, a Delhi-based climate-focused research organisation, in 50 houses in Chennai — all medium- and low-income residential units — showed that occupants were frequently sleeping in temperatures exceeding 32°C Celsius. Sometimes, night-time temperatures even exceeded 35°C Celsius, very similar to peak day-time temperatures in the city. This study highlights the need for passive cooling solutions and structural changes in low-cost housing in urban areas. In the next phase, we plan to study the damage done by heat exposure in sleeping bodies," said Palak Balyan of Climate Trends, one of the authors of this study.

### Rising night-time temperatures

India's average temperature has increased by about 0.7°C Celsius between 1901 and 2018, according to the 2020 comprehensive climate change assessment over the Indian region. Both day and night-time tem-



People standing near a shop selling air coolers in New Delhi. ANI

peratures have increased during this time, but at different rates.

In the 30 years between 1986 and 2015, the temperature of the warmest day of the year increased by about 0.63°C Celsius, while that of the coldest night increased by 0.4°C Celsius. This suggests that the rise in day-time temperature was more pronounced than the nighttime temperatures, which is true for this period.

But the situation changes in future projections. The same assessment said that the temperature of the warmest day of the year could rise by 4.7°C Celsius by the end of this century, while that of the coldest night could jump by as much as 5.5°C Celsius. Night-time temperatures are all set to rise at a faster rate. This has already begun to happen, according to more recent data by the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

While the rapid rise in night-time temperatures is happening everywhere, it is more pronounced in urban spaces, mainly because of what is called the urban heat island effect. Concrete, roads, bricks and metal absorb the heat during the day and

### Relief measures

The Climate Trends study noted there are measures that can bring immediate relief to people living in cramped households.

Passive cooling solutions like reflective roof coatings or whitewashed roofs and walls can make a lot of difference.

radiate it at night. The lack of adequate vegetation and green spaces, loss of water bodies and dense clustering of high-rise buildings amplify this effect. Increasingly, the use of air-conditioners, which emit hot air outside, is emerging as a significant contributor. There could be a difference of 4-6°C Celsius or more in the nighttime temperatures of a city centre or a dense residential area of a city, and its outskirts. As we build more, this effect is likely to get further aggravated.

Most of urban India goes to sleep in small houses that are poorly designed and lack natural ventilation. If these houses lack air-conditioners, there is little nighttime relief for the human body. Sleep discomfort, restlessness, exhaustion, and lack of energy are direct results of this condition, which affects people's productivity the next day. But there are major adverse health impacts as well, whose magnitude is still being assessed.

### Heatwave intermittent, heat perennial

Dileep Mavalankar, former director of

the Indian Institute of Public Health in Gandhinagar who has done extensive work on heat and its health impacts in India, gave an insightful example. He said the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation maintains a daily record of all-cause mortality in the city.

"Ahmedabad records about 100 deaths every day — deaths due to all causes. We have seen that on days when the maximum day-time temperature exceeds 45 degree Celsius, if the maximum night-time temperature is below 28 degree Celsius, there is not much of a change in the daily all-cause mortality. But if the night-time temperature rises to between 28 and 30 degree Celsius, all-cause mortality increases to about 165. If the night-time temperature is more than 30 degree Celsius, mortality goes up to as high as 265. This is an interesting correlation. Even without doing a full-scale analysis of the cause of death, we can see something very significant is happening here. The thresholds would be different for other cities, but there is a very clear indication that higher night-time temperatures are strongly linked to mortality," Mavalankar said.

At least 25 states and more than 200 cities now have heat action plans that get implemented every summer. A bulk of that is focused on dealing with heatwave-like situations. But a heatwave is a very specific event and is declared when very specific temperature criteria are satisfied. It happens maybe two or three times a month. Extreme heat, on the other hand, is a constant in Indian summer. And so is the trend of rising night-time temperatures.

One component of most heat action plans is about long-term measures needed to reduce impacts. These include coordinated efforts to improve urban infrastructure, come up with better low-cost housing, and increase green spaces. There is a need for paying greater attention to these aspects of the heat action plan.

The Climate Trends study on Chennai households noted there are measures that can be applied to bring immediate relief to people living in cramped households. Passive cooling solutions like reflective roof coatings or whitewashed roofs and walls can make a lot of difference. Some structural changes, like introducing natural ventilation, can also help.

POLITICS

## Why Rahul Gandhi unveiled statue of 'forgotten hero' of 1857 revolt

Asad Rehman  
New Delhi, May 20

ON WEDNESDAY, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi unveiled a statue of Veera Pasi, a "forgotten hero" who had fought the British during the Revolt of 1857, in Raebareilly. While this was not the first attempt by a political party to tow the Pasi community in Uttar Pradesh through a community icon, Gandhi's move is significant ahead of the state Assembly elections next year. Gandhi also addressed a 'Bahujan Swabhinna Sabha' in Veera Pasi's memory the same day.

### Who was Veera Pasi?

Veera Pasi was a trusted companion and commander of Rana Beni Madhav Baksh Singh, the ruler of the Shankarpur Estate in modern-day Raebareilly during the 19th century. A Dalit belonging to the Pasi caste, Pasi was born on November 11, 1835, into an impoverished family in Lodhiwari village of Raebareilly district.

He lost his parents at an early age and went to live at his sister's house. In the local dialect, a brother living with his sister's family was called "Veera", which later evolved into the name "Veera", which later Singh recruited Pasi for his army, after he was impressed by the latter's strength. Ac-



Rahul Gandhi during the unveiling of the Veera Pasi statue in Raebareilly. ANI

According to local folklore, when the British captured Singh during the 1857 revolt, Pasi displayed remarkable bravery by rescuing Singh from prison. The British government then had announced a reward of Rs 50,000 for Pasi's capture or information on his whereabouts.

While Veera Pasi doesn't feature too prominently in the history books, oral history has kept his legacy alive in Raebareilly and adjoining areas where the Pasi community

### BSP's decline

The Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party's vote share fell from 22.23% in the 2017 Assembly election to 12.88% in 2022.

Other parties such as the SP, the Congress, and the Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) are trying to fill that space.

resides in sizeable numbers. Local folklore suggests Pasi died while trying to protect Singh from the British forces.

### Dalit history and politics in UP

Over the last few years, political parties in UP have worked towards invoking Dalit icons from the past and their contribution to the freedom struggle.

In 2024, after the general election, Awadhesh Prasad, Samajwadi Party (SP) MP from Faizabad (Ayodhya), had invoked "Veeranagar" Uda Devi and "Maharaja" Bilal Pasi, two prominent personalities of the Pasi (Dalit) community while taking oath as MP. Dalit leaders and academics in UP say that icons from the community have largely been "ignored" by historians.

Ajay Kumar, assistant professor at Babasaheb Ambedkar University's sociology department, said that mainstream historical writing has often neglected the contributions and experiences of Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalised communities. "This process is not just about rediscovering the past, but also about reinvigorating self-respect, and political consciousness," said Kumar. "Since these communities traditionally possessed relatively few written records, their histories survived through folk tales, folk songs, memories, and oral traditions. These oral traditions became impor-

tant carriers of their social experiences, struggles, and collective consciousness."

### Pasis and the Dalit vote

The Pasis make up around 7 per cent of the state's Scheduled Caste population, making them the largest group among Dalits in UP after the Jatavs. While they also have significant presence in other states, their largest population is in UP. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the SP won 37 seats of which five were Pasi candidates — from the BJP, three such candidates won.

With the Mayawati-led BSP steadily declining in UP — its vote share fell from 22.23% in the 2017 Assembly election to 12.88% five years later — everyone, from the SP and the Congress to the Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) led by Chandrashekhar Aazad is trying to fill that space.

The SP and Congress have both been working to reach out to Dalits by regularly invoking BR Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram. This year, both parties held programmes across the state on Ambedkar's birth anniversary on April 14.

After receiving overwhelming support from the Dalit community in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the SP and Congress are both working to ensure that Dalits (around 20% of UP's total population) support them in next year's Assembly election.

## Clouded outlook

Policy makers need to remain agile

The United States, according to reports, has rejected the latest proposal sent by Iran to end the stalemate. This means the uncertainty in West Asia continues with no clarity as to when the blockade in the Strait of Hormuz will be lifted and when oil and gas will resume their flow. Nearly one-fifth of global crude oil passes through the strait. Since not much has flowed through this route from the time of the beginning of the conflict on February 28, global prices of crude oil remain elevated. Higher prices are creating difficulties in most parts of the world, including India. After much delay, state-run oil-marketing companies (OMCs) have started adjusting pump prices. In cases of a sudden spike in prices of crude oil, governments often face the dilemma of whether to absorb the increase or pass it on to consumers. An analytical post published by the International Monetary Fund on Wednesday offers some policy insights.

It rightly notes that there is no one-size-fits-all response. The impact of the conflict in West Asia depends on, among other things, energy dependence, market structure, and fiscal space. Sustained higher prices can affect households' purchasing power and strain businesses. However, if the government response is not designed carefully, it can prove costly and difficult to unwind. Thus, the fiscal response needs to be temporary, timely and targeted. It suggests that domestic energy prices be allowed to reflect the costs. Vulnerable households can be provided temporary and targeted support, while viable small businesses can be supported through liquidity measures and not price controls. In India, the government has announced a credit-guarantee scheme to support businesses, along with a special arrangement for airlines. However, it has not allowed domestic prices to reflect the international costs. It has reduced the special additional excise duty, which will directly hit its Budget arithmetic.

Until recently, OMCs were reported to be facing underrecoveries worth ₹1,000 crore per day. After two modest increases in petrol and diesel prices, they have come down, but more needs to be done because the losses of the OMCs will ultimately hit government finances. The suggestion to support vulnerable households is more difficult to implement in the Indian context because of targeting issues. Measuring the extent to which a household is affected will be difficult, and it could easily become a political issue. For instance, the government provides free food grain to over 800 million people, which is hard to justify. Besides, the government is protecting farmers, and arguably consumers as well, by not allowing fertiliser prices to adjust.

Thus, overall, there are no easy answers in terms of managing the situation. Nevertheless, the government needs to allow greater price adjustment because the situation could worsen further. Analysts argue that the price impact of the Iran conflict has thus far been muted because countries have been running down their reserves. But that cannot last very long. As a result, prices may increase substantially in the coming weeks, and the availability of oil and gas could become an issue if the conflict isn't resolved quickly. Therefore, Indian policy managers have to remain agile in responding to the situation. A combination of price adjustment, fiscal support, and supply management may need to be adopted for all fuel categories. At a broader level, the world is paying the price for a fractured global governance system in which some countries can unilaterally start wars and hold the entire global economy hostage without facing any consequences.

## Reorienting usage

Coal gasification can reduce import dependence

The Union Cabinet's approval of a ₹37,500 crore incentive scheme for coal gasification marks a significant shift. The revised framework substantially raises state support, up to ₹3,000 crore per project from the earlier ₹1,000 crore for private firms and ₹1,350 crore for public-sector units. For decades, coal in India has largely been treated as a fuel to be burnt for electricity. Gasification changes that logic. Instead of direct combustion, coal is chemically converted into synthesis gas, or syngas, which can then be used to produce methanol, ammonia, urea, synthetic natural gas, and hydrogen. Thus, coal becomes industrial feedstock rather than merely a combustion fuel. This matters because India's import vulnerability extends beyond crude oil. While the country imports nearly 88 per cent of the crude oil it needs, it also imports over 90 per cent of its methanol and significant quantities of liquefied natural gas and ammonia, which are used in fertiliser production. Coal gasification offers a domestic alternative in sectors where import dependence remains structurally high. Estimates suggest that a scaled-up gasification ecosystem could reduce imports by as much as \$15 billion annually.

India is well positioned for such a transition. The country produced more than 1 billion tonnes of coal in FY25 and possesses one of the world's largest coal reserves. However, nearly 80 per cent of the mined coal is still directly burnt for power generation. Since much of Indian coal has high ash content and a lower calorific value, direct combustion is relatively inefficient and polluting. Gasification offers a more value-added pathway in this respect. Hard-to-abate sectors (industries where reducing greenhouse gas emissions is technically or economically challenging) such as steel, chemicals and fertilisers require hydrogen, chemical feedstock, and high-temperature fuels. Gasification can produce grey hydrogen immediately and potentially blue hydrogen if integrated with carbon-capture systems. The policy push is now translating into projects. The Odisha plant of Talcher Fertilizers will be India's first coal gasification-based urea complex and is expected to produce 1.27 million tonnes annually. Private participation is also growing. Jindal Steel's Angul facility is already among the world's largest syngas-based steel plants, with additional projects planned in other parts of the country. Joint ventures involving Coal India, Gail and Bharat Heavy Electricals are also attempting to build an integrated gasification ecosystem.

Still, the challenges are substantial. Gasification projects are capital-intensive, technologically complex, and highly sensitive to global price cycles. China recognised decades ago the value of coal gasification and continued investing through commodity cycles. Today it dominates coal-derived methanol and ammonia production. India, despite similar coal advantages, remained hesitant. There is also the risk that excessive dependence on coal-linked infrastructure could slow the shift to renewable energy and green hydrogen. But the debate should not be framed as a choice between coal and clean energy alone. India's transition will inevitably differ from that of advanced economies. Coal will remain part of the economy for some time. The more relevant question is whether India continues burning it inefficiently or uses it in cleaner, higher-value industrial pathways. Gasification, if executed strategically, offers the latter possibility.

# Gaps in inflation targeting

A credible framework requires credible measures of price expectations

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



There is little doubt that India's inflation-targeting framework succeeded in reducing inflation. Before its introduction, India faced persistently high inflation, negative real interest rates, and recurring macroeconomic instability. The inflation rate often neared double digits, hurting household savings and creating uncertainty for investors. The post-inflation-targeting period has been markedly different, with lower inflation and greater monetary-policy credibility. Any serious discussion must begin by acknowledging this success.

But success should not prevent us from recognising a growing weakness. Have these gains come at the cost of excessive growth sacrifice? Unfortunately, the answer is "yes". The problem is rigidity. In an economy in which food prices are volatile and driven by geopolitics, and future inflation is difficult to measure reliably, targeting inflation based largely on past reported numbers can make monetary policy dangerously pro-cyclical, amplifying rather than stabilising business cycles.

The fundamental problem is that reported inflation reflects the past while interest rates affect the future. For instance, the latest inflation figure for April measures price changes between last April and this April. But the real interest rate relevant for investment depends on future inflation. As a result, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) often discovers the true real interest rate only after the fact. This makes actual real rates extremely volatile if the RBI's decision making is based on reported inflation.

The first major example of this problem emerged soon after inflation targeting was introduced. India's forward-looking real policy rate between 2015-16 and 2018-19 turned out to be close to 3 per cent, among the highest in the world. This occurred when the banking system itself was in crisis. Public-sector banks were burdened with stressed assets, credit growth had weakened sharply, and lending spreads had risen. Borrowers, therefore, faced double-digit tightening. Higher spreads from banks also extremely tight monetary policy.

This approach ignored a key lesson from the global financial crisis: Policy rates cannot ignore financial con-

ditions. What matters is the effective borrowing cost. When banking stress pushes spreads up sharply, the neutral policy rate itself should fall. In fact, the modified Taylor Rule explicitly incorporated financial spreads and credit conditions. Yet in India, real policy rates remained high even as the banking system weakened and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) entered a period of crisis. The framework proved excessively focused on reported inflation while underestimating deteriorating financial conditions.

The outcome was predictable. Growth slowed sharply and fell below 4 per cent in 2019. Inflation targeting succeeded in reducing inflation, but it also imposed very high borrowing costs during one of the weakest credit environments India had faced in decades. Assessing the framework's success without accounting for the resulting growth sacrifice is therefore economically misleading.

The same pattern repeated after Covid, though this time inflation was driven largely by food and supply-side disruption rather than generalised overheating. As the inflation rate crossed the upper limit of the tolerance band, the RBI entered an aggressive tightening cycle and raised the repo rate to 6.5 per cent, arguing that real rates were not excessively high because reported inflation remained elevated. But this interpretation later proved misleading. The actual inflation rate for 2023-24 eventually collapsed to around 2 per cent, implying ex-post real interest rates close to 4 per cent, among the highest in the world. The monetary policy, which initially appeared only moderately restrictive, turned out to have been extraordinarily tight, keeping the rupee overvalued for an extended period and hurting India's international competitiveness.

Now a third episode may be unfolding in the reverse direction. Only months ago, commentators were celebrating a supposed "Goldilocks" phase of low inflation and strong growth. As the reported inflation rate fell below the 4 per cent target, the RBI began cutting rates again. But even before the Iran conflict intensified, warning signs were visible. Borrowing by

state governments was rising sharply, partly driven by an increasingly entrenched freebie culture, open market operations were indirectly monetising government borrowing, geopolitical tensions were rising globally, and government bond yields had risen more than 60 basis points over the year despite lower short-term rates. Yet policy discussion continued to focus narrowly on current inflation prints. A forward-looking assessment would likely have concluded that inflation risks were not truly benign and that at least the last couple of rate cuts were premature.

The Iran conflict has made this situation far more complicated. Oil prices could rise sharply, and the headline inflation rate may again cross the upper tolerance band. If that happens, there is a real danger that the RBI may once again react mechanically to reported inflation. Rates could be raised at precisely the wrong moment, kept high for too long, and only later discovered to have produced another episode of excessively tight real interest rates.

This is the central problem with backward-looking inflation targeting in a volatile emerging economy. When inflation is driven by temporary food or fuel shocks, the key question should not simply be whether the inflation rate breaches 6 per cent. The more important questions are forward-looking: How much inflation reflects excess liquidity and rising expectations versus temporary supply shocks, how long the shocks will last, and whether inflationary pressures will persist beyond the initial disruption. These are ultimately judgement calls, especially in a country with limited high-quality data.

None of this means India should abandon inflation-targeting altogether. Countries with histories of macroeconomic instability benefit from nominal anchors. But a credible inflation-targeting framework requires credible measures of inflation expectations. At present, inflation expectations in India are inferred largely from surveys, which often fail to reflect actual pricing behaviour. Spikes in food prices can temporarily inflate survey responses even when firms and long-term contracts do not adjust immediately, while temporary declines in the food inflation rate can mask persistent underlying inflationary pressures.

India, therefore, needs much better ways of measuring expected inflation. Rental agreements, school-fee contracts, wage revisions, supplier agreements, and contracts with built-in price escalation clauses may provide better signals of future inflation than household surveys. Financial-market signals should also be used more systematically, and surveys need better calibration using actual outcomes and recent research on inflation expectations. More India-specific research on how inflation expectations are formed is urgently needed.

Until then, competent and independent central bankers exercising judgement may be preferable to mechanical adherence to backward-looking inflation numbers.

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PRASANNA TANTRI

# A case for affordable urban housing

In most developing economies, the city is where productivity concentrates, wages rise, and growth compounds. India is rapidly urbanising and its urban centres are striving to absorb that growth at scale. However, there is one domain where urban policy has not kept pace relative to the scale of the opportunity. It is housing. Not because the problem is unacknowledged, but because it has been often misunderstood and sometimes even misclassified. Affordable urban housing has been treated as welfare policy or a redistribution question, sitting somewhere between subsidy and charity. That framing fundamentally misreads what housing does in an economy. Like roads or power grids, housing is infrastructure that underpins everything a productivity does. India's deficit of it is not merely a social problem. It is a macroeconomic opportunity of considerable scale, and one that remains, for now, largely unrealised.

Applying the United Nations' framework for household deprivation, a report by a NITI Aayog committee in December last year estimated a housing deficit of 50 million, 70 million units across metro, urban, and semi-urban areas. A Confederation of Indian Industry-Knight Frank projection adds urgency: Even on conservative assumptions, the urban deficit will reach 31.2 million units by 2030. The government's "Housing for All" programme aims to add 10 million urban units by 2029, covering a share of the need, with much of the gap still requiring structural reform.

The economic case is well established, and not unique to India. Housing is among the most deeply networked sectors in any economy, with linkages spanning cement, steel, logistics, paint, and financial services. A landmark study by the International Labour Organization—the study was done between 1995 and 2009 and across 45 countries—found that output multipliers in construction were consistently higher than the economy-wide average across all

income groups. In middle-income economies, an investment of \$1 million generated roughly 36 times that amount in broader output. India's own data confirms the sector's dynamism: Construction in 2024-25 posted a real growth rate of 8.6 per cent in gross value added, the highest among major sectors, according to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. The question is not whether construction generates growth but whether India is directing that investment towards the part of the housing market where the need and multiplier are the greatest.

Additionally, the construction sector consistently demonstrates high employment elasticity, standing out for its responsiveness to investment.

Yet most jobs generated are characterised by low wages and informality. As of 2022, 70 per cent of unskilled construction workers did not receive the prescribed daily minimum wages. The sector employs over 50 million workers, but without security, without wages that feed meaningfully into consumption, and therefore without unlocking the full induced multiplier that makes housing investment truly transformative in lower-middle-income countries, the induced effect is suppressed when wages are too low. Fix the wages, formalise the workforce, and the housing multiplier grows larger.

India has not been indifferent to the crisis. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban), which received a 36 per cent increase in budgetary allocation to ₹20,71 crore in 2024-25, represents the most ambitious housing programme the country has attempted. But it is built around home ownership, which requires land, creditworthiness, and stable income, precisely what the urban poor lack. The "beneficiary-led construction" component supports those who already hold land. Credit-linked subsidy favours households with formal incomes. The result is that the programme reaches a large number of people just above the truly

excluded, while the landless migrant, the informal worker, the daily-wage earner sleeping on a pavement remain outside its reach.

India's cities need to consider a large-scale, publicly anchored rental housing system. For households earning below ₹15,000 a month in cities like Mumbai, Delhi, or Bengaluru, ownership is simply not a viable near-term aspiration. Land prices, interest rates, and loan tenures make it arithmetically impossible. Rental housing, built on publicly owned land leased to private developers for 50-60 year terms, with regulated rents and long-tenor debt backed by rental income, can reach those households. India's urban population, at 500 million in 2021, is projected to reach 850 million by 2050, according to the NITI Aayog. That is 350 million more people, roughly the current population of the United States, arriving in cities. Without a structural housing solution, those people will not disappear. They will build more slums, strain more infrastructure, and crowd into low-income neighbourhoods. China offers the most instructive mirror. Through land reforms, state-enabled developer markets, and aggressive mortgage expansion, it dramatically expanded its housing stock during its most rapid economic growth.

A country urbanising at India's pace, with a construction sector that generates outsized economic returns and a housing deficit concentrated almost entirely among its working population, has the ingredients of a significant growth story. The institutional pieces are falling into place: Conversation on land reform is live, and rental housing frameworks are being debated. What the moment calls for is a shift in how the question is framed: from how much we can spend on housing the poor to how much growth we are leaving unrealised by not doing so. That reframing, more than any single scheme or budget line, is where the opportunity begins.

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# The story of the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra



CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

How do you tell the story of a river that originates in Tibet, flows through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, then journeys across Bangladesh, and empties itself eventually into the Bay of Bengal? It is not an easy task but veteran journalist Sanjoy Hazarika takes on the challenge with his book *River Traveller*, a chronicle of his travels on and along "The Tsangpo-Brahmaputra".

He is not an aloof commentator. There is a personal, intimate connection with the river. As the founder of the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Mr Hazarika lives near a forest in Shillong, and travels exten-

sively across the northeast and its neighbourhood. He has also worked on documentary films that engage with the river's past and present, and launched boat clinics that provide health care services to people living on islands prone to floods.

Mr Hazarika's book will appeal to environmentalists, historians, diplomats, anthropologists, political scientists, bureaucrats, and activists as well as readers who enjoy reading travelogues. He covers subjects as diverse as geopolitics, folklore, poaching of dolphins, river pirates, the politics of migration, sand mining, and wandering Sufis. Moving confidently across systems of knowledge, and making them accessible, are his skills.

Mr Hazarika's curiosity, wonder, open acknowledgement of his ignorance, and the willingness to fill the gaps in his understanding make the book genuinely inviting. This is how one earns the reader's trust; not by hiding behind an authoritative voice that lacks

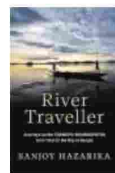
intellectual humility.

He does not limit himself to learning from people like university professors, scientists, government officials, and policy wonks who are usually seen as experts. He cares about what drivers, boat builders, daily wage earners, singers, and tea plantation workers have to say, for they have valuable insights into the socio-economic, cultural and political life of the river.

This, however, does not mean that *River Traveller* is deficient in terms of scholarly citation. It is clear that Mr Hazarika has read widely, be it on the history of the Ahom dynasty, China's occupation of Tibet, water diplomacy, tourism, the customs of indigenous people, and climate change skills.

The author is also able to put himself in the shoes of people distant from him in time and space, and imagine them in corporeal terms. This is evident, for instance, when he writes about Nain Singh Rawat, an "incredibly fit" Kumaoni man employed by the British

as a spy to explore the Himalayas and map Tibet. "At his age (36), I certainly would not have been able to make it and certainly not more than a fourth or fifth of the distance covered every day," notes Mr Hazarika, with admiration, because Rawat covered that 500 miles in 37 days in the chilly Tibetan winter that is also worth noting that the author used various modes of transport on his river journeys, including "large ferries, small dugouts, rubber dinghies and mid-sized country boats". He trekked, cycled, flew, and was driven around. His reflections are shaped by the nature of transport as well because the body processes each experience differently. Comfort or the lack of it is only one aspect of this; who he got to speak with was also determined by how he travelled.



River Traveller: Journeys on the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra from Tibet to the Bay of Bengal by Sanjoy Hazarika. Published by Speaking Tree. 400 pages ₹999

Alongside the thrill, Mr Hazarika captures the toll that intense fieldwork can take. He is candid about "the accumulated stress and exhaustion", and even mentions an incident when a minor disagreement with a member of his film unit made him feel so vulnerable that he "could not stop weeping". It is not common for male researchers in India to talk about such experiences. Hopefully, the author's decision to share will reassure other researchers that they are not alone.

Through his words, the river comes alive as a home to multiple species, a cultural archive, an economic engine, a muse for the artistically inclined, the site of battle between nations, and a friend to those who seek solace. In a nutshell, a river is not merely a natural resource to be exploited for the sake of human needs, which are always put above the needs of others. Mr Hazarika writes, "I have seen its

beauty and faced its wrath, been stuck on sandbanks and swept out to sea. I've been caught in fierce storms and sailed through shimmering glass-like surfaces, the best of both worlds: stress and the reflection of sky and clouds." His prose strikes a chord because it does not come across as a stack of information that is eager to educate. It is deeply felt, and the feelings are shared without embarrassment or apology. It reveals the range of emotional states a river can evoke in a human—awe, fear, joy, nostalgia, and a sense of belonging.

It is a pity then that China is building the Medog hydroelectric project, "a monster dam on the bend of the Tsangpo" disregarding environmental concerns. Mr Hazarika notes that "it will not just impact Tibet's ecology but has the potential to adversely affect life downstream in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Bangladesh." The US government has traditionally been an ally to the Tibetan cause but Donald Trump may not want to arouse Xi Jinping's ire over this.

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OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | MYTHS AND MANTRAS



# Greater transparency is good for Indian banking

RBI's move to align bank disclosures with international norms is welcome. Making its own bank-inspection reports public might also support the cause of improved market discipline

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has put out a draft amendment to its earlier directions on prudential norms for the capital adequacy of commercial banks. It deals with Pillar 3 (disclosure requirements) of the Basel III framework, adopted by RBI in 2013. The rationale, according to the central bank, is to ensure greater consistency with that framework, as prescribed by the Bank for International Settlements, the global collective of central banks. Its three pillars cover minimum capital ratios, supervisory review processes and market discipline. The third pillar aims to keep markets informed about the financial status of banks through a regulatory mandate to disclose vital information that has no legitimate claim to secrecy.

The draft circular hits the nail on its head by stating that the provision of "meaningful information about common key risk metrics to market participants is a fundamental tenet of a sound banking system" as it "reduces information asymmetry and helps promote comparability of a bank's risk profile within and across jurisdictions." The business of banking is, by definition, characterized by a certain degree of opacity, thanks to its underlying principle of customer confidentiality. Information asymmetry—where one side knows more than the other—is almost a given. This is where Pillar 3 hopes to make a difference. By stipulating what exactly a bank must disclose, it enables market participants to access key information on a bank's risk exposure and capital cushion designed to absorb any losses that may arise from operations. The broad idea is to increase transparency and confidence in a bank's ability to withstand financial blows. However, the

adequacy of regulatory capital *per se* and good supervision are no guarantee against bank failure. A lender with more than the mandated level of capital as a fraction of its risk-weighted assets may still falter. After all, banking is not only about taking risks on credit and interest rate exposure, to mention just two; at its core, it is "accepting for the purpose of lending or investment of deposits of money from the public," as Section 5 of the Banking Regulation Act of 1949 states. Note the words "from the public." It is people at large who have the most at stake in ensuring bank resilience.

For the public to watch out for itself, people must have access to information that is typically the preserve of the sector's supervisor—RBI, in our case. Regulation must strike an appropriate balance between what must be kept confidential and what's placed in the public domain. The draft circular is right to say disclosures must be clear, comprehensive, regular, meaningful to users, consistent over time, comparable across banks, etc. By extending these norms even to banks that are not listed on stock exchanges, it ends the differential treatment of widely held and unlisted banks. This is wise. What's less so is an exclusion granted to what RBI terms "exceptional cases," where disclosing some items required by Pillar 3 may reveal the position of a bank or contravene its legal obligations on proprietary or confidential data. In such cases, general information and an explanation of what is being withheld and why would suffice. This relaxation seems both inexplicable and unwarranted, as it is precisely such cases that may call for greater transparency. In fact, a key step in improving bank transparency would be for RBI to make its inspection reports public, a move that it has steadfastly resisted.

# What explains the rush to sell us global and private credit funds?

Most appear to be chasing retail investor money that is flowing into these as part of the latest fad



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Remember what fund managers were telling you in the last quarter of 2025—that you must have gold in your portfolio? It included even those who advised you just a year or two before to sell the 'unproductive' gold you had at home and put it all in equities. Indian equity markets did not do well and gold did, so the advice changed. Unfortunately, this change came far too late.

Investments from Indian investors into gold funds and exchange traded funds (ETFs) peaked in January, even exceeding equity flows. Since then, the rupee has fallen, import duty has been imposed and the gold price is still down. The talking heads on TV have also moved on. What are you listening to these days? Some offer their seemingly wise counsel on why you should invest globally (usually in a Gift City product they have launched) or advise going into fixed income, especially private credit, which is where a number of new fund structures have been launched.

What is all this about? At one level, it is about driving—or rather, investing your money—looking backwards. In whatever has done well of late. But the actual reason for this is that the asset management industry is really an asset gathering industry. The revenues of fund managers depend on the assets they gather and hence the focus is not on what would make the investor money now but on 'under which theme

the investor will give us money today.' We plotted the clustering of thematic funds since the start of the mutual fund industry in India almost three decades ago. The pattern has not changed.

When did technology funds cluster? Just weeks before the global tech crash of 2000. Engineering and infrastructure funds? A little before the 2009 downturn, with the industry in doldrums for the next 12 years. In 2021? It was Nasdaq or China/Greater China. Then all of them crashed the following year, with Nasdaq becoming almost the worst performing index in the world for 2022.

This is a theme (pun intended) you would see play out every time new fund offerings (NFOs) cluster in a particular category, be it geography, sector or size (small cap versus large cap). Usually, investors lose money or underperform on such investments because most such NFOs come around the end of the bull run for that theme. But why do fund houses launch funds for themes which have already largely run their course? Don't they understand that risks are high and big returns unlikely?

Of course they do. But they also understand that this is when you, the retail investor, have come to understand that theme. Maybe you even have some FOMO (fear of missing out) because your friends supposedly made money on, say, public sector unit stocks or defence or some other theme. Or conversely, you have not made money on your portfolio and are looking to reverse your fortunes, which is where the current push for global funds and private credit is coming from.

Sell dreams of a new El Dorado and investors participate enthusiastically. That usually doesn't end well for investors but the objective of the fund house of gathering assets is met. And when the new scheme does not perform? I have seen asset management company (AMC) CEOs being asked on stage how they felt when a fund they launched was down substantially (in one case, it was a fund investing in a narrow list of global

tech stocks; in another, it was a defence stock fund), the answers were similar. The CEOs shrugged and said that they felt nothing as they were only offering a product and it was up to the investor to decide whether to invest in it!

Back to the Gift City products. Am I saying that you should not invest globally? Of course not. Mine has been among the very few voices saying for years that investing in India, which is a microscopic portion of global market capitalization, is not enough and that the rupee has depreciated almost 90% in the course of my career. The first four chapters of my book are about how asset allocation should include fixed income and global assets and how globalization does not mean only US markets.

So what is going wrong? For one, most fund houses offering Gift City products do not have global expertise. They are there because money is coming in. Most of these fund managers are on record as having had at the most one global index fund even in their personal portfolios two or three years ago and now they have repositioned themselves as global fund managers. This also shows in the performance of the half-a-dozen Gift City products, that have been around for over a year. Every scheme is down for six months and, with one exception, has underperformed the almost 21% rise in a year for the global equity index.

As someone who has run a global investment firm since 1999 and managed global assets for the past 11 years, I can tell you that global stocks and markets are complex. It takes years to understand them in depth. You cannot wake up one day and launch a fund and expect it to perform.

As for private credit, the principle is that the fixed income part of your portfolio is there to reduce risk and volatility in your portfolio, not increase it. The combination of illiquidity and credit exposure to companies not getting funded by banks is deadly, as investors in Western global private credit funds have just discovered. More on that another time.

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

# Apple and Berkshire: are their best years behind them?

RAHUL JACOB



is a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

Shareholders at Berkshire Hathaway's early-May annual general meeting, often described as a pilgrimage for many who idolize Warren Buffett, might have been puzzled by some aspects of CEO Greg Abel's presentation. Abel, a long-time lieutenant to Buffett who took over as CEO at the beginning of this year, underlined that he planned to continue with the Buffett tradition of buying undervalued businesses. One of the examples Abel highlighted was Bell Laboratories. After being approached by Bell's CEO, Berkshire had bought the business with annual revenues of less than \$100 million. The company is known for being an efficient producer of chemicals that kill rodents. Abel candidly said, "We only wish it had been ten times bigger."

Instead of being an acquisition to boast about, Bell Laboratories is emblematic of the huge challenge Berkshire and Abel face in the years to come. Buffett is stepping on as chairman, but the last significant investments he made were in large amounts of

Apple Inc.'s shares (from 2016) and the equity of five Japanese trading houses (in 2020). This year marks a transition at the top of Apple as well, with Tim Cook about to step down as CEO after a 15-year stint. Apple's profits this year are expected to be in excess of \$125 billion, a fivefold jump from when he became CEO. The dysfunctional company that he took over from visionary founder Steve Jobs has become a byword for supply chain efficiency and spawned a host of successful Chinese companies in the bargain. Patrick McGee, the author of a book on Apple in China, argued recently that the mythology around Jobs' Apple turnaround that climaxed in the 2007 launch of the iPhone overlooks that the company was a kind of "manufacturing hell". Cook's big achievement was to focus on building a supremely efficient supply chain in China and pivoting the company to one in which 40% of its revenues are from services.

But as Cook prepares to step down, large questions loom over the high performer he built. By outsourcing production to China, Cook, who once described himself as "Attila the Hun of inventory," has helped build China into a high-value manufacturing behemoth. As McGee notes, BYD, which started as a supplier of Apple's metal casings and then

became a big assembler of Apple products and titanium alloy components, has transformed itself into a leading electrical vehicle company. One may wonder why Apple did not similarly capitalize on its manufacturing prowess. Apart from the fact that various Apple products (like wearables) never gained much traction, it is widely seen as laggard artificial intelligence.

While OpenAI, Google and Claude dominate the AI conversation, Apple must also fend off new challenges in smartphones from lower-cost Chinese producers as well as from new rivals that excel at AI offerings. As Richard Waters, who covers Silicon Valley for the *Financial Times*, wrote last month, "AI isn't just another service, like search, that Apple can collect a fee on. It's a technology that changes the way computers are programmed and controlled, and it promises entirely new experiences and services... if other developers are drawn to creating apps that run on top of AI, the models could become major computing

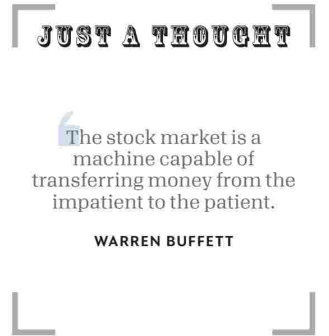
platforms in their own right." In time, this could lead to operating systems like Apple's proprietary iOS receding from the prime position they hold today. Then again, monetizing AI may prove more difficult than the hype suggests. Waters says that it is possible AI will be far less of a game-changer.

The reputations of Apple and Berkshire's new CEOs may seem Lilliputian in comparison with their predecessors, but the parallels end there. The challenge for Berkshire Hathaway is that its mission of finding value is no longer relevant in a market where the high performers are highly priced tech shares. Even with Buffett, 95, continuing as chairman, its problem is that hunting for large acquisitions has become a somewhat existential dilemma. Berkshire's old 'Buffett premium' has been replaced by a 'conglomerate discount,' which is arguably a fairer estimation of a company with more than 50 diverse businesses, excluding its insurance business run by Ajit Jain. Berkshire made its name for value investing in a

world that was the very opposite of the momentum game practised by hedge funds and day traders in the US. In what seems like an almost perpetual bull market, Berkshire's class B shares are down about 13% in the past year, against a US stock market that rose by 26% over the same period.

Apple still benefits from the supply-chain skills that Cook honed over the past decade and a half, including a quick shift of some assembly lines to India. Apple conforms to what Buffett described as a business with wide "economic moats," or almost impregnable advantages. This was the kind of company he invested in for decades, such as Gillette and American Express.

This week, the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that Apple had salvaged some silicon chips that had slight defects. Instead of discarding them, Apple ingeniously used them to power the MacBook Neo, its lowest-priced computer offering at \$599. By contrast, Buffett said this month that in six decades of investing, he had seen a case for being greedy just half a dozen times. He is inclined to be patient, but Berkshire has a cash hoard approaching \$400 billion. Against that backdrop, acquiring a small rodent control company underlines how the sun may be setting on Berkshire's long-held strategy.





THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# East Asia's manufacturing model can't be imported by everyone

Times have changed and competing in world markets now calls for capabilities that are relatively scarce in poorer countries



**DANI RODRIK**

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BLOOMBERG

**A**t a gathering of academics and policymakers at Harvard this month, a participant reminded me that I had published a column 15 years ago on 'The Manufacturing Imperative.' As the title suggests, the piece emphasized the importance of industrialization in driving economic growth, creating good jobs, and building a middle class. "This is one of my all-time favourite articles," the policymaker from Africa told the audience.

There is scarcely a greater reward for a scholar than having his ideas resonate strongly with the people for whom he writes. But in this case, a gentle rebuke came along with the praise. What I had written in that column and many other places at the time seemed to conflict sharply with the arguments I was making at this conference about the limits of manufacturing.

The contradiction was real. In recent years, I have become sceptical about the viability of the traditional industrialization-led growth model. I have argued for a different model of economic growth, emphasizing the development of productive capabilities in labour-absorbing, mostly non-tradable services. I have warned policymakers in Africa and other developing regions that trying to emulate the East Asian model would produce, at best, manufacturing enclaves, with a tiny sliver of productive firms integrated into global value chains while the bulk of the labour force remains stuck in low-productivity activities.

Mexico exemplifies this outcome. As Santiago Levy, a former Mexican deputy minister of finance, pointed out at the same conference, Mexico's exports of manufactured goods have increased more than tenfold since the country joined the US and Canada to form the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) in 1994. At the doorstep of a giant market and with policymakers determined to promote foreign trade and inward investment, few countries were blessed with better circumstances for export-oriented industrialization. Yet Mexico's overall economic performance has been dismal, even by the underwhelming standards of Latin America with a declining productivity trajectory.

What made manufacturing the powerful economic escalator it used to be was that it could employ large numbers of low-skilled workers while making limited demands on low-income countries' governance and infrastructure. Today's manufacturing is different. Competing successfully on world markets and with China at home requires skills, technologies and other capabilities that are in short supply in poorer countries—precisely because they are poor. Manufacturing no longer offers a shortcut that sidesteps these fundamental constraints. The result is that even when countries manage to pull

more workers into manufacturing, this happens through the expansion of small-scale, mostly informal, enterprises and at the expense of productivity. This is the story of industrialization in Ethiopia, which once represented the hope that the East Asian model could be transplanted in Africa. The expansion of factory employment and an increase in manufacturing productivity used to go hand in hand in early industrializers such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan; they now move in opposite directions in Ethiopia, Bangladesh, India and even Vietnam.

I became a manufacturing sceptic reluctantly. The evidence was hard to ignore, as manufacturing technologies became more sophisticated and the failure of countries outside East Asia to industrialize successfully became more apparent. I began to consider alternative growth strategies not because I came to think of broad-based industrialization as less desirable, but because I became convinced it was less feasible. As John Maynard Keynes reputedly said, "When the facts change, I change my mind; what do you do, sir?"

Here is a sobering calculation. Of the two billion workers in the developing world today, I estimate that roughly three-quarters (1.5 billion) are in occupations that neither require university education nor are exposed to the international economy through trade or offshoring. These are subsistence farmers, street vendors, retail and food service workers, casual workers, and others in non-traded occupations. Their numbers will only increase in the years ahead, even if their share of the total declines somewhat. The critical question facing policymakers is how to enhance the economic opportunities of these workers. The numbers make it painfully clear that neither industrialization nor education can be the answer, as desirable as these may be. Finding ways to increase the productivity of workers in labour-absorbing services will be crucial; otherwise, gains in living standards cannot be sustained.

Non-traded services have traditionally been a drag on economic growth. Many policymakers are accordingly pessimistic about their potential. But this may be changing. Something akin to a revolution in services productivity has been underway, most visibly in advanced economies, through organizational innovations, the use of digital platforms and other new technologies. For developing economies as a whole, the last three decades have been a rare period of rapid economic growth and convergence with advanced economies. Remarkably, it is services, not manufacturing, that is responsible for this outcome. As the economists Tianyu Fan, Michael Peters, and Fabrizio Zilibotti show in detailed empirical work, India's remarkable economic growth has been driven by productivity gains in consumer services such as retail and hospitality produced for local markets, not in skill-intensive, exportable services such as information and communications technology and business process outsourcing for which the country is well known. The authors have documented a similar mechanism at work in Sub-Saharan Africa's rapidly growing economies as well.

The evidence suggests the possibility of a virtuous cycle of economic growth built on middle-class services. Expansion of the middle class shifts consumer demand toward higher-quality and more productive services, which in turn enables the rise in workers' incomes that underpins the middle class. But the process is not automatic. There is an important role for the government in facilitating the requisite productivity enhancements.

As Rohan Sandhu of Harvard Kennedy School and I have argued, many successful experiments around the world already provide proof of concept. They include initiatives that encourage platform companies to employ local inputs and workers, assist micro enterprises with training and certification and provide customized artificial intelligence and other technological tools adapted to developing-country circumstances. Dedicated efforts along these lines can build a more reliable, more inclusive growth model. Without them, the vast majority of workers in the developing world will be left in precarity, isolated from the high-productivity enclaves linked to the global economy.

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# Altman beat Musk in court but OpenAI could lose Wall Street

This case may well have left the AI firm's reputation under a cloud



**DAYE LEE**

is Bloomberg Opinion's US technology columnist.



Altman's OpenAI is expected to launch a public offer of equity this year.

**W**e have all been in meetings that "could have been an email," so why not have a jury trial that could have been an AI prompt?

"Is Elon Musk able to sue OpenAI for breach of contract?" we might have asked an artificial intelligence (AI) model before the three-week circus at a federal court in downtown Oakland, California. "No," should have been the AI model's answer. "He is too late."

That was the jury's antimiscellaneous verdict on Musk's effort to sue Sam Altman, OpenAI and Microsoft over transforming OpenAI from a non-profit into a for-profit concern—or "stealing a charity," as Musk put it more than a dozen times while on the stand. The jury took about two hours to rule unanimously that the statute of limitations for Musk's claims had expired. The judge agreed, and that was that.

Musk's lawyers vowed an appeal, but didn't specify what they will argue.

At the start of the trial, I suggested that asking an Oakland jury to choose between Musk and Altman was like asking them to pick between a "slap in the face or a knee to the groin." Shrewdly enough, the jurors opted to avoid both. Yet, while they passed on the opportunity to deliver a verdict on Altman's integrity in creating OpenAI, Wall Street still might.

If there is one thing of any value to take from the trial, it is the ever-darkening cloud over Altman's suitability as a custodian of one of the most important companies in the world. Especially telling over the course of this trial was just how many of Altman's earliest allies now seem to want little to do with him.

Yes, Altman and OpenAI won't the case. Potential for appeal aside, the decision seems to have stamped off the immediate threat that OpenAI in its current form would be dismantled, scuttling what is expected to be one of the most lucrative initial public offerings (IPOs) ever. That is good news for Altman and good news for markets too: Who knows what kind of immediate ripple effect would have been created had one of the biggest planned spenders on AI computing power been faced with abolition.

Yet, as I noted when this trial was getting underway, Musk would be a partial victim even in loss, given the distraction and reputational damage caused to OpenAI as America's big AI firms—Musk's own included—head for public listings.

Was Musk portrayed in court as untrustworthy, hypocritical and bulling? Did he come across as brash and argumentative? On

the stand? Well, sure. Hold the front page. Investors know what they are getting with Musk. But they still seem to be figuring out what they get with Altman.

Five witnesses took the stand to question Altman's honesty. Musk's lawyer Steven Molo pointed out in his closing, "People who have worked with him called him a liar under oath; that's a very powerful word." The jury heard passages from a 52-page memo written by co-founder and former close friend Ilya Sutskever to OpenAI's board in which he described Altman as exhibiting "a consistent pattern of lying, undermining his excess, and pitting his excess against one another." Mira Murati, formerly OpenAI's chief technology officer, told Altman in a memo that his leadership "generates chaos and churn."

OpenAI's current president, Greg Brockman, did not come off much better; his personal diaries revealed an intense private focus on increasing his net worth when OpenAI was billing itself as the AI firm that was building the tech for the good of humanity. "What will take me to \$1B?" Brockman wrote in 2017. Today, his stake in OpenAI is worth almost \$30 billion, the court heard.

OpenAI was further exposed as a bit of a hot mess of a company. "It was amateur city as far as I'm concerned," said Satya Nadella, Microsoft's chief executive officer, when recalling the days surrounding Altman's dramatic ouster from OpenAI in 2023. At the time, Microsoft was left scrambling to reassure its investors that its AI strategy was not falling apart.

Throughout the trial, Microsoft sought to distance itself from just about all of OpenAI's origin story. Fast-forward to today, Microsoft is doing what it can to decouple its own fate from that of OpenAI, renegotiating a soured partnership between the two tech firms.

We will never know if the jury was convinced by Altman when he said "I believe I am a truthful person." But Wall Street might take that question into account if and when the company attempts to go public. Maybe investors might prefer calmer waters. While this trial played out, rival AI shop and IPO candidate Anthropic was busy closing a \$30 billion funding round that valued it at \$900 billion—leapfrogging OpenAI. **©BLOOMBERG**

THEIR VIEW

# How India can gain from a great power role inversion

VIVAN SHARAN



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**L**ast week, US President Donald Trump's historic two-day meeting with Chinese Premier Xi Jinping, the first in Beijing at this level since 2017, ended without a commercial breakthrough despite the presence of a high-powered technology delegation of 17 American CEOs, including Elon Musk of SpaceX and Jensen Huang of Nvidia. China did not respond to US overtures, including the potential sale of Nvidia's cutting-edge H200 chips to Chinese entities that the Joe Biden administration had blocked and Trump administration reversed. US officials dismissed a lack of business progress as immaterial. Markets disagreed. The absence of a high-technology purchase package, despite the delegation theatrics, exposed a rare crack in the seemingly unstoppable AI boom. US markets corrected sharply, with chip stocks falling after a prolonged bull run.

India should read this sequence of events clearly. The US is increasingly behaving like China once did, using statecraft to sell

things. And China is behaving like the US once did, policing commercial flows through ideological and political tests.

US mercantilism is a given, but American commercial dealings have traditionally also been mediated through political ideology. Earlier restrictions on chip exports are one example. But Cold War relations with the Soviet Union are perhaps the most memorable. Trade between the two blocs was heavily restricted, despite the potential for large-scale commerce, peaking at just 1% of total US trade in 1979.

Similarly, China's historical commercial pushiness across the world is well documented. Since 2010, Beijing has been Africa's largest trade partner, providing not only goods, but also investments and unconditional aid. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is another glaring example of a transactional approach. Fudan University estimates that the BRI involves around 150 countries.

But China's refusal to strike a big commercial deal with the US is the latest in a series of moves that indicate Beijing is changing tack. Not only has it signalled a preference for building sovereign chips, it has established export controls for strategic technologies. Two sets of rules announced in April expand these, including a retaila-

tory toolkit against foreign sanctions. Together, they create a head-on conflict between Chinese law and the regime that US multinationals are forced to follow.

Meanwhile, Trump's 'art of the deal' seems premised largely on high-visibility commercial and trade concessions extended to the US by its partners, rather than on their ideological moorings. Last year's trade war with Five Eyes allies such as Canada exemplify this departure from the past.

For India, all of this means old assumptions no longer work. China will not release the capital and technology that India needs to deepen manufacturing without a broader commercial accommodation. The US will insist on selling more to India until we have enough leverage for better balanced relations.

New Delhi has liberalized its investment screening regime, which it established after the People's Bank of China increased its shareholding in HDFC in 2020. The regime controls investments from countries with

which India shares land borders. This framework was partially relaxed recently for specific import categories like capital goods.

But Beijing seems unlikely to de-phenate politics and commerce or let strategic technologies or investments flow to India in support of China-plus-one plans that New Delhi has been keen on.

Beijing has also raised a WTO dispute with India over Indian manufacturing incentives for batteries, automobiles and EVs, which it claims discriminate against Chinese imports.

Clearly, India needs a wider strategic conversation with China, within which commercial concerns can be placed. We must also identify areas where we can credibly open up markets, perhaps by easing a quality control regime aimed mostly at Beijing. The objective should be to offer China a level playing field in commerce, not selective concessions. Such calibration would make it harder for Beijing to argue that Indian policy is structurally discriminatory, even as New

Delhi retains its sovereign right to protect sectors with genuine security risks.

As far as Washington is concerned, India already offers US firms market access across most tech-led growth areas. A more useful assurance, therefore, is policy stability and transparency in domains that matter to value creation, including intellectual property, digital commerce and emerging technologies. These are high on the US agenda and we lose little by making explicit commitments to protect US investments through the rule of law, avoiding retrospective policy changes and maintaining a predictable operating environment for US firms.

A sharp focus on the domestic economy should help India's balancing act. Inflation is ticking upwards and jobs remain scarce, which means costs must be kept down and job creation treated as urgent. Commercial flows that help meet these two needs should be framed within the context of India's geo-strategy in a bipolar order. Otherwise, India risks falling between the cracks.

India should use both relationships to advance a market-led industrial strategy: let the US and China compete in our market even as we lower costs, create jobs and build supply-chain and tech capabilities at home. These are the author's personal views.

**As China and the US swap their approach, we must work out how to make the most of this shift**



[ OUR TAKE ]

## Reimagine Brics for present times

The bloc has the potential not only to articulate concerns of the Global South but also to steer the world through the current chaos

The confirmation from Moscow that President Vladimir Putin will attend the Brics summit in New Delhi in September raises the profile of the event. Chinese President Xi Jinping is also scheduled to attend — Putin and Xi are expected to have a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the summit, according to reports from Russia. At a time when multilateralism is on the decline and the old West-centric, liberal, rules-based order is unravelling, Brics has the potential to emerge as an important arbitrator in global affairs. But can the bloc rise to the task?

Brics is no monolith. Its member States carry diverse views. At the recent Delhi conclave, Iran and the UAE sparred over the war in West Asia, and a joint statement could not be issued. There are divisions within the bloc on Ukraine and Iran (the latter is a member), while China and India differ vastly on their outlook on Pakistan. However, there is a consensus among the Brics members on reforms to global governance institutions, such as the United Nations and the Security Council, and greater representation of Global South countries within international institutions. One factor common to the bloc is that members prefer a multipolar world order to one that is dominated by a single country, namely the US, or even the US-led western bloc. Brics has the political and economic clout to orchestrate a pushback to unipolar paradigms or even the weaponisation of tariffs to unilaterally shape trade and power relations.

A broad consensus on most of the contested issues — such as West Asia and Ukraine — may appear difficult at the outset, but Brics at least offers a platform where nations are talking. As New Delhi has argued, the focus needs to be on functional cooperation rather than ideological warfare. Europe, for instance, is looking to Brics, especially India, to help find a way forward on ending both Ukraine and West Asia conflicts. New Delhi has friendly ties with Moscow and Kyiv as well as Washington and multiple capitals in West Asia, and its stature as a mature, neutral power provides some leeway to mediate peace with the warring parties. French President Emmanuel Macron has advocated for India to become the bridge between the G7 and Brics.

But Brics is currently divided over West Asia and India, as the chair will face a tough test in getting everyone together. The challenge is to negotiate the differences and build on commonalities for the greater good — issues from energy shortages to the climate crisis call for focussed attention and action. The summit is both a challenge and an opportunity.

## The distance between actor Vijay & CM Vijay

On May 4, actor-politician C. Joseph Vijay stormed the political box office in Tamil Nadu. Vijay's win seemingly marked a rupture with the Dravidian politics that dominated the state for six decades. However, the new chief minister's pronouncements on the LTTE and its leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, and the Centre's two-language policy suggest that the TVK is more a mutated version of the old Dravidian political lineage, and less a complete break with the past. This may ruffle his new admirers, but it could help Vijay and the TVK plug into the Tamil political ecosystem that has historically privileged social justice and linguistic nationalism over other agendas.

Vijay's views on the two-language policy is in continuation with the previous DMK government's stance that drew its rationale from the political lineage and emotional inheritance of anti-Hindi agitations that catapulted the party to office in the 1960s.

However, the exigencies of office demand that he nuance his opinion on Tamil nationalism. This Sunday, Vijay mourned the victims of Mullivaikkal, the last stand of the Tamil Eelam Movement in 2009 in northern Sri Lanka, and Prabhakaran, who was killed on May 18 that year. The TVK founder has always been an ally of the Eelam cause. There is near consensus in Tamil Nadu over the political rights of Sri Lankan Tamils, even if many are critical of the violence the LTTE unleashed within and outside Sri Lanka on both the Sinhalese and its Tamil critics. But how far can a chief minister go in offering eulogies to an outfit banned by New Delhi and held guilty of assassinating a former Prime Minister of India (leader of a party that is now an ally)? What may be alright for an actor, or even a politician, may not be for a person holding down a constitutional office.

## When State returns to the policy centrestage

The world has quietly abandoned free-market orthodoxy. The Washington Consensus is dead. India helped prove it wrong. Now it must prove itself right

There is an uncomfortable truth buried in the World Bank's latest intellectual pivot. For decades, the Bank preached the gospel of free markets, open trade, and minimal State intervention to developing nations — while the rich world quietly subsidised, protected, and directed its own industries to global dominance. Now, confronted with the spectacle of the US Inflation Reduction Act, European industrial strategies, and China's State-capitalist juggernaut, the Bank has changed its mind. Industrial policy, it now concedes, can work. The question is how.

For India, this moment is both a vindication and a prompt for reflection. A vindication because India has long been derided — including by the Bank — for its protectionist instincts. A prompt, because intellectual legitimacy is not the same as policy effectiveness, and India's circumstances — its demographic scale, consumption-driven growth model, federal complexity, and strategic autonomy ambitions — demand an industrial policy framework built on its own terms, not borrowed templates.

The fiction of a free-trading global order is over, if it ever truly existed. Using the Global Trade Alert database, analysis of the top 10 economies reveals

a striking pattern. From 2010 to 2023, every major economy has become more protectionist. China went from 203 discriminatory policy interventions in 2010 to 889 in 2023. The US saw a brief dip, surged past previous records in the post-Covid scramble. Even Japan, once the most restrained, more than doubled its discriminatory interventions over the same period.

India followed suit, moving from 117 to 232 discriminatory interventions. But here is what gets overlooked: India simultaneously introduced the highest number of liberalising trade and industrial policies among the top 10 — rising from 45 in 2010 to 124 in 2023. And in probabilistic terms, India remains dramatically less protectionist than its peers.

In 2023, the US and China had more than ten times higher odds of introducing a discriminatory policy harmful to foreign commercial interests than India did. India — the country routinely lauded for its protectionist tendencies — is, by comparative measure, a relatively open economy among the world's largest. The narrative of India as a uniquely obstinate protectionist simply does not survive contact with the evidence.

Yet India cannot afford complacency. Because while it may be less protectionist than the US or China, its toolkit looks strikingly different from the economies it is most often compared to. In China, 93% of discriminatory industrial policy interventions take the form of domestic subsidies — punitive grants to SOE firms to drive down costs and power export growth. Tariff barriers and import restrictions account for less than 3% of China's interventions. India's

profile is different: Tariff measures constitute 22% of its discriminatory interventions, import barriers another 18%.

China's export-obsessed model was built on a foundation of repressed domestic consumption and suppressed wages — a deliberate political choice to subordinate household welfare to industrial accumulation. India has neither the authoritarian capacity nor, frankly, the desire to replicate that bargain. With private consumption accounting for nearly 60% of GDP, India's domestic market is not a policy failure to be corrected — it is a structural asset to be leveraged.

The more valid concern is that India relies on tariffs too exclusively — and that its subsidy architecture lacks transparency. Over 80% of India's corporate subsidies are delivered as foregone tax revenues rather than direct transfers, making them nearly impossible to evaluate or hold accountable.

To its credit, India has recognised this tension and responded with a parallel deregulation drive of genuine institutional ambition. Over 47,000 tax measures have been simplified, digitised, decriminalised, or removed altogether since 2020. The Jan Vishwas Acts of 2023 and 2025 together decriminalised hundreds of minor technical offences across dozens of central laws, dismantling the "inspector raj" culture that for decades made Indian firms prefer staying small over risking the scrutiny that came with growth. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) consolidated nearly 500 overlapping circulars into 238 Master Directions. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) simplified capital market disclosure requirements. The



Shamika Ravi

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government raised the turnover threshold for "small companies" tenfold, removing the perverse incentive that had long discouraged firms from scaling up.

Crucially, this is no longer an ad hoc exercise. High-level committees announced in 2025 are now institutionalising the next generation of reforms — covering non-financial regulatory frameworks at the central and deregulation priorities at the state levels — across areas including land, labour, permits, and single-window clearances. The architecture here matters: Reform is being pursued simultaneously at the federal and sub-national levels, recognising that India's regulatory friction is as much a state-level problem as a central one. These represent a sustained, institutionalised attempt to make the enabling environment match the ambition of the headline schemes.

India must make three pivots rooted in its own reality. First, treat domestic market dominance as a stepping stone, not an endpoint. India's vast home market is a legitimate launch pad — few countries have the demand base to nurture industries to scale before they face global competition. But protected industries that conquer that market should face a clear internal expectation: Bring down costs, raise quality, and progressively reduce their dependence on shelter. Infant industry protection is defensible; permanent sheltering is not.

Second, make subsidies transparent

and time-bound. Foregone revenues hidden in tax codes are a subsidy to opacity itself. Direct transfers tied to productivity benchmarks allow governments to reward success and cut failure — the discipline that separates purposeful industrial strategy from pervenience.

Third, continue deepening trade integration through the remarkable FTAs momentum India has built. In just the past two years, India has concluded agreements with the UK, the EFTA bloc, Oman, New Zealand, and most significantly, the EU — described by both sides as the largest trade deal either has ever signed, creating a combined market of nearly \$27 trillion. India now has nine FTAs spanning 38 countries. This is an asset to exploit. The task now is ensuring domestic industries use these agreements as a competitive spur rather than treating them as a threat to be defensively managed.

The global circumstances are giving us a remarkable opening: Geopolitical fracture, China-plus-one supply chain diversification, and a belated intellectual consensus that the State has a legitimate role in industrial transformation. India's challenge now is to build an industrial policy architecture that is honest about what is working, ruthless about what is not, and calloused about what is not objectionary but has no external prescription.

Shamika Ravi is member, EAC-PM. The views expressed are personal

## Searching for Bengal's civilisational signature

On a tiny island in the Baltic Sea, with the cool winds of the peaceful sea brushing against my face, I found myself thinking of home. Of Bengal. Of India. Of history. And of the irony of time itself. This tumultuous year, marked simultaneously by political upheaval and the birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore — compels reflection far deeper than electoral arithmetic. That the swearing-in ceremony of a new political order coincides with the remembrance of the poet who warned India against the dangers of narrow nationalism is one of those ironies that history occasionally stages with unsettling precision. For Bengal stands at a threshold once again.

The winds of change sweeping through the state carry with them both hope and apprehension. Hope for institutional reform, economic revival, restoration of governance, and an end to political exhaustion. Yet also apprehension — that in the pursuit of political correction, Bengal may lose something civilisationally precious about itself. In moments of fundamental transition, societies reveal not merely what they oppose, but what they truly are.

Tagore's writings remain profoundly relevant precisely because he distinguished between love for one's civilisation and the temptation of exclusionary nationalism. He deeply respected Hindu philosophy, India's spiritual traditions, and the cultural inheritance of this ancient civilisation. But he rejected the idea that India could ever be defined through the prism of a single religious identity.

To Tagore, India was never a monolith; it was a civilisational confluence shaped by centuries of synthesis, absorption and coexistence. A land shaped by Hindu thought, Buddhist compassion, Islamic aesthetics, Sikh courage, Persian refinement, and even certain western liberal traditions. India's greatness, in his eyes, lay not in uniformity but in absorption — the extraordinary ability to synthesise contradictions into a shared inheritance.

His warning was timeless: When nationalism becomes aggressive, intolerant, or majoritarian, it ceases to elevate a civilisation and instead, weakens the very civilisation it claims to defend. "Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity," he wrote.

This was not rootless cosmopolitanism. Tagore viewed it as civilisational confidence. Only a civilisation secure in itself can afford generosity for such perspectives. Bengal history understood this instinctively. Its greatest cultural figures drew deeply from Hindu spirituality while simultaneously embracing universalism. Swami Vivekananda embodied precisely this synthesis. Fiercely proud of Vedantic philosophy and India's civilisational depth, he nevertheless rejected fanaticism, caste arrogance, and sectarian hatred. At the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, he did not proclaim supremacy; he proclaimed acceptance.

Vivekananda spoke not merely of worship, but of service. Not merely of identity, but of upliftment. His concept of nationalism was

moral and spiritual — rooted in India's regeneration through education, dignity, social reform, and empowerment of the poor. Influenced profoundly by Ramakrishna Paramahansa, he believed truth could manifest through multiple faiths and traditions. He admired in Islam the principles of equality and brotherhood, envisioning an India where Vedantic spirituality and social egalitarianism could coexist harmoniously.

This composite ethos became Bengal's civilisational signature.

That is why the present political moment demands wisdom and statesmanship rather than retribution; reconstruction rather than triumphalism. After decades of ideological stagnation, political violence, corruption, capital flight, and institutional erosion, Bengal undeniably seeks renewal. An aspirational younger generation seeks jobs rather than slogans, investment rather than patronage, infrastructure rather than rhetoric. The demand for governance, accountability, and economic dynamism is no longer a demand for a political renewal cannot come at the cost of Bengal's deeper identity.

The state must resist two equal and opposite temptations: The hollow appeasement politics that weakens institutions and deepens cynicism, and the seductive pull of majoritarian polarisation masquerading as civilisational resurgence. Both ultimately fragment society.

The Bengal Renaissance was never built upon exclusion. From Tagore to Vivekananda, from Kazi Nazrul Islam to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Bengal's intellectual tradition rested on confidence without hatred, pride without insecurity, and spirituality without intolerance. That inheritance now stands tested.

The true challenge before Bengal's emerging political order is, therefore, not merely electoral consolidation. It is whether it can build a model of governance that combines economic vigour of a profoundly mature, cultural rootedness with pluralism; administrative firmness with democratic restraint.

History offers many examples of societies replacing one form of decay with another through triumphalism or noise, but because they retain moral balance enduring moments of immense political change. The verdict of an election can alter governments. But only wisdom can shape the future of a civilisation.

And Bengal now faces a historic test: Whether it can remain proudly rooted in its civilisational identity without surrendering the pluralism that has long defined its soul. For in an age increasingly shaped by polarisation and certitude, the highest form of civilisational confidence may well be the ability to remain plural, humane, and secure in itself.

Prabal Basu Roy is a Sloan Fellow of The London Business School and a board member. The views expressed are personal

[ XI JINPING ] PRESIDENT, CHINA

As permanent members of the UNSC... Russia and China must strive for cooperation on a higher level, building a just system of global governance



On Russia-China cooperation

Even judges are no longer insulated from the distortions of the digital age.

With Artificial Intelligence (AI) already embedded in legal systems across the world, AI is no longer a futuristic question. It is used for research, translation, case management, transcription, and drafting assistance. The Supreme Court recently launched Su Sahay, an AI chatbot linked to the "One Case One Data" initiative aimed at streamlining judicial information. The question now is how deeply AI will enter the judicial system.

The case for AI is compelling. Indian courts are overburdened to the point of dysfunction. AI can organise documents swiftly and save time on administrative tasks. But it remains fundamentally a predictive technology, built on identifying patterns in data. Judicial work, however, often requires courts to break with precedent — to protect minorities against majorities, individuals against the State, and rights against convention. Judges are constantly balancing competing human realities of liberty and equality, equity and tradition, punishment and mercy. AI can efficiently handle the drudgery of administration, but not judicial deliberation.

The real danger is not that robots will suddenly replace judges. It is the algorithmic shaping of a profoundly human endeavour that is judicial reasoning. A good judgment does more than state a conclusion; it constructs a chain of reasoning that situates legal doctrine within social reality. Citizens accept difficult judgments not only for the court's authority, but also for their coherence. Landmark judgments are valued for outcomes and the intellectual labour of balancing principles, interpreting precedents, and articulating moral responsibility.

Generative AI systems are indifferent to this craft. Their strength lies in producing plausible and standardised text quickly. As lawyers increasingly rely on AI-generated summaries and judgments on AI-assisted submissions or draft structures, legal writing may become flatter and less reflective. Once AI systems begin structuring how judges receive, summarise, and prioritise information, they can indirectly shape judicial reasoning itself. The danger may not be incorrect judgments but thinner reasoning.

This is not the only concern. There is also the

problem of hallucination. AI systems fabricate judgments and legal citations with alarming confidence. Once such false material enters legal databases, it can undermine the integrity of the system. Ironically, a technology expected to reduce judicial workload has instead increased it by shifting the burden towards verification.

Privacy implications further complicate the issue. Court records contain sensitive personal information. Feeding such material into AI systems inevitably raises constitutional questions about privacy, now a fundamental right.

Today, Indian courts occupy an unusual, paradoxical position. They are being asked to regulate AI, adjudicate on deepfakes, misinformation, and data rights, while simultaneously integrating AI into their own institutional functioning. The judiciary is thus both regulator and consumer of the same technology.

That paradox may eventually produce difficult institutional questions. Litigants may begin questioning the role AI systems play and whether it influences judicial reasoning. In that sense, courts may face the same demands for algorithmic accountability and transparency that are demanded from other players.

The promise is that AI will eventually surpass human intelligence not only in speed and memory, but also in empathy, ethics, and creativity. Perhaps that day will come. But at present, AI does not experience human consequences. Justice, however, is built upon consequence, through judgments that alter citizens' lives. Judicial legitimacy rests not only on correctness, but on accountability.

A judge can explain reasoning, justify interaction, and be publicly criticised. Judgments can be overturned when reasoning no longer holds. The authority of the Court is inseparable from this responsibility. None of this means AI should be rejected by the judiciary. Its integration is inevitable, and, in many respects, desirable. But it must remain strictly assistive, easing administrative burden, not drafting judicial reasoning. The burden of moral and constitutional responsibility must remain firmly human.

This article was written by humans. AI may have written it faster, but speed is not the highest virtue of justice.

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Insiyah Vahanvati



Ashish Bharadwaj



### Editor's TAKE

## Dowry violence remains India's ugly reality

Rising dowry deaths reflect a collective moral failure. Until society challenges the mindset that commodifies women in marriage, laws alone will not end this menace

This is sad and unfortunate, but true. The much-cherished Indian marriage institution is largely becoming transactional, as marriages are more about a give-and-take relationship than the bond between two individuals choosing to spend a lifetime together. Thanks to patriarchy rooted in the Indian psyche, dowry is considered a necessary tradition where the groom receives gifts, often in cash and kind—and the bride's family complies with the irrational demands of the groom's family, failing which the girl pays the price through mental torture and, in some cases, with her life. That is the reality today: despite decades of legislation, public campaigns, and growing awareness about women's rights, India continues to witness a disturbing rise in dowry-related violence and deaths.

Two recent incidents of alleged dowry deaths have once again exposed the continuing menace of dowry-related violence despite strict laws. One of the most disturbing cases is that of Twisha Sharma, a 33-year-old woman from Bhopal whose death triggered nationwide outrage. Reports suggested that injuries were found on her body, leading to demands for a Special Investigation Team (SIT) probe. The incident shows that dowry deaths are not limited to weaker sections but also occur in well-to-do families.

Another shocking case emerged from Greater Noida, where 24-year-old Deepika Nagar died after allegedly being thrown from the terrace of her in-laws' house. Her family accused her husband and in-laws of demanding ₹50 lakh and a Fortuner car as dowry. Police arrested the husband and father-in-law while investigations continued. These incidents prove that the scourge of dowry is still very much rampant, though it has vanished from mainstream discourse. According to NCRB data, thousands of women still lose their lives every year because of dowry harassment, exposing deep-rooted patriarchy and greed.

Dowry deaths are registered under Section 80 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). Yet, even with the Dowry Prohibition Act in force since 1961, implementation remains weak and convictions are few. At the heart of the problem lies patriarchy. In many families, daughters are still viewed as financial burdens, while marriage is treated as a means to enhance status through gifts, cash, or property. Rising consumerism has worsened the situation, with demands extending beyond traditional gifts to luxury cars, apartments, and expensive lifestyles. Another major reason is silence. Many women endure emotional abuse, violence, and coercion in silence.

The way forward requires more than stricter laws. Legal provisions already exist, but enforcement must become faster and more effective. Women's economic empowerment is another critical step. Greater access to education, employment, and property rights can help women gain independence and resist abusive situations. But most importantly, society must change and create stronger support systems for victims. Ultimately, it is a menace that can only be controlled through a changed mindset, as law alone cannot prevent it.

## Beijing's Thucydides gambit

By invoking the ancient Greek concept of the 'Thucydides Trap,' Chinese President Xi Jinping sought to frame the US-China rivalry not as a temporary dispute but as a structural contest embedded in the logic of history itself



BHASKAR JYOTI MAHANTA

The ancient Greek historian Thucydides observed that the Peloponnesian War became inevitable because of the rise of the power of ancient Athens and the fear it generated in Sparta, which was the dominant power at that time. The historical construct of the "Thucydides Trap" was popularised by Harvard professor Graham Allison, who warned that when a rising power threatens to displace an established superpower, structural friction frequently culminates in war.

Occurring against a backdrop of global economic turbulence, Middle Eastern instability involving Iran, and an unrelenting tech war, the recently concluded US-China summit was heavily scrutinised for its symbolic and structural implications.

In Beijing, this ancient Greek thesis was intentionally revived, serving as the canvas upon which China painted a complex, multi-layered strategic narrative. During the opening sessions at the Great Hall of the People, President Xi explicitly invoked Allison's coinage, asking President Trump whether their respective nations could "overcome the Thucydides Trap and establish a new paradigm for relations between great powers." Far from a casual academic reference, this query encapsulated China's multi-pronged messaging strategy directed at both the White House and the global community.

The narrative posits that friction is an inevitable law of history, thereby demanding mutual accommodation. Xi's framing subtly pressured the United States to treat China as a geopolitical equal, arguing that "Planet Earth is vast enough to accommodate the respective development and common prosperity" of both powers. Beneath the diplomatic vocabulary lay a stark, conditional warning. Chinese state media and Foreign Ministry spokespersons quickly tethered the Thucydides metaphor to the Taiwan question. The messaging was clear: avoiding the "trap" of open conflict is entirely contingent on Washington respecting Beijing's red lines. Xi explicitly noted that mishandling Taiwan would push the relationship into "dangerous" territory, effectively communicating that if the trap snaps shut, it would be due to American provocations on cross-strait sovereignty.

Concurrently, China targeted international observers, particularly the Global South and European markets. By publicly asking whether conflict could be avoided, Beijing positioned itself as the responsible, rational actor seeking "tactical stabilisation" and global predictability, contrasting its posture with the perceived volatility of the Trump administration's trans-



President Xi, on the other hand, preferred a structural and institutional approach. Facing domestic economic headwinds, low consumer demand, and real estate vulnerabilities, Beijing sought a prolonged runway of stability. Its primary objective was to maintain the October 2025 Buzan trade truce, avoid impending Section 301 tariffs on industrial overcapacity, and prevent further tightening of US restrictions on mid-tier semiconductors.

As Air Force One departed Beijing, the summit was widely categorised by international analysts as the "Stalemate Summit." While President Trump characteristically declared that they had "settled a lot of different problems," the actual readouts revealed a lack of structural breakthroughs, resulting in a highly managed tactical equilibrium.

CHINA YIELDED NO GROUND ON TAIWAN, SUCCESSFULLY REINFORCING ITS DETERRENCE POSTURE WITHOUT PROVOKING IMMEDIATE ESCALATION. ON IRAN, BEIJING AVOIDED MAKING CONCRETE CONCESSIONS, KEEPING ITS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH TEHRAN INTACT WHILE PLAYING THE ROLE OF A DETACHED DIPLOMATIC OBSERVER

actional foreign policy. The meticulous choreography of the summit revealed deep-seated mutual suspicion, particularly within the digital domain. Behind-the-scenes preparations were heavily shaped by defensive cybersecurity measures and radically divergent strategic expectations. The summit took place immediately following intense domestic friction regarding "AI distillation attacks." In the months leading up to May 2026, leading American AI firms—including OpenAI and Anthropic—disclosed industrial-scale cyber campaigns aimed at harvesting proprietary algorithmic models, pointing directly to Chinese threat actors. In response, the White House issued National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM-4), elevating these digital extraction campaigns to a core national security threat.

Consequently, cybersecurity precautions for the US delegation were unprecedented. Air-gapped communication networks, highly encrypted satellite links, and strict physical and digital isolation of devices were implemented to prevent espionage. On the Chinese side, cyber defences were heightened to prevent retaliatory data poisoning or disruptive countermeasures by US intelligence. Furthermore, the presence of high-profile tech leaders such as Elon Musk, Tim Cook, and Jensen Huang in Trump's delegation turned the summit venue into a virtual fortress of intellectual property protection, with both sides treating digital networks as live combat zones.

The two leaders entered the summit room with fundamentally incompatible frameworks. President Trump approached the bilateral meeting through a highly transactional lens. He heavily weighed towards concrete commercial concessions: extracting large-scale Chinese commitments to purchase US soybeans, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and Boeing aircraft. Additionally, Washington prioritised pressuring Beijing to leverage its oil-buyer relationship with Tehran to de-escalate the Middle Eastern crisis.

However, the US achieved notable short-term commercial gains. Trump secured renewed Chinese promises to honour agricultural and energy import quotas, providing a political boost to his domestic base. Furthermore, the codification of the January 2026 TikTok joint venture—where American investors take majority control while Oracle oversees algorithmic security—was presented as a successful blueprint for handling Chinese tech expansion. On geopolitics, Washington succeeded in forcing China to publicly acknowledge the shared risk of a prolonged blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, given Beijing's reliance on Middle Eastern energy.

China achieved its core objective—namely, buying time. By preventing a breakdown of the Buzan truce, Beijing preserved its export pipelines to the US until at least November 2026. Given that recent US Supreme Court rulings had limited the presidency's emergency powers to impose sweeping tariffs, Xi managed to exploit American domestic institutional divisions, effectively weakening Trump's yield leverage.

Moreover, China yielded no ground on Taiwan, successfully reinforcing its deterrence posture without provoking immediate escalation. On Iran, Beijing avoided making concrete concessions, keeping its strategic partnership with Tehran intact while playing the role of a detached diplomatic observer.

Ultimately, the 2026 Beijing Summit did not resolve the systemic rivalry that characterises the US-China relationship, nor did it permanently dismantle the Thucydides Trap. Instead, it served as an elaborate mechanism for relationship management. By utilising the vocabulary of ancient history, China successfully signalled the catastrophic costs of conflict, while the United States leveraged the meeting to secure immediate transactional concessions. The final outcome was a fragile, heavily managed stabilisation—a diplomatic truce that temporarily lowered the geopolitical temperature, even as both powers continued to build up their cyber, economic, and military assets for a prolonged historic confrontation.



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### PICTALK



Workers wearing traditional hats pluck tea leaves at the Durgabari Tea Estate on a hot summer day on the outskirts of Agartala, Tripura. PHOTO: PTI

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## An open letter to the young lives lost too soon



ASHA IYER KUMAR

### 2ND OPINION

Dear children, You may never read this open letter I am writing to you—or perhaps you will, from the balcony of the world you chose to ascend to after the NEET-UG examination was cancelled. Already distressed by the paper leak and the lapse in the system, the news of your deaths came as a horror to me, and I am crestfallen. I sincerely wish to have a conversation with you, between the two realms to which we now belong. This is not a newspaper column; it is a heartfelt epistle written in the knowledge that I may never receive a reply. Or perhaps I will—from those who read this—and their responses may help stop the growing trend of young people choosing self-annihilation instead of courage and confidence when the system fails them.

The first question that comes to my mind is this: what on earth made you end your lives for a mistake that was never yours? I understand that your years of hard work seemed wasted. You dreamt of a peaceful sleep of smithereens, and suddenly you felt stranded in darkness. But who told you there was no light beyond it? Which devil convinced you that this was the end of the road? Why did suicide appear to be the only response to this crisis?

I have often tried to understand the logic behind taking one's own life. Statistics suggest that there are nearly 14 to 15 million suicide attempts worldwide every year, of which around 720,000 end in death. I deliberately avoid saying people "succeed" in suicide because choosing death when life still stretches ahead can never be called a triumph.

Life has a way of disrupting plans and pushing people to the edge. I, too, have gone through moments when the future appeared bleak and death seemed easier than enduring life's burdens. I have had fleeting thoughts of escape. But those thoughts always passed. Over time, I realised that the future still holds possibilities, however hidden they may appear in moments of despair. The struggles we endure often shape us into stronger and wiser human beings.

I must confess—as many others would—that thoughts of escaping life's harshness are not uncommon. What

keeps most of us going is faith: faith that setbacks are temporary and that life offers more than one path. But in your case, you believed that this setback was permanent, that there was no life beyond becoming a doctor. Dear children, what happened to you was deeply unfair, but it could never have determined your entire future. One examination could not define what you were destined to become. There are countless ways to fulfil one's dreams, and there are many dreams worth pursuing. Life never offers only one route to success. Sadly, no one may have told you that—not your parents, teachers, or guardians. People often say suicide is not a solution. Perhaps you were not even seeking one. Perhaps you were only trying to escape the pain and humiliation that overwhelmed you. But you had not failed. The system had. That you paid with your lives for someone else's failure is heartbreaking. You could have become symbols of hope for future generations. Instead, your deaths have become reminders of despair. I only wish someone had taught you that life renews itself every day with fresh opportunities. Your lives were precious, and it is tragic that you could not see it. You had not reached a dead end; you merely mistook a curtain for a wall and stopped walking.

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist, independent journalist and children's writing coach

### PHYSICAL INACTIVITY: A GROWING GLOBAL CONCERN

A recent report published in Nature Medicine, analysing data from 68 countries, reveals that physical activity levels have remained stagnant over the past two decades despite increasing awareness and policy recommendations. Globally, around 80 per cent of adolescents and one in three adults fail to meet the World Health Organization's prescribed physical activity guidelines. This makes the WHO's target of reducing physical inactivity by 15 per cent by 2030 appear increasingly difficult to achieve.

The issue is particularly serious in developing countries such as India. The 2026 Time Use Survey showed that only one in ten Indians exercised on a given day in 2024, most of them men. For millions living in overcrowded cities, leisure and exercise have become luxuries amid long commutes, demanding work schedules and inadequate public infrastructure. Another study in Nature Health highlighted poor implementation of physical activity policies, noting that many countries failed to set measurable targets for assessing progress.

The challenge now is to democratise physical activity. Governments must treat exercise as a civic necessity rather than a personal choice alone. Cities need pedestrian-friendly roads, parks and cycling tracks, while workplaces should encourage movement instead of prolonged sedentary routines. Women and marginalised communities must also have safe access to public spaces for recreation and exercise.

YASH PAL RAJHAN | JALANDHAR

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

### Brewing hope, one cup at a time

Tea is the world's second most consumed beverage after water, cherished across cultures and generations. Whether enjoyed early in the morning, during a midday break, or on a quiet evening, tea offers comfort, warmth and a sense of togetherness. It is often said that buying tea is akin to buying happiness. While every day may feel like "tea day", the United Nations officially observes International Tea Day on May 21 each year.

The 2026 theme, "Fostering Growth and Inclusion", highlights the need to empower tea farmers and strengthen livelihoods linked to the tea industry. Tea supports millions of farmers, especially in economically weaker and remote regions, while also symbolising cultural heritage and diversity. The UN continues to promote tea as a tool for sustainable development, poverty reduction, hunger eradication and women's empowerment.

At the same time, challenges such as climate change and declining tea production require urgent attention.

As the saying goes, life is like making tea—boil the ego, evaporate worry, dilute sorrow and filter mistakes. The result is a happier and richer life.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

### Revision in auto-taxi fares

This refers to the report, "Cab, auto drivers' unions call 3-day strike" (May 20). The commercial vehicle unions in Delhi-NCR have disturbed not only the peaceful sleep of the Delhi government and officials but also that of commuters by announcing a three-day strike. Consequently, the possibility of an increased financial burden falling upon common people—who already rely on expensive taxi services—has become stronger.

In Delhi, the "Chalk Shakti Union", taxi fare slabs in Delhi-NCR have remained unchanged for the past 15 years, even as fuel prices and operational costs have steadily increased. This has reportedly disrupted the financial balance of drivers' earnings. By submitting memorandums to the Chief Minister, Transport Minister, Lieutenant Governor and Police Commissioner of Delhi, the union has further intensified the issue by extending support to the nationwide protest call given by the All India Motor Transport Congress. On the other hand, the general public points out that many auto-rickshaw drivers frequently claim their meters are out of order to justify charging arbitrary and exorbitant fares. As a result, people now prefer app-based services such as Ola, Uber and Rapido for safer travel. The government must consider the burden on common people before revising fares.

YUGAL KISHORE SHARMA | FARIDABAD

### Balancing human safety and animal welfare

Appropos, "SC refuses to recall order on sterilisation of stray dogs" (May 20). The Supreme Court's refusal to dilute its directions on removing stray dogs from public institutions is a timely and necessary intervention in an escalating public safety crisis. For years, civic authorities across the country have failed to address the alarming rise in dog-bite incidents, forcing the judiciary to step into what has effectively become an administrative vacuum.

The ground reality today is deeply concerning. Children near schools, elderly citizens on morning walks, and residents in housing colonies often live in fear of aggressive stray dogs. The Court has rightly observed that humane treatment of animals cannot come at the cost of human safety, just as public safety cannot justify cruelty towards animals. The solution lies in striking a careful balance. Municipal authorities must now match the Court's directions with serious investments in shelters, sterilisation centres, vaccination drives, and veterinary care facilities. The issue cannot be resolved through knee-jerk reactions or violence. Instead, local administrations must develop a humane, accountable and effective stray management system that safeguards both citizens and animal welfare.

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A thought for today All grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, The Little Prince

Let Our Teens Be

Nepal's done well to actively consider decriminalising teenage sexuality. India must do the same

As shoutout to Nepal's law minister: Her first decision, on assuming office on April 26, was to review their rape law that criminalises teen sexual relations. Her task force's recommendation: include a close-in-age exemption, as is done across liberal societies. This, hopefully, will soon be legislated. There is little as harmful to growing minds and bodies as criminalising teen sexuality, exploration and sexual relations. Nepal's age of consent, as in India, is 18. In India, a close-in-age exemption was, unjustifiably, not included when Pocco was legislated, despite repeated cautions - from policy wonks, legal experts, health & behavioural specialists and so on. Uphoot: India too sends teens in consensual sexual relations - if discovered by ever-disapproving adults - to jail. The girl has no legal say, at all. And her close-in-age friend is pushed into the criminal justice system, his future in tatters. Fallout is traumatic, ruinous, and inflicts lifelong damage. One analysis found that 80% of "romantic" cases under Pocco "were filed by parents or relatives after a girl eloped or became pregnant."

India's SC and several HC's - Allahabad, Madras, Delhi - have repeatedly observed, while hearing cases of criminalised teen sex, that Pocco has resulted in victimising the very kids law aims to protect. Of course, there's always the upholder of toxic patriarchy, like the Calcutta HC judge who found it his remit to suggest "teen girls should control their urges". A tongue-lashing from SC doesn't take away the fact that patriarchal attitudes - in courts, policy corridors and Parliament - are anything but rare, ever taking new shape and form. India's messy reality, additionally, is that while Pocco criminalises sex below age 18, sex with an underage wife is perfectly legal. Child marriage is illegal, but underage sex law doesn't apply. The law is confused, because lawmakers are confused. Because society, and tragically, the law, views growing teens not as individuals with autonomy, but in terms of parents' ownership & control, investment & returns (disguised as child's 'future'), and as keepers of family 'honour'.

India must follow Nepal's example - renew the move to incorporate age-gap leniencies in law. Free India's teenagers from every passing elder who magically transforms into an advisory body. Let's let teenagers be.

Who You Calling Old?

People over 60 are increasingly fitter, wealthier & full of zest for life. The trend will grow stronger

At 82, Billie Jean King, yes, she of the 39 Grand Slam titles, has got herself a new one: College graduate. Why is this making headlines? Because it rudely interrupts retirement mythology, which in US remains coloured by the golf granddads in Florida. Or escape, from cold, from work, from obligation. The Indian version features quiet demotion to the back bedroom of the eldest son's home, cushioned by a second one in Goa or the hills. But as some readers would know first-hand, these clichés are ageing faster than people. Well-off professionals Mumbai to Bengaluru have a very different biological curve than their parents did. If they're going to have a long, healthy, wealthy later life, why shouldn't it be purposeful?

Director of the MIT AgeLab, Joseph Coughlin, underlines that a) by 2047 there will be more people in the world over 60, with more money and education than any other time in history, than children under 15, and b) the longevity economy is already enormous enough to be the third largest after US and China. This means the old story of needy older people needs to be rewritten. By businesses, employers, govts. Of course, extending working life by choice is a luxury of the higher-income, higher-education, and better-health workers. With only 12% of India's workforce covered by a formal pension scheme, the story remains pre-industrial for most of the rest. As in, for much of human history, retirement simply didn't exist, and old age was just the final, harder chapter of working life.

But the ones who can choose, are perhaps the most un-herd-like generation ever. As Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott say in their influential book, The 100 Year Life, the longer your life, the more your identity reflects what you craft, rather than a reactive response to where you began. There will be a variety of careers. And while savings will provide the baseline of security, new skills and sustained relationships will count for a lot too. Indeed, research has shown that the single strongest predictor of happiness in later life is the quality of your close relationships. A 100-year-old human is still a human.

New sutra's other putra

How many words are nestled in 'austerity'?

Bachi Karkaria



'Austerity' is the new MD. Mantri Darling. This now-WOW is not displacing archival official Word of Week like perennial vikas or pol-bol 'poribolton'. It has only extended them. In post-Hormuz world, progress can continue only through a change in wasteful ways, no? Here's my contribution to patriotic conservation. I'm going to obey PM-Ji's orders literally to the letter. Instead of squandering avoidable words, this column will try to use as many as can be formed with the alphabetical letters in 'austerity'. My verbal economy follows the ego-unfriendly 3Rs: Reuse, Reduce, Recycle. Sparring you the avariciousness of self-spotting, I've italicised these 'kangaroo' words.

A suite-of measures was announced to make sure that we keep our 2030 trust with 7.3 trillion GDP. True, they aren't easy, but aren't we well-sit-ed not to stray from this yugic sutra's set aims? Unlike West/West found with its pants down in every era of belt-tightening. Evolved East does not get shirty or weep copious tears, let alone snare those who've ordered curbs. Here, sacrifice is not some airy notion/trite cliché. It does not raise our ire, tire us, get us into a state or leave us all at sea. We're high on frugal traits. Didn't they ease us through the socialist years?

Trust me, we won't be a backside-sitter or stare in disbelief when asked to give up our gas-guzzling SUV or LPO-consuming puris. Or not buy more gold for sundry rites. Not just an artist, we are THE artist of juggad. We can cleverly rejig whatever Trump, Iran and that damned straight throw at us.

Letting their fancy cars rust, star ministers already travel on and in a convoy of bikes. Who knows, they might actually laugh off the satire this show provokes, not treat it like reason - or treat the national oil/gas as a... Yes, sir, now that the alarm has rung, we will stir from non-AC beds, arise and rise like yeast to bake our patriotic bread.

Alec Smart said: "With the mandated restraint, does the forex holiday become a 'guilt trip'?"

'Why Tata Sons should not be listed'

Former Tata Sons vice chairman argues an IPO can undermine the company's special role in the group, and may not unlock much value

NA Soonawala



Most readers encountering this issue yet again may feel fatigued by the continuing debate on whether Tata Sons should be listed. However, there are certain aspects that need closer attention. Tata Sons Private Limited, labelled as a non-banking finance company (NBFC) and a core investment company (CIC), essentially functions as principal investment holding company of Tata Group. Over the years, it has consistently complied with all regulatory directives issued by RBI, adapting its structure whenever required.

When it was restricted from accessing bank funding, Tata Sons repaid all such borrowings and relied only on permitted non-banking sources. Subsequently, when maintaining a near debt-free profile became necessary to avoid listing, it repaid an amount of ₹20,000 crore from internal resources, and prematurely redeemed preference shares. Similarly, when CIC rules were tightened to prohibit investments outside group companies, Tata Sons divested its relatively small non-Tata Group holdings. These responses reflect disciplined compliance without compromising its nature as a private holding company.

The latest requirement - compelling listing primarily because of asset size - is equally a cause for concern. When growth is rightly the prevailing mantra in our country, why compel and almost punish for growing to a certain size, and force a company to change its basic structure established over 100 years ago by the great founder of this House, nursed, built and financed by successors, and whose ways comply with applicable laws and regulations?

A strange new obstacle stems from a retrospective interpretation of transactions from 1995, where investments by certain group companies are now alleged to involve "public" money, thereby being treated as borrowings of Tata Sons today. It is difficult to establish the nature of such funds after three decades, and even more so to justify their present-day treatment in this manner.

More importantly, implications of listing go beyond regulatory compliance, and strike at the heart of Tata Sons' role within the group. Historically, Tata Sons has not merely been a holding company but a promoter and custodian of group values. Examples include Sir Dorabji Tata pledging personal assets to save Tata Steel, and more recent actions, such as voluntarily settling liabilities of Tata Finance, which was close to default, by the then chairman Ratan Tata, who prevailed on Tata Sons board to honour obligations to Docomo, the partner in Tata Teleservices. These decisions were guided by reputation, responsibility, and long-term

trust, rather than strict commercial logic.

A publicly listed Tata Sons would inevitably be accountable to institutional and foreign shareholders, whose primary focus would be financial returns. It is doubtful whether such investors would accept substantial deployment of capital to support or rescue group companies in distress. This tension could fundamentally alter Tata Sons' traditional role and weaken the group's internal support system. The above examples alone (and there have been other smaller ones) have saved lending banks from writing off tens of thousands of enterprises with similar problems. This tension could mean new institutional and private investors in an IPO may hesitate to allow, from a purely commercial point of view.



Timing is another critical factor. The group currently faces large financial commitments from recently formed subsidiary companies, including Air India, investments in long gestation projects, and losses in newer ventures. The current situation in the case of Air India would be an acid test. All these would need to be disclosed fully in an IPO prospectus. Consolidated financial statements - reflecting subsidiary losses and borrowings - may not present an especially attractive picture to sophisticated investors, pointing to wrong timing for an IPO at the present time. Thus, even if listing were necessary, postponement may be prudent until these issues are addressed.

Equally important is the ownership structure and philosophy of Tata Sons. Around 66% is held by Tata Trusts, reflecting the founder's vision of combining enterprises with philanthropy. Dividends from operating companies flow indirectly into charitable initiatives, reinforcing a long-standing commitment to social purpose. Listing would, therefore, introduce pressures

on distribution and retention of funds that could dilute this unique model. Consequently taking a long-term view of investing in greenfield and other ventures may become questionable.

The argument of improving liquidity for minority shareholders appears limited in scope. Most such shareholders primarily rely on dividends. They have not advocated listing and have, in fact, benefited significantly from dividends and appreciation over time. The principal demand for liquidity comes from Shapoorji Pallonji Group, whose position is understandable, but cannot alone justify a decision with such far-reaching consequences.

Moreover, shares in Tata Sons are not entirely illiquid; they can be transferred under established procedures, but at a discount to net asset value (NAV), as elaborated in the next para. Let it be said that the SF group's investments in Tata Sons are minuscule compared to the dividends received and the enormous increase in value of Tata Sons shares over the years, which is well-documented.

Other listed Indian group investment holding companies also provide perspective. Such companies trade at discounts of 20% to 50% to NAV, as investors would prefer direct exposure to underlying operating companies. There is little reason to assume Tata Sons shares would be treated differently by the stock market, raising doubts about the effectiveness of listing for unlocking value. Therefore, it appears that the case for a holding company - listed or unlisted - would always attract a substantial discount.

Claims that listing would improve governance are equally debatable. Many governance failures have occurred even in listed entities, suggesting that listing alone is no guarantee of better oversight. Strengthening internal controls and regulatory supervision may be more effective than altering ownership structure.

It is also noteworthy that both Tata Trusts and Tata Sons have opposed listing, and even sought exemption. When both the principal owners and the company itself are aligned against such a move, their position deserves due consideration. Furthermore, similar pressure is not seen to be applied to other large group holding companies, raising questions about consistency.

In conclusion, the proposed listing of Tata Sons risks undermining a structure that has evolved over more than 100 years, blending commercial success with social purpose and long-term stewardship. Such a transformation may irreversibly alter its character. It is hoped that regulators will weigh these considerations carefully, and preserve a model that has stood the test of time. For those who may disagree, this perspective is offered respectfully, without intent for debate, but out of deep concern for the future of an institution to which the author has devoted a lifetime.

The Two Test Neat Solution To The NEET Mess

Split medical exam in two parts, like JEE. NTA conducts the first nationwide screening. Those who qualify, take a second test in their home state. Each state will set their own questions. Paper-leakers will be outplayed

Varna Sri Ramam



Medical aspirants will write NEET-UG again on June 21, as CBI investigates the leak of the NEET question paper, 42 hours before the May 31 exam, which was cancelled on May 12. This was, per media reports, the 49th public exam test paper leaked, or suspected to have been leaked in the last decade. For each, a case was filed and/or re-tests undertaken.

Around 120 of 180 questions, in the leaked paper that Rajasthan police recovered this year, matched the actual exam. None of what has followed - CBI probe, arrests of "masterminds", MOs - is unfamiliar. But the administrative explanation has worn thin. Tighter security and better protocols have been gov't's answer through every cycle. The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 1982, in force since June 2014, has produced no convictions. Looked at as a labour market problem, the picture changes. The arithmetic of the chase tells you why India admits about 1.2L students to MBBS programmes each year - about 22L young Indians compete for those seats. The 2L who do not get one, return for another attempt, and then again. A median aspirant invests roughly two years into a single entrance test. At a private-sector entry wage of ₹15k a month, foregone earnings of failed aspirants could be about ₹60k or a year. Add coaching fees of around ₹1L per student annually, and the country has burned over ₹7L cr on this exam since 2014. That exceeds India's cumulative central health budget over the same period and NREGA's total output since 2006.

The leak market has a documented price. The Bihar Economic Offences Unit priced a NEET seat in 2024 at

₹30L-₹50L. In Hazaribagh that year, one family sold a buffalo and two katha of land to make the first installment. Patna police recovered phones with call records of mothers asking for time to arrange money - by withdrawing savings for a daughter's marriage.

These are families of small farmers and govt school-teachers, pushing one child across a threshold they never crossed, because a govt MBBS seat unlocks a salary roughly six times the private-sector equivalent for comparable work. This is the development economics of the leak.

A test is supposed to sort candidates by ability. When the credential can be bought, it sorts on family wealth. The 22L aspirants chasing 1.2L seats are in what economists call an aspiration trap. The family has paid too much to walk away. The arithmetic does not allow them to succeed.

This cycle has a body count - 29 teens died by suicide in Kota in 2023, the highest annual count on record, with 1.1k out of 1,200 in her Class 12 boards, took her own life in Tamil Nadu in 2017, when her board marks no longer counted for medical admission. The cycle has burnt money, and cost lives families had given everything to save.

Given NTA's record in conducting 14 exams by 2024, a parliamentary standing committee in its review of autonomous higher education bodies, in Dec 2025, laid emphasis on pen-and-paper testing for NEET given "NTA's recent performance has not inspired much confidence."

GOI already runs a national exam that works on a different design. JEE is a two-stage test. JEE Main is the screening test, administered nationally by

NTA. JEE Advanced is the second-stage examination, administered by one of the seven IITs on a rotating basis, with its own paper-setting committees, syllabus and operations. Roughly 2.5L of the Main cohort qualify for Advanced each year. The two-stage design splits the value of any single leak. A compromised Main does not compromise Advanced.

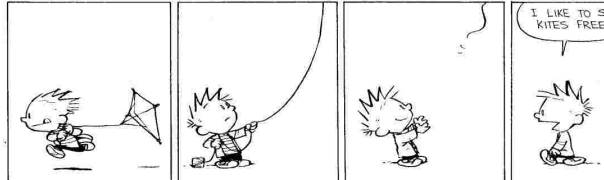
NEET could follow JEE's template. NTA conducts national screening. State govts, universities or state-level testing bodies conduct the second stage, with their own paper-setting committees. Class 12 board marks carry weighted consideration, alongside the second-stage score. Such a design halves the leak value of any single leak. State govts, politically accountable for their public health workforce, regain the ability to admit students from schools and languages their hospitals will serve.

NTA has argued something close to this for almost a decade. Justice AK Rajan's committee documented in 2021 that Tata's MBBS representation, in the state's MBBS admissions, had collapsed from above 15% before NEET, to under 2%, while CBSE-stream representation rose from 0% to over 25%. TN's exemption from NEET Act, re-passed in 2022, was denied President's assent. In Nov 2025, TN filed an Article 131 suit in SC, saying NEET violates federalism.

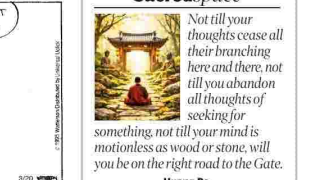
The aspirant phase young Indians spend years in-between school and labour market - calls for a different fix, beyond anti-cheating laws or jammers. The deeper repair, of course, is upskilling employment growing alongside labour force and admissions returning to govts politically accountable for the services they staff. That's NEET should run on the JEE template, with state-level second stages and weighted board marks. That has worked for IITs for more than a decade. It is overdue at medical colleges.

The writer is an independent development economist

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Brewing Mindfulness, One Cup At A Time

Devendraraj Suthar

The relationship between tea and contemplative consciousness is most clearly visible in the Zen Buddhist traditions of China and Japan. Buddhist monks in China consumed tea during prolonged meditation sessions to maintain alertness and concentration. Over time, this practice evolved in Japan into the Japanese tea ceremony, chanoyu. Tea masters such as Sen no Rikyū associated the ceremony with simplicity, discipline and attentiveness.

Contemporary research suggests that, under certain conditions, drinking tea may cultivate a sense of slowness, present-moment awareness, and mental steadfastness. For this reason, many scholars and cultural theorists view tea not merely as a drink, but as an 'experiential practice' in which the body, mind and patterns of social interaction operate simultaneously.

It was understood as an activity capable of drawing the individual, however briefly, into the immediacy of the present moment.

Modern psychology and neuroscience have attempted to explain certain dimensions of this experience. Research on mindfulness has shown that slow and attentive activities may help reduce psychological stress and improve concentration. The mindfulness-based stress reduction framework developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn demonstrated that present-centred awareness can have measurable benefits for mental well-being. Although his research did not focus specifically on tea, several psychologists suggest that slow, sensory acts, such as drinking tea, may evoke experiences analogous to mindfulness practices.

In addition, scientific studies have found that L-theanine, an amino acid naturally present in tea, may influence brain activity patterns associated with a calm yet alert mental state. The intensity of these effects, however, varies according to the individual, the quantity consumed and the surrounding circumstances. Tea may support, rather than directly produce, feelings of calmness and attentiveness in certain individuals.

In the Indian context, the significance of tea has evolved primarily through social and conversational culture. Tea has long been a familiar presence in ashrams, satsangs, family gatherings and informal discussions. From a sociological perspective, tea creates what may be described as a 'slow social moment', a temporary space in which individuals can step away from pressures and formalities of daily life. Its significance lies largely in the state of mind with which it is approached.

International Tea Day is observed on May 21



erratica

Trust me, we won't be a backside-sitter or stare in disbelief when asked to give up our gas-guzzling SUV or LPO-consuming puris. Or not buy more gold for sundry rites.

Letting their fancy cars rust, star ministers already travel on and in a convoy of bikes. Who knows, they might actually laugh off the satire this show provokes, not treat it like reason - or treat the national oil/gas as a... Yes, sir, now that the alarm has rung, we will stir from non-AC beds, arise and rise like yeast to bake our patriotic bread.

Alec Smart said: "With the mandated restraint, does the forex holiday become a 'guilt trip'?"

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Simultaneous polls

Potential benefits not enough to build consensus

A Joint Parliamentary Committee is holding nationwide consultations on two Bills related to the politically divisive issue of 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE). PP Chaudhary, the BJP MP who is heading the multi-party panel, has stated that India can save Rs 7 lakh crore if Lok Sabha and Assembly elections are held simultaneously. According to him, this exercise would raise the country's GDP by 1.6 per cent and the money saved can be used for development works and welfare schemes. There is no quarrel with the argument that ONOE would lead to considerable savings in terms of money, time and manpower. However, there is much more to electoral democracy than convenience and cost-benefit calculations.

The Congress and many other Opposition parties are calling simultaneous polls an attempt by the BJP-led Union government to centralise power and undermine the federal structure. These concerns have only grown after the saffron party added West Bengal to its burgeoning kitty of states. The Centre, however, is insistent that ONOE will benefit the nation. The lack of consensus makes it vital for the parliamentary committee to engage with a wide range of stakeholders — political parties, constitutional authorities, legal experts, administrative bodies, financial and educational institutions, industry and civil society.

One of the biggest challenges is to synchronise elections — different states go to the polls in different years. Also, there has to be a concrete plan for the worst-case scenario — when a government falls mid-term due to defections or a no-confidence motion. Moreover, Lok Sabha elections focus on national issues, while Assembly battles primarily revolve around state/regional matters. Clubbing the two contests may give an unfair advantage to the ruling party at the Centre, especially in states where it is not in power. The panel must take diverse factors and perspectives into account before submitting its findings. After all, the proposal, if implemented, will have far-reaching implications for India's democratic and federal framework.

## Hospitals neglected

Healthcare begins with functional machines

THE public healthcare systems of Punjab and Haryana have received a much-needed jolt from the Punjab and Haryana High Court. It has directed both states to ensure CT scan and MRI machines, along with ICU facilities, in every district hospital. The court's intervention exposes the widening gap between healthcare promises and healthcare delivery. During the hearings, Punjab informed the court that MRI facilities were available in only six of its 23 districts, while more than 2,000 posts of General Medical Officers and hundreds of specialist positions remained vacant. Several district hospitals still lacked functional ICUs. Haryana, too, was asked to explain gaps in diagnostic and critical-care facilities. These shortages explain why costly medical equipment in many government hospitals often lies unused or underutilised.

The HC rightly observed that access to CT scans, MRIs and ICUs was no longer a luxury but a basic healthcare necessity. It also underlined that governments could not rely indefinitely on outsourcing or referral systems in place of functional district-level infrastructure. Public healthcare system suffers not merely from lack of procurement, but from procurement without planning. MRI machines remain uninstalled because technicians are unavailable. Ventilators gather dust because maintenance contracts lapse. Diagnostic services are outsourced because radiologists and biomedical engineers are absent. Repeated audit reports have shown equipment worth crores lying idle for months or even years.

The consequences are severe. Every dysfunctional CT scanner delays diagnosis for accident victims, cancer patients and stroke sufferers. Every vacant specialist post pushes families towards expensive private hospitals. Rural patients often travel long distances only to discover that machines are non-functional or there is no staff to operate them. Installing machines alone will not cure the crisis. Public hospitals need doctors, technicians and accountability as urgently as they need equipment. Healthcare cannot be measured by machines purchased, but by patients treated in time.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, MAY 21, 1926

## The power of the Civil Service

THE announcement of the personnel of the Public Service Commission only shows that the government has not carried out the main object with which the Commission was recommended. They only desire to maintain the domination of the Civil Service in India and protect its extraordinary powers. When the suggestion was made for the appointment of the Commission, only men of independence, impartiality and a judicial frame of mind were recommended. The nomination of three European and two Indian members does not convince the people of India that the government is anxious to act according to the spirit of the Reforms. There is nothing to indicate that the progressive realisation of a responsible government by the people of India is the end kept in view. On the other hand, the progressive strengthening of the powers of the Civil Service and the permanent subordination of the people and the constitution to it what appears to be kept in view. When the government and its spokesmen ask for the cooperation of the people, they forget that real cooperation is not possible so long as the government does not change their hearts and conform their hearts and conform their actions to the real spirit of the Reforms Scheme. The people and their representatives fully realise how, in almost every measure of the government, they are perpetuating their own powers and privileges and do not make any real attempt to share such power with the people.

## Bipolar world order is here to stay

India should avoid ending up as a bargaining chip in the new superpower game

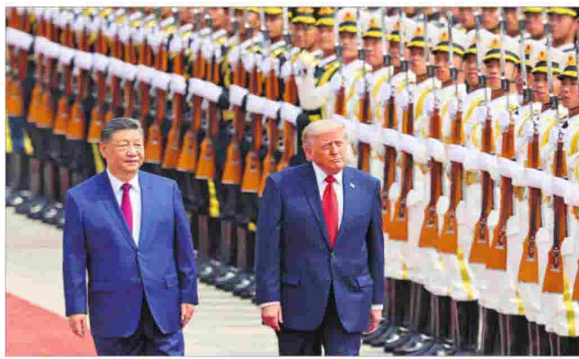
SHYAM SARAN  
FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY

THE May 14-15 summit in Beijing between Chinese President Xi Jinping and his US counterpart Donald Trump was a landmark geopolitical event, whose impact will reverberate across the Asian region and the world for years to come. This is an inflection point, and one is not using the term lightly. It is perhaps for this reason that there is a reluctance not only in the US and the West but also in our own region to grasp the full significance of just what happened in those two days of early spring in the Chinese capital.

One, this summit marks the acknowledgement of a bipolar equation among proximate powers. Xi framed the new strategic framework in these unusually categorical terms: "I have agreed with President Trump on a new vision of building a constructive China-US relationship of strategic stability." Xi went on to define the four pillars of this strategic stability: cooperation as mainstay, competition within limits, manageable differences, and expectable peace. He said this would guide the relationship for the next three years and beyond.

The term "strategic stability", which belongs to the bipolar Cold War years, defined the US-Soviet relationship. Its very use now suggests that we are in a similar historical period of a G-2 dominating the world.

At first the US side ignored this formulation in its initial readout. However, the Haryana High Court read-out of May 14 endorsed it: "President Trump and President Xi Jinping agreed that the US and China should build a constructive relationship of strategic stability on the basis of fairness and reciprocity."



INFLECTION POINT: The Xi-Trump summit in Beijing was a landmark geopolitical event. REUTERS

The additional phrase "on the basis of fairness and reciprocity" is missing from the Chinese read-out and may have been added by American diplomats as a hedging exercise. But the strategic framework stands and reflects US acknowledgement that it is dealing with a peer power. This is a major shift and a plus for China.

If there were doubts about whether the US truly appreciated the significance of the shift, the US Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, Marco Rubio, laid them to rest in a subsequent media interview: "One of the things that Chinese emphasise, which we agree (emphasis mine), is strategic stability in our relationship, a constructive relationship, but also one that establishes strategic stability so that we don't have misunderstandings that can lead to broader conflict."

This immediately puts a limit on what the US can and will do to defend the interests of allies and partners alike. Would the overarching objective of maintaining strategic stability put limits on US defence of the latter? For India, the question would be whether the US Indo-Pacific strategy will soon become a casualty of this new paradigm. If the Chinese

The Chinese perception is that in the changed geopolitical equation, Beijing can press forward its advantage on Taiwan.

declare that the "Quad" is incompatible with "strategic stability," what will be the US response?

The Chinese side was extremely forceful on the question of Taiwan. Xi even invoked the Thucydides Trap to warn that if this issue was not handled properly, it could lead to conflict — that is, undermine strategic stability. The Chinese Foreign Ministry readout said: "The Taiwan question is the most important issue in China-US relations. If it is handled properly, the bilateral relationship will enjoy overall stability. Otherwise, the two countries will have clashes and even conflicts, putting the entire relationship in great jeopardy. Taiwan independence and cross-

strait peace are as irreconcilable as fire and water. Safeguarding peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is the biggest common denominator between China and the US. The US side must exercise extra caution in handling the Taiwan question."

One has not seen a formulation as categorical and harsh as this in previous summits. The entire relationship is being predicated on this issue. It reflects a Chinese perception that in the changed geopolitical equation, China can press forward its advantage on Taiwan. Trump's commitment to Taiwan has been lukewarm at best. He has often considered it as yet another bargaining chip to extract concessions from China and not as a keystone in US Indo-Pacific strategy. There was no reference to Taiwan in the US readout, which means that the Chinese statement went unchallenged.

Subsequent remarks by Trump and Rubio were ominous. Trump said he was holding back on the approval of a \$14-billion arms package for Taiwan for the time being and described it as a "bargaining chip." Later, he said he did not want to fight a war "9,000 miles away". When Rubio was asked whether

the commitment to Taiwan's defence remained unchanged, he said, "US policy on the issue of Taiwan is unchanged as of today and it was raised. We always raise it on their side. We always make clear our position and we move on to other topics."

There are two things to note here. One, Rubio suggests that the position on Taiwan stands for now but implies that it could change. Two, he reduces the conversation on Taiwan to a ritualistic and rhetorical exchange, devoid of any strategic content. That is a mistake. It misreads the political and emotional charge that the Chinese have invested in the issue.

The two leaders have agreed to meet again in September, when Xi will pay a return visit to Washington. Trump is unpredictable, but he is now locked in a dynamic that would be difficult to reverse.

The structural confrontation between the US and China will continue, but the nature of the equation has changed. The Chinese believe that they can assert their interests with a boldness born out of the symmetric leverage vis-à-vis America. This will inevitably affect its relations with other countries, especially those in Asia. India will confront a less accommodating China and a greater predilection on its part to double down on its alliance with Pakistan.

One should note that Trump is not reported to have raised the issue of China supplying components to Iran's missile and drone arsenal and assisting with targeting information that led to attacks on US bases in the Gulf during the Iran war. Strategic stability has its limits.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is already in Beijing for another consequential summit. The strategic space around the US is narrowing and this is inevitably leading to a distancing of both allies and partners from Washington. We should be extremely alert and avoid ending up as a bargaining chip in the new superpower game.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

China and the US should be partners & friends. That's what history has taught us and what reality needs. —Xi Jinping

## A centenarian with a never-say-die spirit

RUPINDER TEWARI

ON May 4, my mother, Rajdulari Tewari, completed 100 remarkable years. To celebrate this rare milestone, our family hosted a special dinner attended by relatives, friends and many others whose lives she has touched. Her life is a reminder that true greatness often exists quietly — in sacrifice, resilience, compassion and unconditional love.

Even at the age of 100, my mother remains mentally alert and physically active. She was born in a humble Brahmin family at Dau Majra village near Khanna in Punjab. She belongs to a rare generation that has witnessed the country's journey through the pre-Partition Gandhian era, the post-Independence Nehruvian period and 21st-century India. She has seen extraordinary transformations — from mud stoves (*chullahs*) to LPG, lanterns to LED bulbs, handheld fans to air-conditioners, earthen water pots (*matkas*) to refrigerators, and landline telephones to smartphones.

I call my semi-literate mother an "unsung hero" because she has always been the silent force behind the success and happiness of her family members and countless others. At the age of 17, she married Prof Jivan Tewari, an accomplished educationist and dedicated social worker. Their home in Chandigarh was known for its open doors and hospitality. My father's friends and relatives frequently arrived unannounced from all over Punjab. Guests often stayed for days.

Mother managed the enormous responsibility of running a large household without complaint. In the 1960s, my father's three college-going nephews stayed with us for nearly four years. In a modest house already occupied by nine members, a tent had to be erected to make space for the trio.

Without any domestic help, my mother cooked breakfast, lunch and dinner daily for a household of 12 persons. Meals were prepared on *chullahs* over a fire. I vividly remember her using a *phoonkit* to keep the kitchen free of burning. Washing utensils twice a day was exhausting. She would hardly get any time for rest. Weekends brought even more work. Water would be heated in large metal containers and clothes washed by hand using wooden paddles (*nagri*). Despite the workload, we rarely saw her lose her temper or complain. She treated the relatives staying with us like her own children. Whenever we tried to help, she would gently insist that we focus on our studies and health.

Even after her children were married, her responsibilities did not diminish. She naturally stepped into the role of caregiver and grandmother, helping raise nine grandchildren. Although she suffered the loss of two sons many years ago, their close friends still remain in touch with her and occasionally visit to seek her blessings.

Generosity has always been central to her life. She never hesitates to help those in need and has donated significant amounts from her pension for the education of underprivileged children and the marriage of daughters from less-fortunate families. Because of her kindness, she is lovingly known to many as *Badi Mamma*. May she continue to inspire us all for years to come.

The writer is a former professor, Punjab University

epaper.tribuneindia.com

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Rivalry and selective cooperation

Refer to 'Xi has the measure of Trump'; the trajectory of the US-China relationship has become the defining geopolitical story of 2026. When Trump visited China about a decade ago, he appeared to believe that Beijing could be pressured into making concessions. But now Trump's approach appears to be more flexible and quite respectful that reflects the reality of China's increased economic, technological and military strength. Xi, for his part, has approached the relationship with greater confidence. China's objective is to secure greater recognition of its interests, and to ensure that the US respects what Beijing defines as its core concerns, especially on the Taiwan issue. For Asia, India particularly, the challenge is to recognise that the US-China relationship will continue to combine elements of rivalry and selective cooperation.

MONA SINGH, AMRITSAR

## Italy, a gateway to Europe

Refer to 'Made in Italy + Make in India = Excellence'; the India-Italy relationship has travelled far from the bitterness of the 2012 Italian Marines controversy that once cast a long shadow over bilateral ties. Today, with global supply chains fragmenting and maritime competition intensifying, cooperation between India and Italy in defence manufacturing, semiconductors, clean energy, connectivity and the Indo-Mediterranean corridor carries genuine strategic weight. Italy provides India with an industrial and technological gateway into Europe, while New Delhi offers Rome scale, markets, talent and strategic depth in the Indo-Pacific. The emerging Indo-Mediterranean framework concerns resilient supply chains, energy security, digital infrastructure and maritime stability, linking Europe and Asia.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

## Natural surroundings

Apropos of 'Dog menace', the administration mostly remains a silent spectator under public pressure. Dog feeders add to the problem. In advanced countries, hefty fines are charged if someone feeds birds or animals because their governments don't want these creatures to be dependent on people for their survival; instead, they pro-

vide them with natural surroundings. Happiness doesn't lie in feeding dogs on the streets; it lies within the four walls of your house. Be human and humane.

SHAM MURARI SHARMA, CHANDIGARH

## Moral duty towards animals

Humans can cope with the heat using various amenities at their disposal, but animals are left to suffer. It is our moral duty to make water and feed available on our terraces for birds and in front of our houses for cats and dogs. Taking cognisance of the cruelty perpetrated on draught animals, the government enacted the animal draught rules, which prevent the use of draught animals from noon to 3 pm when the temperature hovers around 40°C. Cart drivers must be persuaded to follow these rules. Pet stores pack poultry birds, parrots and pigeons in crates with no provision of water and food and no space even to stretch their wings. Such blatant cruelty must be discouraged.

SOSHIL RATTAN, AMRITSAR

## Justice through legal means

Refer to 'UP encounters'; it was shocking to note that Yogi Adityanath's rule, five encounters have been taking place daily for the last nine years. Yogi wants to drive home the point that orders will have to be followed without fail. Public safety is a vital responsibility of the state; hardcore criminals, gangsters and anti-social elements must definitely be dealt with strongly. The message should be — no one is allowed to take the law into their hands and criminals will be brought to justice using legal means.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

Fair exam nation's responsibility Incidents of paper leaks, cheating and other malpractices have weakened public confidence in examinations. Punishment must be severe enough to discourage future misconduct, and investigations must be completed quickly and fairly. A fair testing system is not only an academic necessity, but a national responsibility. A strong and secure examination system is essential to ensure that every hardworking student receives an equal opportunity.

RICHA SHARMA, CHANDIGARH

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.

These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: letters@tribunemail.com

# DNA science and the quest beyond ageing



**MANISH TEWARI**  
LOK SABHA MP AND  
FORMER I&B MINISTER

**F**RONTIER technologies are fascinating. In these columns, I have tried to provide a glimpse into the worlds of artificial intelligence, quantum computing, internet of things and renewable energy. Today, we delve into the enigmas of genomics.

On September 3, 2025, a hot mix caught Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un musing about organ transplants, biotechnology and the possibility of living to a young 150. Three of the world's most powerful totalitarians are not any different from other world leaders and business tycoons when it comes to battling age.

The twin enigmas of ageing and death, however, remain, arguably, the final unconquered bastions of biological science. While we have dismantled the atom, decoded the cosmic microwave background and engineered pathogens to deliver therapeutic payloads, the programmed obsolescence of our own cellular machinery eludes a definitive, mechanistic solution. This pursuit, the deep interrogation of our biological operating system, is unfathomable without genomics.

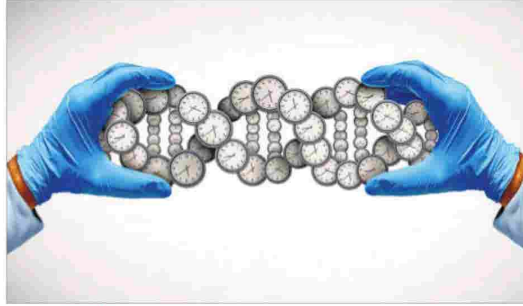
At its foundational level, genomics is the study of the genome, an organism's complete set of deoxyribonucleic

acid (DNA) — the chemical repository of the instructions needed to develop, operate and perpetuate virtually every living organism. Its double helix comprises two anti-parallel strands, each a string of four nucleotide bases: adenine (A), thymine (T), guanine (G) and cytosine (C). The strands are complementary: A always pairs with T and C with G. The linear sequence of these billions of letters encodes the instructions for building and operating a human body.

A gene, a specific locus on DNA, carries the code for a functional product, typically a protein. Information flows from DNA to a transient messenger molecule, messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA), through the process of transcription. This mRNA transcript then exits the nucleus and engages the ribosome, a molecular machine that translates the nucleic acid code into a specific sequence of amino acids, which fold into a 3D protein. Proteins form organs, catalyse biochemical reactions, and relay signals.

When a somatic mutation alters this sequence, an aberrant protein can be produced, disrupting homeostatic networks and potentially initiating a pathological cascade, such as neoplasia. Genomics, therefore, is the science of reading, interpreting, and now, editing this fundamental text.

The impact of this ability is already transformative and pervasive across multiple sectors. In clinical medicine, genomics has catalysed the shift from empirical, population-based protocols to personalised and predictive paradigms. Pharmacogenomics, the study of how genetic variation affects drug response, allows clinicians to pre-empt



**FRICITION**: The commercial translation of genomics is accelerating globally. ISTOCK

adverse reactions and choose the right drug at the right dose from the outset.

Genomic sequencing is now the definitive tool for tracking disease outbreaks. When a new pathogen emerges, decoding its genome allows scientists to understand its origins, monitor its mutations in real time and develop targeted diagnostics and vaccines with unprecedented speed.

The same logic applies to rare diseases: India bears a significant burden of rare diseases. Around one in every 20 Indians is affected by 7,000 to 8,000 diseases classified as rare. Genomic sequencing is increasingly the first-line diagnostic tool, ending diagnostic odysseys that previously lasted years.

This capability is inseparable from food security, which is inextricably linked to national security. Genomics is revolutionising agriculture by enabling the development of crops with higher yields, enhanced resistance to pests and drought and improved nutritional content, all critical

By identifying the genomic determinants of human longevity, we are seeking a compression of morbidity, the extension of a healthspan that matches our lifespan.

factors for a stable and secure food supply in the face of climate change. Similarly, genomic analysis of soil microbes can inform more sustainable farming practices and the monitoring of biodiversity loss.

In the realm of biosecurity, genomics provides the sentinel system, allowing for the rapid characterisation of engineered pathogens in a bio-attack scenario and the subsequent design of gene-specific medical countermeasures, such as mRNA vaccines or monoclonal antibodies.

Even in the domain of criminal justice, DNA analysis through forensic genomics not only helps identify suspects with high precision but also resolves cold cases by tracing distant familial connections through public ancestry databases, a technique that led to the apprehension of the Golden State Killer of the US. Concurrently, the commercial translation of genomics is accelerating globally. The worldwide genomics market, estimated to be valued

around \$30-40 billion, is on a steep growth trajectory, and India's market is projected to mirror this with a CAGR of 16.6%, reaching an estimated \$1.86 billion by 2033.

However, this scientific and commercial momentum generates a series of profound policy and legal frictions. The most immediate challenge is the governance of the direct-to-consumer testing market, which operates in a near-regulatory vacuum. Companies can directly market single-gene, multi-gene and even exome-sequencing services to consumers without a mandated framework for analytical validity, clinical validity, or, most critically, the post-test return of results. The interpretation of a polygenic risk score for a complex disorder like type 2 diabetes or the discovery of a variant of uncertain significance requires nuanced clinical translation alongside non-directive genetic counselling.

The very nature of genomic data places it in a category distinct from other medical information, demanding a rethinking of the data protection framework. A genome is a permanent, personally identifiable blueprint that contains predictive information not only about the individual but also about their kin. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, fails to recognise 'genetic data' as a specially protected category with heightened safeguards. The Act's 'consent' framework for scientific research is philosophically mismatched with the highly sensitive, re-identifiable nature of genomic data. This creates an incongruous scenario where the country is generating vast population-scale genomic datasets through initiatives

like the Genome India Project, which are managed under the normative Framework for Exchange of Data (FEED) protocols of the Biotech-PRIDE Guidelines, while the statutory law governing the privacy of this data remains generic.

The near future of genomics lies in its convergence with AI and spatial omics. The sheer volume of data produced by a single human genome is staggering, and making sense of it is a computational grand challenge. This is where AI through machine-learning and deep-learning algorithms trained on vast datasets, can forecast drug responses, identify synergistic drug combinations and illuminate the complex interplay between genetics, environment, and lifestyle.

Complementing this is spatial omics, which layers this molecular data onto the physical architecture of the tissue itself. By mapping the transcriptome of a tumour in its native two-dimensional space, we can visualise clonal heterogeneity, observe the immune cell infiltration at the tumour-stroma interface and understand cancer not as a monolithic mass but as a complex, evolving ecosystem. This spatial context is the missing dimension for unlocking mechanisms of disease progression that bulk-sequencing averages out.

The ultimate horizon of this science returns us to the initial, profound question of human mortality. By identifying the genomic and epigenomic determinants of extreme human longevity, we are not necessarily chasing immortality, but rather seeking a compression of morbidity, the extension of a healthspan that matches our lifespan.

## In Bihar, Education Minister must listen to women



**MAJA DARUWALA**  
LEGAL CONSULTANT

**T**HERE is outrage — and there can never be enough outrage — at the statement of Bihar Education Minister Mitihlesh Tiwari questioning the need for women to be out and about in public life and the value of educating them at all. He should have known better. Indeed, he is expected to know better.

A BA in economics from an evening college affiliated to Magadh University and often described as a coaching centre teacher in Patna, the minister is familiar with the value of education. He has been praised for pushing for education to be linked with employment. But there is concern that education is too often deeply linked to an ultra-traditional ideology. This fits right in with his recent statement.

But it is at odds with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's repeated framing of 'women-

led development' as a central, essential element for the success of 'Viksit Bharat'. This will not happen if women are to be pushed back into cloistered homes, unable to choose their own pathways into the workforce.

Under the Nitish Kumar-led Bihar government, one of the most hopeful signs of progress rested on his encouragement of girls' education. Between the early 2000s and the mid-2010s, girls' enrolment in secondary schools grew from about 55-60% to 75-80%. The famous bicycle initiative drew national attention. It did not matter whether it was successful in every village. It was a strong and visible indicator of movement — outward and upward — from the hold of orthodox traditions into the world of opportunity.

To reverse this would be a tragedy. Not just for equality, but also for the state's well-being. Bihar's unemployment rate stands at about 10-12%. Comparatively, women's unemployment is roughly 20-25%, against the national average of 12-15%. Needless to say, where they are employed, it is at the lower echelons and at poorer salaries. Nevertheless, over the course of two decades, women's employment under the governments of Nitish



**EDUCATION**: The world over, women's inclusion has benefited economic growth. FILE PHOTO

Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav grew by 4-6 percentage points. This was because of education.

Bihar's 12.7 crore population (as per the 2023 Census population projections) presently contributes about 7-8% to India's GDP. By comparison, Maharashtra, with a similar population, contributes roughly 15%. Women there make up about 20% of the workforce. Education that stands at around 12-14 years of average schooling for women has undoubtedly played a significant part.

On this analogy, energised by the inclusion of educated women into the workforce, Bihar's GDP could probably double over the medium term if female education to employ-

The significant backlash against the minister's careless statement is also a hopeful sign.

ment pathways keeps expanding at rates seen earlier.

The world over, women's inclusion has benefited economic growth. The massive numbers of women employed in the manufacturing and services sectors has been a key factor in China's economic ascent. Despite its social conservatism, investments in girls' education, coupled with bringing women into the garment sector, has unlocked remarkable growth in Bangladesh. Today, its girls' secondary school enrolment is so high that girls outnumber boys in classrooms and in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report, it ranked 99th against India's 129th.

Sri Lanka's investment in women's education has yielded some of the best human development indicators in South Asia. The evidence is incontrovertible. When women earn, families eat better, children stay in school longer and local economies grow.

Appreciation of traditional family values is all very well, but it cannot be based on women's seclusion and subordination. Home is not always a safe haven for women.

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau report for 2024-25 makes this amply clear: in Bihar nearly half of all crimes against women — rape, cruelty, dowry-related abuse, and harassment — happen inside the home. In terms of pure numbers, this is higher than the national average and up from a decade ago. While it reflects a sad state of affairs at home, more reported crime also indicates that women are ready now to come out and seek remedy for their woes and that the state is ready to respond.

The significant backlash against the minister's careless statement is also a hopeful sign. It signals that women are willing to talk back to those who would mock their expectations. Women are no longer passive reflections of menfolk but a decisive, independent political force with

clear constituencies that voice demands, especially for their safety, education and jobs.

The new government must recognise that it is beholden to the large numbers of women voters who contributed materially to its win. The minister's remark cannot be passed off as a slip of the tongue. It reflects a darker trust with subservience and inequality. It demands an unambiguous withdrawal and a clear apology, backed by concrete reassurances about the new government's commitment to girls' education and women's public life participation. The Education Ministry must align its language and policies with the aspirations of women — and, indeed, with the larger populace that wants Bihar to prosper.

Bihar needs an administration which understands that its future cannot be built on dragging half the population backwards into seclusion and submission; it must work actively to multiply every opportunity to further women's presence in schools, workplaces and public life. This would be a good time to hold consultations and come up with a clear-eyed progressive operational blueprint to increase women's participation at all levels of education. Only this can go some way to assuage the damage that has been done.

### QUICK CROSSWORD

**ACROSS**

- Censure severely (7)
- Funny (5)
- Prevailing fashion (4)
- Spicy (8)
- Cave-dweller (10)
- A medium-sized songbird (6)
- Outer edge (6)
- Food supplies (10)
- Well-disposed (8)
- Knock senseless (4)
- Utter confusion (5)
- The very embodiment of (7)

**Yesterday's Solution**

**Across:** 1 Plays it cool, 9 Octagon, 10 Extra, 11 Dupe, 12 Stoicism, 14 Osprey, 16 Fleeced, 18 Florence, 19 Spar, 22 Rhine, 23 Evasive, 24 Hot-tempered.

**Down:** 2 Lit up, 3 Yoga, 4 Innate, 5 Credible, 6 Outside, 7 Cold comfort, 8 Warm-hearted, 13 Vehement, 15 Provviso, 17 Scream, 20 Pride, 21 Mute.

### SU DO KU

	1	4	8	6	7
5	3			9	8
		1	4	2	
6	5	9	8		2
		6	7	5	
2	8			6	7
	4	7	6	3	8

**YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**

9	4	7	3	8	6	2	1	5
8	1	3	9	5	2	4	6	7
5	6	2	1	4	7	8	9	3
2	3	1	6	7	8	9	5	4
6	7	8	5	9	4	1	3	2
4	9	5	2	1	3	6	7	8
3	8	6	7	2	9	5	4	1
1	2	9	4	3	5	7	8	6
7	5	4	8	6	1	3	2	9

**CALENDAR**

MAY 21, 2026, THURSDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Vaisakh Shaka 31
- Jyeshtha Purnashtiti 7
- Hijri 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 5, up to 8:27 am
- Ganda Yoga up to 10:59 am
- Pushya Nakshatra up to 2:50 am
- Moon in Cancer sign.
- Gandmoola start 2:50 am

### FORECAST

CITY	THURSDAY		19:13 HRS 05:26 HRS
	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	44	26	
New Delhi	46	28	
Amritsar	44	26	
Bathinda	46	26	
Jalandhar	44	26	
Ludhiana	44	27	
Bhivani	44	29	
Hisar	45	29	
Sirsa	47	29	
Dharamsala	33	21	
Manali	28	13	
Shimla	30	21	
Srinagar	28	17	
Jammu	42	27	
Kargil	20	07	
Leh	21	05	
Dehradun	40	24	
Mussoorie	30	20	

TEMPERATURE IN °C

EASY epaper.tribuneindia.com

# SC must check government's high-handedness on UAPA

**T**HE Narendra Modi government is unnecessarily insisting on harsher bail conditions for the accused in the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). Its stubbornness, if left unchecked, will have grave consequences for civil liberties and democratic rights. As it is, many accused persons have been treated harshly. Some Supreme Court judges also are not being helpful, as smaller benches have not explicitly honoured a judgment by a three-judge SC Bench five years ago.

In the K.A. Najeeb (2021) case, the three-judge Bench held that, in cases of prolonged incarceration without a reasonable chance of the trial being completed within a reasonable timeframe, constitutional intervention is warranted.

"At the commencement of pro-

ceedings, Courts are expected to appreciate the legislative policy against grant of bail, but the rigours of such provisions will melt down where there is no likelihood of trial being completed within a reasonable time and the period of incarceration already undergone has exceeded a substantial part of the prescribed sentence. Such an approach would safeguard against the possibility of provisions like Section 43-D (5) of UAPA being used as the sole metric for denial of bail or for wholesale breach of the constitutional right to speedy trial."

Unfortunately, in January 2026, a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court comprising Justices Arvind Kumar and B.V. Nagarathna pointed out that no reading of Najeeb suggests that the mere passage of time, divorced from all surrounding circumstances, mechanically entitles an accused to release.

Meanwhile, Additional Solicitor General S.V. Raju made a sensible suggestion to the apex court; he requested it to refer the matter to a larger Bench. This is a good suggestion that the SC should accept in earnest so that the issue is settled for once and all.

Delhi riots conspiracy case, held that the 2021 verdict does not indicate "as laying down a mechanical rule under which the mere passage of time becomes determinative in every case arising under a special statute."

On Monday, Justices Ujjal Bhuyan and B.V. Nagarathna pointed out that no reading of Najeeb suggests that the mere passage of time, divorced from all surrounding circumstances, mechanically entitles an accused to release.

Meanwhile, Additional Solicitor General S.V. Raju made a sensible suggestion to the apex court; he requested it to refer the matter to a larger Bench. This is a good suggestion that the SC should accept in earnest so that the issue is settled for once and all.

Both the government and the ruling dispensation under the Bharatiya Janata Party must realise that 'jail, not bail' in certain cases, are like a double-edged sword. Today, it hurts a set of people they don't like; tomorrow, it may cut another group—the one they are fond of. History repeatedly demonstrates that extraordinary powers granted to the state rarely remain confined to their original targets. Once normalised, they become instruments available to any government, regardless of ideology or political affiliation.

The danger lies not merely in individual cases, but in the precedent such practices establish for the criminal justice system and constitutional governance. If prolonged

incarceration without trial becomes acceptable under the pretext of national security, then the constitutional guarantees of personal liberty, presumption of innocence, and speedy trial risk becoming hollow promises. Laws like the UAPA were framed to address exceptional threats, not to create a parallel system where due process is indefinitely suspended. Courts, therefore, carry a profound responsibility to ensure procedural safeguards.

A democracy cannot sustain itself solely through periodic elections; it must also protect dissent, uphold fairness, and maintain institutional restraint. Safeguarding civil liberties, even for unpopular or controversial causes, is ultimately essential to preserving democracy for everyone.



## LETTERS

### Sustainable development, a must for Hyderabad

**W**ITH reference to the report "How Hyderabad's infra has pre-built the future" by Nomula Srinivas Rao (The Hans India, May 20), Hyderabad's growth story clearly shows how visionary planning can transform a city into a global economic hub. By setting up world-class infrastructure in advance, the city has managed to draw in investments, speed up development, and open up opportunities across sectors such as IT, aviation, biotech, and logistics.

Projects likeHITEC City, the Outer Ring Road, Metro Rail, and the upcoming Regional Ring Road have not only eased movement but also pushed growth towards surrounding regions. However, rapid expansion also brings challenges that cannot be brushed aside. Authorities must step up efforts to upgrade storm water drains, check urban flooding, preserve lakes, and bring down pollution levels before these issues spiral out of control.

The roadmap ahead should focus on sustainable and inclusive development. Smart traffic systems, eco-friendly construction, efficient waste management, and stronger public transport networks must be rolled out consistently. Citizens, too, have a crucial role to play. Residents should come forward to protect public spaces, cut down waste, follow traffic discipline, and speak up against encroachments and environmental damage.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinaida

### Time management crux to governance

**T**HIS refers to the editorial "Capex reality and the myth of the 'double-engine' sarkar" (THI, May 20). The editorial raises an important point that governance outcomes cannot be measured merely through political alignment between the Centre and States. Infrastructure spending is meaningful only when allocations are efficiently utilised and projects are completed on time. Administrative capacity, transparent monitoring, and institutional coordination matter far more than political slogans. States with stronger implementation systems naturally perform better regardless of party affiliation. The focus should therefore shift towards improving project execution, reducing procedural delays, and strengthening accountability in public expenditure. Development requires competence, continuity, and cooperative federalism in practice.

A Myilsami, Coimbatore

### Inclusive development must be Centre's motto

**A** PROPOS 'capex reality and the myth of the 'double-engine' sarkar'. Irrespective of statistics of capital expenditure the centre mokes out to states and its utilization, 'double-engine sarkar' translates as only states that vote BJP-led NDA to power can expect centre's financial assistance for their development. Others will need to fund their development by themselves. This very concept, besides damaging the nation's federalism, also divides the nation into two— that powered by 'double-engine' and that powered by a 'single-engine'. More significantly it disrespects people's choice at the hustings, which democracy is all about. Irrespective of utilization of capital expenditure offered by the centre, the centre must help every state of the union, irrespective of who governs it. Is this too much to ask for, or Utopian a circumstance, in the current scheme of things in the country?

Dr George Jacob, Kochi

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Why Bengaluru lacks Hyderabad style smooth roads?

**BENGALURU:** A video shared by Canadian national Caleb Friesen has gone viral after he openly admired the excellent condition of roads in Hyderabad and wondered why Bengaluru cannot maintain similar standards.

In a social media reel, Friesen highlighted that Hyderabad's roads are remarkably well-built, allowing easy connectivity across different areas with no potholes, no stray animals, and no sudden pedestrian crossings that endanger drivers. He noted that the city's road infrastructure effectively controls traffic flow.

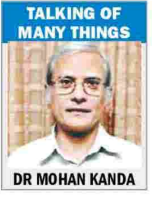
The caption of the reel states, "The main roads in Hyderabad are immaculate. I've spotted very few potholes, and from what I've seen, the city struggles a lot less with gridlock traffic than Bengaluru. That doesn't mean Hyderabad doesn't have traffic, but they've done a much better job of building up high-quality road infrastructure to mitigate the traffic and accelerate the process of getting around. It's very uncommon in Hyderabad to spend more than an hour on the road getting from Point A to Point B. Why can't Bengaluru have roads like this?"

The clip has ignited a lively online discussion comparing the two cities. Many users supported Friesen's observations and called for urgent planned road development in Bengaluru, where traffic congestion has become unbearable.

Others argued that the comparison is unfair, pointing out that every city has both good and bad stretches of roads, and that Friesen may have only visited Hyderabad's Outer Ring Road (ORR) and better-maintained zones.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

# Weather forecasting blends two models to sharpen accuracy



DR MOHAN KANDA

**T**HE agriculture and allied sectors are now not quite as substantial contributors to the GDP of the country as they once were. Still the agriculture and allied sectors remain an important component of the country's economy; perhaps no longer the backbone, but at least a major limb. And what India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal did of its significance, namely that it does not wait, but not agriculture, by and large still holds good.

Agriculture, in an all-encompassing and complex discipline. The two decades and more in my service that I spent dealing with it has left me convinced that no other activity spans such a vast canvas of subjects.

In soil, for instance, there is physics, in plants, botany in insects, zoology in dealing with the markets mathematics, and, finally, economics in assessing its viability.

Never an extraordinarily remunerative occupation compared to others such as businesses, industries, or professional careers, agriculture did have its appeal as a substantial source of support for long, till the initial days after independence.

A number of things that have

happened since then have, however, reduced it to a very fragile, non-remunerative and risky occupation, with many abandoning it in favour of greener pastures, pun intended! Whatever can be done, therefore, to assist the transition of the agriculture and allied sectors from sustenance occupations to commercial activities, needs to be done with a sense of urgency of purpose and emphasis.

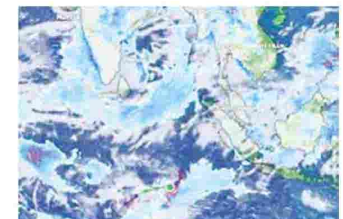
Among the many things that government can do is the one thing that is easiest, nothing. At least nothing, that is, that comes in the way of the farmers' produce accessing the most remunerative markets.

In doing that, the government will be emulating Diogenes the Guru of Alexander the Great. When Alexander, after his celebrated conquests, approached his mentor, offering a reward for all that he had learned from him, Diogenes is famously reported to have told his disciple to step out of the way of the sunlight as he was feeding cold! The Guru was beyond being lured by material temptations.

A very potentially promising effort recently made by the government of India in this regard, unfortunately, proved to be an abortive attempt, on account of the lack of political will to overcome resistance by forces largely motivated by vested political interests.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD), last week unveiled a new weather model to provide forecasting of monsoon patterns at the block level forecast of the journey of the monsoons.

Weather has always played a pivotal role in farming, influencing everything from plant-



**The two decades and more in my service that I spent dealing with agriculture have left me convinced that no other activity spans such a vast canvas of subjects. In soil, for instance, there is physics, in plants, botany, in insects, zoology in dealing with the markets, mathematics, and, finally, economics in assessing its viability**

schedules to harvest quality. It is arguably the most significant external factor affecting agricultural productivity. From early civilizations observing seasonal patterns to today's farmers relying on high-tech meteorological tools, the ability to anticipate atmospheric conditions remains fundamental to farming success.

In today's world, marked by increasing climate variability and extreme weather events, accurate and timely weather forecasting is not just helpful but essential. Its influence extends across the entire agricultural value chain, affecting immediate on-farm decisions and shaping long-term strategies. For modern agriculture to remain productive, sustainable, and resilient farm practices are absolutely essential. Weather forecasting is directly linked to increased productivity by allowing farmers to take proactive rather than reactive actions. With access to reliable forecasts, growers can better manage inputs, protect their crops, and avoid costly mistakes.

Expecting a heavy rainfall event, for example, might prompt the delay of planting or harvesting operations, helping to avoid soil compaction, seed washout, or spoilage of mature produce. Thwarting of an impending heat wave, again, gives farmers the opportunity to adjust irrigation schedules to maintain adequate soil moisture and prevent heat stress in crops. Wind forecasts can, similarly, influence decisions such as applying or delaying pesti-

cide and herbicide spraying to reduce drift and maximize effectiveness.

Event forecasting systems can clearly transform weather from being a source of risk into a strategic advantage, by facilitating optimization of resources such as water, fertilizers, and labour, resulting in better yields, improved quality, and reduced environmental impact. Without accurate forecasting, farm operations become vulnerable to sudden disruptions, increasing the likelihood of crop failure, wasted inputs, and financial losses.

Weather windows or short periods of favorable conditions, can also be identified in advance for tasks like mechanical weeding, pruning, or spreading compost, ensuring operations are done efficiently and at the right time.

Further, many crop pests and diseases are strongly influenced by weather conditions. Forecasting models can predict outbreaks based on temperature, humidity, leaf wetness, and precipitation levels. Harvesting is a race against time and weather. The quality and quantity of a crop at harvest can be dramatically affected by short-term weather conditions.

It has, therefore, become a long-standing aim of the IMD to provide 'hyper' local forecasts to enable farmers to time their sowing precisely. Historically, such estimates have been available, at best, over states or at the level of districts.

The new system blends two forecasting models to sharpen accuracy. From the date of the monsoon's onset in Kerala, it can use AI-based analysis and, using its historical data and

global weather models, which provide the monsoon's itinerary with unprecedented granularity.

The ability of an institution to stay abreast with developments in weather conditions elsewhere in the world is crucial to the art of improving forecasting systems. The famous butterfly effect amply demonstrates that imperative. It is the concept that small, seemingly insignificant actions can create massive, unpredictable consequences in complex systems.

Coined by meteorologist Edward Lorenz in the 1960s, it implies that tiny initial differences like a butterfly flapping its wings can ripple out and cause vast variations in outcomes, such as a distant hurricane. The phrase suggests that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil could, through a chain of atmospheric events, cause a tornado in Texas!

No matter which place in the world, it is, and irrespective of how highly developed its weather forecasting systems, it is always the unfortunate weathermen who are the butt of jokes. No matter how hard they try, the very inherent instability of weather systems is such that they defy the most advanced technologies and the best efforts of forecasters.

Which is probably why there is this joke about the weatherman in a town who applied for a transfer to another place, on the ground that the weather was constantly in disagreement with him!

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

## REVISITING THE ITDAs

# Reimagining their role in the current context

PALLA TRINADHA RAO & MADIDI BHARATH BHUSHAN

**T**HE continued existence of Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs), established in the pre-1980s in the Telugu States, without any substantive structural or functional transformation, raises a fundamental policy question: have these institutions genuinely enabled tribal communities to progress within the development paradigm while safeguarding their constitutional and legal rights, or have they merely persisted as administrative instruments of welfare delivery disconnected from contemporary realities?

In the present context—marked by rights-based legislations, decentralised governance mandates, and increasing socio-economic transitions—tribal regions—this question assumes critical urgency.

The trajectory of tribal development policy in India reflects an enduring tension between welfare-oriented administration and the aspiration for culturally grounded, rights-based governance. Historically, Scheduled Tribes have faced economic exploitation, land alienation, and social exclusion, largely shaped by geographical isolation and systemic discrimination.

As a result, tribal pockets in the country remain among

the most backward in terms of development indicators and continue to be areas of concern even after five decades of intervention through special institutional mechanisms. Administration in tribal areas in the erstwhile Hyderabad Princely State (Hyderabad Deccan State) served as a precursor to post-independence institutional mechanisms. Early interventions in the 1940s, such as the Chenchu Development Programme and the Gond Education Scheme introduced under the guidance of Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf in Adilabad (now in Telangana), attempted to address inequities through culturally sensitive approaches.

The Gond Education Scheme, in particular, sought to bridge administrative gaps by training and employing individuals as teachers and functionaries, with the Marwadi Training Centre emerging as a key institutional innovation. The government also established the Social Service Department in 1946.

In Andhra, the government appointed a team of experts led by R.S. Malayappan in 1949 to formulate development plans for tribal areas. This perspective was further strengthened by post-independence policy thinking. The 1969 Study Team on Tribal Development, led by Shulu Ao, strongly advocated an "area approach" to planning,



emphasizing region-specific strategies responsive to local ecological, economic, and cultural conditions.

It recommended that tribal development be funded primarily through general plan resources, supplemented by targeted allocations and supported by protective legal measures. The underlying principle was clear: development in tribal areas must ensure autonomy, safeguard resources, and promote meaningful participation.

The creation of Girijan Development Agencies (GDAs) in 1972 marked an attempt to move beyond fragmented and sector-specific approaches such as community development blocks and tribal development blocks. These GDAs, first established in northern Andhra Pradesh, were later reorganized into Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDAs) in 1979, forging the core of the area-based institutional approach.

ITDAs were designed as autonomous agencies tasked with adapting State and Cen-

tries in both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

At the same time, the role of ITDA Project Officers has expanded significantly. They now perform a wide range of functions, including serving as Member Secretaries under FRA, overseeing PESA implementation, acting as Project Administrators under land acquisition laws, and exercising powers as Additional Agents to Government. Many of these roles are assigned through executive orders without corresponding statutory backing or institutional restructuring.

Simultaneously, the socio-economic context of tribal communities has undergone significant transformation. Increased access to education, market integration, migration, and the assertion of rights under PESA and FRA have reshaped aspirations. However, persistent challenges such as land alienation, displacement, and intra-community inequalities continue to undermine development outcomes.

The institutional framework designed in the 1970s is increasingly inadequate to address these evolving realities. There is an urgent need to strengthen decentralized governance by placing Gram Sabhas at the centre of decision-making, as envisaged under PESA. ITDAs must transition from top-down implementing

India is witnessing a decisive shift towards clean and efficient transportation. E-buses are the future of passenger mobility, and e-trucks will define the next era of logistics and freight transport in our country

-H D Kumaraswamy, Union Minister for Heavy Industries & Steel

**BIZ BRIEFS**

**Topperware's new campaign**

Topperware, a food storage and kitchen solutions products brand, is marking 30 years of its existence in India with a new partnership campaign aimed at expanding the brand's presence across the country. According to the company: "Topperware has been a part of every modern kitchen, known for its premium quality, durability, smart storage solutions, and commitment towards sustainable living. From kitchen organization to smart cooking and storage solutions, Topperware products are designed to make everyday life simpler."

**Viyash Scientific logs robust growth**

Viyash Scientific Limited, a pharmaceutical company, has announced its financial results for the period ended March 31, 2026. The company clocked a massive Profit After Tax (PAT) growth of 134 per cent during FY26, while it recorded a 306 per cent rise in PAT during the fourth quarter of FY26. During Q4 FY26, the company reported revenues of Rs920 crore reflecting a growth of 19.1 per cent rise.

**Campus unveils new brand logo**

Campus Activewear Ltd., a Sports and Athleisure brand, unveiled its new brand identity at its Annual Distributors Meet- Shoecase 2026. At the heart of the identity shift are three outward arrows and lines that symbolise multidirectional paths, choices and possibilities. Nikhil Aggarwal, CEO, Campus Activewear, said: "As we evolve, this marks an important step in the next phase of our journey as a brand. It reflects a generation that values individuality, draws inspiration from culture."

**Dhanuka Agritech's net profit up 29.5%**

Dhanuka Agritech Ltd reported a 29.5 per cent jump in net profit to Rs 97.77 crore for the fourth quarter of the 2025-26 fiscal on higher sales. The company had posted a net profit of Rs 75.50 crore in the year-ago quarter, according to a regulatory filing. Total income for the January-March quarter rose 11.18 per cent year-on-year (YoY) to Rs 503.86 crore from Rs 453.17 crore, while expenses remained elevated at Rs 375.55 crore.

**ABHFL opens branch in AP**

Aditya Birla Housing Finance Limited (ABHFL), a housing finance company, has expanded its footprint in Andhra Pradesh with the launch of a new branch in Cuddapah. With this addition, ABHFL's total network in Andhra Pradesh has increased to 13 branches. Pankaj Gadgil, MD, ABHFL, said: "Andhra Pradesh is a key growth market for us. With strong demand and rising aspirations, we are scaling our regional presence to deepen customer engagement. By combining our growing distribution footprint,"

## Melody diplomacy sweetens India's toffee exports

Exports climb from ₹49 crore to ₹132 crore

NEW DELHI

THE country's toffee exports climbed 166 per cent in the past 12 years to reach Rs 132 crore in 2025-26, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Wednesday. Toffee exports stood at Rs 49.68 crore in 2013-14. "India's TOFFEE TALE would surely be melodic to the ears! Exports have grown nearly 166% since 2013-14," Goyal said in a post on social media. The commerce minister came up with the data after Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi for gifting her "Melody" toffees, reviving the light-hearted "Melody" wordplay associated with the two leaders on social media. In a social media post, Meloni shared a video in which she could be heard saying, Prime Minister Modi brought us a gift, a very, very good toffee -- Melody.

He is visiting Italy to the invitation of Meloni to further strengthen bilateral cooperation in areas such as trade, defence, clean energy and technology. The hashtag "#Melodi", a blend of Modi and Meloni's names, was coined by the Italian prime minister during the COP28 in Dubai in 2023 and later went viral on social media following the warm inter-



actions between the two leaders at global events. Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifted a packet of Melody toffees to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni during his visit to Rome. The informal and light-hearted exchange between the two leaders quickly went viral on social media, reviving the widely popular "#Melodi"

trend -- a portmanteau combining the names of PM Modi and his Italian counterpart Meloni. Meloni later shared a video of the interaction on X, where she was seen laughing with Prime Minister Modi while talking about the gift. "Prime Minister Modi brought us a gift -- a very, very good toffee -- Melody," she said in the video.

The Italian Prime Minister also thanked PM Modi for the gesture in her caption, further fueling online discussions around the viral "Melodi" moment.

The hashtag first gained global attention during the COP28 Summit in Dubai after Meloni posted a selfie with PM Modi captioned "Good friends at COP28, #Melodi". Since then, their warm public interactions at international events, including the G20 Summit in New Delhi, have repeatedly attracted attention across social media platforms. Earlier in the day, visuals and pictures from a special dinner hosted near the iconic Colosseum in Rome also attracted significant attention online. The two leaders were seen sharing a casual moment, including a selfie and a relaxed interaction that quickly spread across social media platforms.

## AP to launch one of India's most ambitious MSME green efficiency initiatives

HANS BUSINESS VIJAYAWADA

POWERED by the APIC's plug-and-play infrastructure policy, Andhra Pradesh Government's initiative to establish 175 MSME parks — one in each Assembly constituency — is accelerating grassroots industrialisation and strengthening the State's industrial ecosystem.

The State is now set to launch one of India's largest energy and water efficiency programmes for MSMEs, aimed at promoting sustainable manufacturing, global technology adoption and resource-efficient operations.

Energy efficiency experts said Andhra Pradesh's partnership with Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL) under the Union Ministry of Power could become a model for other States by improving industrial competitiveness, reducing operational costs, creating green jobs and enhancing environmental sustainability.

The initiative aligns with the Centre's Raising and Accelerating MSME Per-



AP Industries Secretary Dr. N. Yuvaraj along with M. Viswa, CEO of MSME-DC, releasing a report of EESL on the technological strategies for strengthening of MSMEs

formance (RAMP) Programme and the State's MSME and Entrepreneur Development Policy. As part of Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's vision for sustainable MSME growth, the Industries Department will organise the "MSME Growth Conclave" in Vijayawada on May 25, said Dr. N. Yuvaraj, Secretary, Industries, Commerce and Food Processing De-

partment. Andhra Pradesh currently has more than 21 lakh MSMEs contributing significantly to employment generation, regional economic growth and Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). The manufacturing segment accounts for nearly 24 per cent of the sector with around five lakh units engaged in agro-based industries, apparel, textiles, food processing and dairy.

Nearly 45 per cent of these enterprises are led by women entrepreneurs.

The MSME credit ecosystem has also expanded significantly, with institutional credit flow crossing ₹1.17 lakh crore during FY 2025-26. Under the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), 6,193 enterprises were established, generating employment for 68,123 people with margin money assistance of ₹205.95 crore, placing Andhra Pradesh first among southern States.

The State has also launched the AP Chief Minister's Entrepreneurship Programme (AP-CMEEP), a ₹400 crore credit-linked subsidy scheme targeting 3,500 MSMEs and creation of nearly 17,000 jobs.

A major highlight of the conclave will be the launch of the Energy and Water Efficiency Intervention Programme for MSMEs in partnership with EESL. The initiative will include energy and water audits, cluster mapping and diagnostic studies across 15 MSME clusters, benefiting over 1,000 enterprises.

## AP gov't clears 800 acres for RIL's AI data centre in Vizianagaram

AMARAVATI: The Andhra Pradesh government on Wednesday approved the allotment of over 800 acres of land in Vizianagaram district to Reliance Industries Ltd at a discounted rate of 25 per cent for the establishment of a Giga Scale AI Data Centre (AIDC) with Cable Landing Station at an investment of over Rs 1 lakh crore. IT Secretary Bhaskar Katanneni directed Andhra Pradesh Industrial and Infrastructure Corporation (APIIC) and Vizianagaram district administration to identify an additional acre of land suitable for the Cable Landing Station (CLS). "The government approves for allotment of 854.97 acres of land in Vizianagaram district to Reliance Industries Limited, at a 25 per cent discounted rate... the land allotment is intended for establishment of a Giga-Scale AIDC with CLS, with proposed cumulative investment of Rs 1.08 lakh crore," said Katanneni in a Government Order (GO). Further, the government approved a host of tailor-made non-fiscal and fiscal incentives, exemptions, subsidies, reimbursements, discounts, waivers and other privileges for the Rs 18.4-lakh crore conglomerate.

## UN lowers India's GDP forecast, says not immune to global shocks

Higher energy import costs and tighter financial conditions weigh on outlook

UNITED NATIONS

THE United Nations has revised downward India's economic growth forecast for 2026 to 6.4 per cent from its earlier projection of 6.6 per cent, citing global uncertainties and economic shocks arising from the ongoing West Asia crisis. As per the report released by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) on Tuesday, India, however, remains one of the fastest-growing major economies. West Asia crisis has delivered yet another shock to the global economy, slowing growth, reigniting inflationary pressures and heightening uncertainty, it said.

Ingo Pitterle, Senior Economist and Officer-in-charge of Global Economic Monitoring Branch, Economic Analysis and Policy Division, UN DESA, said India is "not immune" to current global challenges. It is a large energy importer and it is also exposed to other channels,



for example, remittances, add to some vulnerability. Also, a global financial tightening will make monetary policy more complicated," he added. Pitterle pointed out that the West Asia "shock" for all countries is having a dual impact on growth — it is lowering growth while at the same time pushing up inflation, and in doing so it is constraining the policy space. "This will also be the case for India. So, the question then remains, how will the central bank and also the fiscal authorities respond to that?..", the report, however, noted that India remains one of the fastest-growing major economies, with output still expected to expand by 6.4 per cent, though the step-down from 7.5 per cent in 2025 underscores the drag from higher energy import costs and tighter financial conditions.

## Core infra industries clock 1.7% growth in April

NEW DELHI: The combined index of India's eight core infrastructure industries increased by 1.7 per cent during April this year, compared to the same month of the previous year, with cement, steel and electricity recording a positive growth, according to data released by the Commerce and Industry Ministry on Wednesday. The final growth rate of the eight core industries for March was observed at 1.2 per cent. The cumulative growth rate of the index of eight core industries during April to March, 2025-26 now works out 2.7 per cent as compared to the corresponding period of last year.

Steel production recorded a 6.2 per cent increase in April over the same month of the previous year, while the cement sector clocked a robust 9.5 per cent growth during the month as demand for these products stayed buoyant due to large government investments in big ticket infrastructure projects such as highways, ports and railways. Electricity generation increased by 4.1 per cent in April, compared to the same month of the previous year. However, coal production decreased by 8.7 per cent during the month while crude oil output declined by 3.9 per cent.

## Mutual fund rules may get investor-friendly overhaul by Sebi

NEW DELHI

MARKETS regulator Sebi on Wednesday proposed allowing third-party payments in mutual funds in certain scenarios, such as investment by an employer on behalf of its employees and payment of commissions by AMCs, provided adequate safeguards are in place.

The current regulatory framework mandates that all payments for investments in mutual funds must originate directly from the investor's own bank account and be routed exclusively through RBI-authorized payment aggregators or Sebi-recognised clearing corporations.

After receiving feedback from the industry, Sebi felt a need to review the existing framework for third-party payments in mutual funds by permitting specific, well-defined scenarios where such payments may be allowed without compromising the



overarching objectives of investor protection and compliance with the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The intent is to strike a balanced approach that facilitates ease of investing in genuine cases while reinforcing robust safeguards against potential misuse," Sebi said. Accordingly, in its consultation paper, Sebi proposed a third-party payment scenario where an employer can pay for employee investments in mutual fund units through payroll deduction. The proposed scenario acknowledges the established practice of employers of offering various benefits and savings avenues to their employees.

# Trump discloses thousands of stock trades, some in companies directly influenced by his policies

NEW YORK

CALL him the Trader in Chief. Recent presidents have stayed away from trading stocks in companies whose fortunes they could lift or scuttle with the stroke of a pen, but Donald Trump smashed that precedent in the first quarter of this year with more than 3,600 buy and sell orders, many of them involving companies whose profits have been directly impacted by his decisions as head of the government.

Among the Trump trades in a recent report filed with a federal ethics agency was as much as \$6 million in Nvidia, whose advanced chips Trump approved for sale to China last year. His portfolio also scooped up stocks of several US military suppliers impacted by the Iran war, including Lockheed Martin, Gen-

eral Dynamics and Northrop Grumman. "If he were defence secretary, he would be committing a crime," said Richard Painter, the chief White House ethics adviser in the George W Bush administration and a big critic of congressional trading, too. "Technically he can do this, but it is fundamental breach of trust."

US law bans federal employees from holding financial assets that could be impacted by their policy work, but there is a carveout for the president. A spokesperson for the Trump family business said the president's portfolio is handled by third parties that have "sole and exclusive" authority to make investment decisions. "Neither President Trump, his family, nor The Trump Organization plays any role in selecting, directing, or approving specific



investments," spokesperson Kimberly Benza said in a statement. "They receive no advance notice of trading activity and provide no input regarding investment decisions or portfolio management." Ethics officials have pointed out that just the knowledge of what's in his portfolio is problematic because it could impact the president's decisions on everything from health policy to government contracting to war.

ures for each transaction are not given, just ranges. Trump has traditionally had very little invested in the stock market relative to his net worth, but that could be changing. It is possible to know if the purchaser were trying to curry favor with the president. All recent US presidents have dumped their stocks before assuming office, but their money in broadly diversified funds or set up a "blind" trust so they couldn't even know what they owned.

The blind trust route was avoided by George HW Bush, then Bill Clinton. George W. Bush, the son, dumped his stocks. Barack Obama was in broadly diversified mutual funds. Joe Biden didn't trade. In addition to Nvidia, the president's portfolio includes shares in Apple, Boeing and Tesla. The CEOs of all four companies accompanied Trump on his visit to China recently. The portfolio also includes Intel, the chipmaker in which the government took a 10 per cent stake last year. Among many others, the portfolio includes a loving president recently added stock in Shake Shack, Papa John's and Cheesecake Factory. Many of the trades were in shares of US companies whose profits have been directly impacted by his decisions as head of the government. All modern

US presidents before Trump avoided trading in stocks because it looked dirty given their power to lift or crush the fortunes of the companies behind them, so this is another case of climbing a rope as precedent. All modern US presidents have stayed away from trading in stocks because it looked dirty given their power to lift or crush the fortunes of the companies behind them. Donald Trump is not only breaking that precedent, he's smashing it up. A report from a federal government ethics agency shows that President Trump's portfolio bought and sold more than 3,500 times in the first three months this year. It's a record impressive for both the number of transactions and for many of the trading targets — US companies whose profits have been directly impacted by his personal decisions.

The Statesman

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Viral Frontiers

The World Health Organization's decision to classify the Ebola outbreak in eastern Congo as an international public health emergency is not merely a medical alert. It is a reminder that epidemics in fragile states are no longer local tragedies.

What makes the current outbreak especially troubling is not only the lethality of Ebola itself, but the geography through which it is spreading. The affected regions sit at the intersection of armed conflict, mining economies, weak governance, and mass population movement.

Much of that urgency evaporated once the immediate emergency passed. Africa's health infrastructure remains chronically underfunded, overstretched and heavily dependent on external agencies for crisis response.

Any infectious disease today is inseparable from national security, migration management, trade stability, and global economic continuity. The Covid era demonstrated how quickly local outbreaks can destabilise supply chains, political systems, and public trust across continents.

The response so far suggests authorities understand the danger. Importantly, Ebola is not Covid-19. It does not spread through casual airborne transmission, and outbreaks can be contained with disciplined public health measures.

The Long Exit

Authoritarian systems rarely collapse in the dramatic fashion imagined by outsiders. More often, they decay internally long before they visibly weaken.

That appears to be the stage Russia is entering under President Vladimir Putin. For more than two decades, Mr Putin's legitimacy rested on a simple proposition: stability in exchange for political passivity. After the economic chaos of the 1990s, many Russians accepted restrictions on democratic freedoms because the state delivered rising incomes, stability, and predictability.

Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet Union projected military power abroad while institutional decay spread internally. Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania looked rigidly controlled until it suddenly imploded. Even in contemporary China, Xi Jinping's concentration of authority has raised concerns within parts of the Communist Party about the risks of over-centralisation.

Russia today is not on the verge of imminent collapse. The Kremlin still commands powerful security agencies, controls national television, suppresses organised opposition and benefits from fragmented dissent. Western predictions of Mr Putin's immediate downfall have repeatedly proved premature.

Problems exacerbated

The Gulf War shockwaves have made India's mismatches more visible. Rising energy costs squeeze industries, leading to layoffs. Volatile markets deter investment, limiting job creation. A weak rupee makes imports costlier, straining households and businesses alike.



The recent Gulf War has unsettled global energy markets, disrupted shipping routes, and shaken investor confidence. For India, heavily dependent on energy imports and remittances from millions of Indian workers in the region, the shockwaves are immediate.

The Sensex has swung wildly in recent weeks, reflecting nervous capital markets. In the last week of April, it fell by over 750 points, part of a broader 7 per cent decline this fiscal year. The rupee, meanwhile, has slipped to little more than Rs 95 against the dollar, its weakest level in months.

CHINADAILY

Are the glory days for Southeast Asian budget carriers over?

Southeast Asian low-cost carriers have cut roughly 20 per cent of flights compared to pre-crisis levels, which equates to around 4 million fewer passengers per month. The impact on Southeast Asia's economy, including the tourism sector, is undeniable as low-cost carriers play a crucial role in domestic and regional connectivity.

Letters To The Editor

Credible Sir, This refers to 'Old and the New' (May 18). The article makes a case that deserves wider engagement. The tendency to treat India's civilisational heritage and its modern technological ambitions as separate compartments has always been false.

and the frustration it breeds is dangerous. The Gulf War shockwaves have made this mismatch more visible. Rising energy costs squeeze industries, leading to layoffs. Volatile markets deter investment, limiting job creation.

The system itself reveals the deeper fault lines. Infrastructure has not kept pace with the demands of climate stress and economic volatility. Priorities in governance have often been misplaced, focusing on short term optics rather than long term resilience.

Consider the contrast with China. Despite its dependence on imported oil, China has devised effective routes and tailored foreign policy to secure supplies. In most other sectors, it is nearly self-sufficient - from steel and electronics to chemicals and consumer goods.

India has shown that self sufficiency is possible - the Green Revolution made us food secure, and the White Revolution made us the world's largest milk producer. These successes prove that with foresight and policy alignment, India can achieve self-reliance.

be built overnight. The cotton and textile industry offers another telling example of missed opportunities. India has long been one of the world's largest producers of cotton, yet countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam have captured greater access to global markets.

The Gulf War has made global markets more volatile, but this should have been the moment for India to showcase perfection in its products. Instead, falling standards, poor finish, and higher costs have eroded competitiveness.

The waste of India's women is another silent crisis. Female literacy has risen, yet female labour force participation remains stuck at around 25 per cent, among the lowest in Asia. Millions of educated women remain outside the workforce, constrained by social barriers, safety concerns, and inadequate childcare.

to stay the course, Cebu Pacific is also in a relatively strong financial position, giving it a cushion to help weather the storm. Meanwhile, most of the other Southeast Asian low-cost carriers have never recovered financially from the pandemic, resulting in relatively high debt and low cash levels.

Slashing capacity is a sensible move to save cash, but less flying means a reduction in efficiency and higher unit costs in other areas. Low-cost carriers are essentially stuck between a rock and a hard place with no way to avoid stiff losses.

article 'The quiet disappearance of the Bengali Bhadrakol' today. It has been correctly mentioned that politics of earlier days was not merely a contest of power, but an exercise in respect, language and moral posture, which rarely descended into vulgarity, despite sharp disagreement and even ideological differences.

From Siddhartha Shankar Ray to Jyoti Basu and Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, there might have been many political differences, but they never tried to enslave people by offering dote in the name of a welfare scheme which Bengal witnessed in the last fifteen years.

Damaged

Sir, I thank both 'The Statesman' as well as the writer for presenting an valuable

competition demands inclusion. There are also practical avenues where youth energy can be channelled productively. Recycling initiatives, river cleaning, and conservation can combine employment with ecological tribute.

What is needed now is a far-sighted response. Vocational and technical education must be strengthened and aligned with emerging sectors like renewable energy, digital tools, and artificial intelligence.

Private institutions must be regulated to curb fake colleges and capitation fees, while industry-academia collaboration must deepen to make graduates employable. Energy diversification is critical: investing in renewables and reducing dependence on Gulf imports will stabilize both the rupee and the job market.

Unless we act decisively, the promise of youth will remain unfulfilled, and the crisis will deepen. As Zig Ziglar famously said, 'You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great.'

# A Japanese lesson India must learn

PRAVIN KAUSHAL

In August 1945, Japan surrendered unconditionally after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The physical devastation was almost total: major cities had been razed, industrial capacity had collapsed, and national morale was shattered by the most humiliating defeat in the country's recorded history. By any conventional measure, Japan was finished as an industrial power. What happened next is one of the most instructive stories in modern economic history not primarily because of what Japan built, but because of the disposition with which it chose to rebuild.

Confronted with total defeat, Japan's industrial and political leadership made a decision that ran against every instinct of national pride: it chose, deliberately and systematically, to learn. That choice and the institutional seriousness with which it was executed is what made everything else possible.

As Japan's industrial rebuilding accelerated through the late 1940s and into the 1950s, a key element of the recovery strategy was the adoption of modern quality control methods not as a technical afterthought, but as a foundational philosophy of production and management. Japanese institutions made a remarkable decision: they invited American experts to come and teach them.

In 1950, W. Edwards Deming delivered a series of influential lectures in Japan focused on statistical quality control—a rigorous, data-driven approach to eliminating defects and improving processes that had been largely overlooked by American industry itself at the time. Four years later, in 1954, Joseph M. Juran lectured Japanese executives and middle managers on the broader principles of quality management: how leadership

must own quality, how systems rather than individual workers are most often the source of problems, and how continuous improvement must be embedded in institutional culture rather than treated as an occasional intervention.

Deming and Juran were not bringing ideas that were secret or inaccessible. Their methods were available, in principle, to any industrialised nation. What distinguished Japan was not access to the knowledge; it was the receptiveness with which Japanese executives, engineers, and managers received it. They did not listen politely and then return to established habits. They internalised these frameworks, adapted them to Japanese industrial conditions, and built quality culture into the DNA of their manufacturing sector. The consequences of this intellectual openness became visible within a generation. By the 1960s and 1970s, Japanese automobiles, consumer electronics, cameras, and precision manufactured goods were not merely competitive in global markets, they were setting the standard by which the rest of the world was measured. Japanese exports swept through international markets with a force that astonished Western competitors who had been deliberately constrained, rigorously maintained, and continuously refined over decades. The Deming Prize, established in Japan in 1951 and still awarded annually, stands as a permanent institutional monument to the seriousness with which Japan embedded the lessons it had chosen to learn. It is worth pausing on the scale of the transformation. A country

that in 1945 could not feed its population had, within 25 years, become the second largest economy in the world. It achieved this not through the discovery of natural resources, not through territorial expansion, and not through financial engineering. It achieved it through disciplined institutional learning and the relentless application of ideas. Japan's transformation was not, at its core, a story about quality control techniques. Those techniques were the vehicle. The deeper story is about a society's relationship with its own traditions and its capacity to distinguish between the traditions worth defending and the habits worth discarding. Japan did not abandon its cultural identity in embracing Deming and Juran. It did not pretend that centuries of Japanese craftsmanship, aesthetic sensibility, or institutional discipline were worthless. What it refused to do was allow those centuries of tradition to serve as an excuse for not changing. The Japanese leadership understood that the world had moved, that new frameworks for industrial organisation existed, and that pride in the past was not a substitute for competence in the present. This distinction between honouring a heritage and being imprisoned by it is one that relatively few societies navigate successfully.

It requires a particular kind of institutional courage: the willingness to say, in public and at the highest levels of leadership, that we do not have all the answers, that others have developed knowledge we lack, and that learning from them is a mark of national seriousness rather than national weakness. Truly mature societies possess this courage. Very few do. India's relationship with foreign expertise and external intellectual frameworks is complicated. There are understandable historical reasons for that complexity: a colonial



past that used the language of improvement to justify extraction and domination has left a reasonable residue of scepticism about unsolicited lessons from outside. But scepticism, taken too far, becomes an obstacle. The question is not whether India should uncritically import foreign models—it should not. Japan itself did not simply copy; it adapted.

The question is whether India's institutions in manufacturing, in higher education, in public administration, in R&D have built the habit of rigorous, honest self-assessment that genuine learning requires. India's private sector R&D investment remains stubbornly low. Its manufacturing quality systems, outside a handful of globally integrated sectors, lag behind those of East Asian competitors. Its institutional culture too often rewards deference over dissent and experience over evidence. These are not permanent features of Indian civilisation. They are habits and habits, as Jagan, a demonstrated so powerfully, can be changed when the will to change them is genuine and the leadership to drive that change is present. The Deming lectures of 1950 cost Japan very little in financial terms. What they required was something harder to summon: the national humility to sit in a room,

listen carefully to a foreign expert, and then go back to the factory floor and do things differently. That combination of openness of mind, seriousness of purpose, and discipline of execution remains, 75 years later, the most important lesson Japan has to teach.

W. Edwards Deming's ideas were not secret. His work was published, his methods were documented, and his lectures were not restricted to any single audience. What Japan offered that others did not was a willingness institutional, cultural, and deeply felt to take those ideas seriously and act on them at scale. That willingness is the rarest resource in economic development. It cannot be imported, cannot be mandated by government decree, and cannot be borrowed from history. It must be cultivated, modelled from the top, and sustained through the long, unglamorous work of changing how organisations function day to day. Japan did it. The results endure. The question for any society that looks at that story and sees something worth emulating is not whether the knowledge is available. It always is. The question is whether the will is there to use it.

(The writer is director, Mitral (AI Data Centre) and a young alumni member, Government Liaison Task Force, IT Khargapur. He tweets as @pravin\_ks14)

## 100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 21 May 1926

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

Gossip is busy again with Mr. Lloyd George's future in politics. He intends, it is said, to renounce his leadership of the Liberal Party, which is not exactly a bed of roses in these days, and to come to terms with Labour. Let us repeat that this is only gossip. It is easily conceivable that Mr. Lloyd George should be tired of the thankless task of leading Liberalism in the Commons when fully half his party is out of sympathy with his wish for a vigorous land campaign but it is not so easy to see Labour welcoming him to its benches in any capacity that a former Prime Minister could occupy. The distrust of Mr. Lloyd George is nowhere more strongly developed than in the Labour group, while no party is willing to hand over its fortunes at once to a new recruit from another section. Mr. Lloyd George may be dissatisfied with his present position, but his escape from it is not easy unless he is prepared to fight practically a lone hand in politics.

## News Items

## COAL DEADLOCK AGAIN WAGES AND HOURS

LONDON, MAY 21

ON the conclusion of to-day's meeting of the Miners' Executive, Mr. A. J. Cook said the position was one of deadlock. The Executive had refused to agree to any alterations in hours or wages.

It is understood that the Executive will recommend the delegate conference meeting to-morrow to endorse the reorganisation proposals in the report of the Royal Commission, but to reject the immediate wage reduction implications contained in the Government's proposals and the Commission's report.

The policy of the Executive is based on reports from the coalfields indicating a fairly general resistance to any departure from the existing wage standard, at least pending the reorganisation of the industry.

It is believed that delegates will accept the recommendation practically unanimously, but there is still a hope that the situation may change shortly. It is regarded as significant that the Executive propose that the delegate conference after endorsing the recommendation shall adjourn to Friday to enable the Executive to conduct any further negotiations that may be possible.—Reuter.

## LAST STAND BY ABDEL KRIM

## RIFFS HEMMED IN BY JOINT FORCES

LONDON, MAY 21

LIKE a wild boar defending his mountain home to the last rock, is the description applied in a Paris message to Abdel Krim's opposition in the face of the joint Franco-Spanish offensive which has now been practically launched in Morocco.

Whereas the pressure last year was practically entirely from the south towards the north and, during the Riff offensive from the north towards the south, the Franco-Spanish offensive is now active on four sides of a huge parallelogram, the two longer sides of which are represented by the Mediterranean coast and the French frontier, and the two shorter sides, from north to south by lines drawn from Tetuan to Larache, and from Melilla to the south along the Wedkeri.

The interior of the parallelogram is traversed by wild mountain gorges and ranges from where last year Abdel Krim sent down his attacking forces. The first Franco-Spanish movements were directed to closing the eastern exits from the parallelogram. The troops are now advancing with a view to effecting a permanent junction which will separate the two blocks of tribesmen, Spaniards in the Ajdir sector have occupied Tamastit, Abdel Krim's winter residence, and Targuist, his recent headquarters.—Reuter.

## NEW COINAGE SYSTEM

SIMLA, MAY 21

REFORMS in Afghanistan are going on apace. Recently the whole of the coinage and the system of weights and measures have undergone a change. The metric system based on the gramme and metre has been adopted. The present rupee is called the Afghani as opposed to the old Kabuli, and is declared to be of a slightly higher value, 10 Afghani being equal to 11 Kabulis. The Afghani is divided into 100 pais, of which only the 25 and 10-pai coins are issued. Twenty Afghani go to make one Amani, which is the standard gold coin. The coinage is well minted.

# Nostalgia will not build chips

YATEESH SRIVASTAVA

India stands at a critical juncture. In an era defined by data, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and rapid technological change, scientific temper, the habit of evidence-based thinking, scepticism, rigorous testing of claims, and public reasoning, is not a luxury but a foundational civic capacity. Its erosion, fuelled by ideological myth-making that romanticises an imagined glorious past, unchecked social-media quackery, and long-standing weaknesses in our education system, risks undermining innovation, public health, sound governance, and India's long-term competitive edge. Without urgent remedial action, India's demographic dividend could rapidly turn into a liability.

What exactly is scientific temper, and why does it matter? Scientific temper is not professional laboratory science alone, nor does it demand atheism or the abandonment of personal faith. It is a mindset: refusing to accept claims without testing them, being willing to revise views in light of evidence, relying on observed facts and method rather than preconceived notions, and having the discipline to admit uncertainty. A deeply spiritual person can maintain personal faith while insisting on peer-reviewed data for public health policies, agricultural guidelines, or technological choices. Scientific temper is about domain separation, protecting public reason and policy from the realm of personal belief.

This habit underpins democratic deliberation, high-quality policy-making, and economic competitiveness. In a knowledge economy, nations that reward critical thinking attract talent, investment, and high-value industries.

This erosion is not new. India has deep-rooted vulnerabilities. India's education system has long suffered from a pre-existing weakness: an obsession with rote memorisation, cracking the exam code, and the coaching-centre industry epitomised by Kota's pressure-cooker culture. Scoring 100 per cent in a physics or biology exam through cramming does not cultivate scientific temper. Inquiry-based learning, hands-on experimentation, and the cultivation of doubt have been sidelined for decades in favour of the mechanical reproduction of textbook content.

This has created fertile ground for low scientific literacy and weak critical thinking, which today's ideological currents and social media algorithms ruthlessly exploit. India's founders, particularly Nehru, envisioned rationalism and the spirit of inquiry as central to nation-building. The Constitution explicitly lists the development of a scientific temper as a fundamental duty of citizens. Yet recent trends show a troubling departure. Selective glorification of ancient achievements, often blurring myth, legend, and verified history, has gained prominence. Claims of advanced ancient technologies are presented not merely as cultural inspiration but sometimes as substitutes for rigorous modern inquiry.

This revisionism operates through the politicisation of curricula, pressure on academic and research institutions, and the elevation of pseudoscientific claims under the banner of "heritage." Textbooks have seen key scientific concepts diluted, while spectacle and anecdote increasingly compete with evidence-based approaches.

The spread of pseudoscience has been enabled not only by political and social forces but also by the scientific establishment's relative silence and occasional complicity. IIT Dhanbad, as recently as February 2026, hosted a 3-day conference on "Ancient Indian Text, Science and Technology." History is being rewritten not through a historiographical lens but through a mythological one. Institutional incentives for public communication remain weak. Too few scientists and academics consistently engage the public with evidence and reasoning. More damagingly, some heads of premier institutions have participated in or lent credibility to religious or unscientific public spectacles, blurring the line between political mandate, personal belief, and institutional authority. This erodes the public trust in science and sends mixed signals about the primacy of evidence. Rebuilding scientific temper requires the scientific community to reclaim its voice as a vigorous defender of method and public reason.

Compounding these issues is the explosion of social-media misinformation. Algorithms reward

virality over accuracy. Influencers and celebrities promote miracle cures, conspiracy theories, and historical revisionism. Low scientific literacy, prestige bias, echo chambers, and emotional appeals make large sections of the population highly susceptible. The Covid-19 period vividly illustrated the dangers, widespread promotion of unproven remedies, vaccine hesitancy, and mixed messaging that undermined public health efforts.

The costs are real and measurable: public health setbacks, misallocation of research funds, flawed policy choices, reduced investor confidence, institutions perceived as politicised, and weakened global scientific collaborations. In a data-driven global economy, countries with robust scientific ecosystems and populations with strong critical thinking secure more FDI, top talent, high-value tech jobs, and geopolitical leverage. India has made progress in innovation rankings, but foundational weaknesses in research culture and critical capacity risk capping this momentum.

Restoring scientific temper demands multi-pronged action:

- Education reform: Move beyond rote learning, by embedding critical thinking, the scientific method, and inquiry-based learning across curricula from early schooling onwards.
- Protect institutional autonomy in universities and research bodies (including IITs, IISc, and CSIR), and in funding decisions.
- Strengthen incentives for scientists to engage in public communication

and reward those who do so effectively.

- Build a robust fact-checking infrastructure, support responsible platform regulation to counter harmful disinformation, and launch sustained public science-communication campaigns.
- Promote community-level programmes that teach domain separation between faith and evidence-based policy.

Journalists, educators, scientists, civil society, and ordinary citizens all have roles. Demand evidence in public debates. Teach not only children but also ourselves, not only what to think but also how to test claims. Support independent institutions and model intellectual humility. Defending scientific temper is neither anti-tradition nor culturally alien. India's history includes rigorous debate, mathematics, logic, and empiricism alongside its rich spiritual traditions. The task is to honestly distinguish verifiable contributions from legend and to apply the scientific attitude universally.

Nostalgia and false certainties are luxuries a rising nation cannot afford. India's democratic vitality, economic promise, and global standing depend on a public life grounded in evidence, openness to revision, and shared reasoning. Renewing our constitutional commitment to scientific temper is a collective, urgent, and winnable project. The choice—and the responsibility—belongs to all of us.

(The writer is a Mumbai-based consultant.)

## Crossword | No. 293468

Yesterday's Solution

ACROSS

14 Hint: Minister should dismiss around (8)  
15 Here's what, at sea, starts to identify precipitation? (7,4)  
18 Paint, true, when splashed around, gives measure of warmth (11)  
19 Working to offload second purchase  
20 A publican will cover range of points in response (8)  
22 What's in wet areas, affected by storms? (8)  
26 Wise to restrain mischievous child-in offering  
27 Marsh, perhaps, never accommodating a lot of steps? (5)  
28 second article in French about climb in good weather (9)  
29 Limits to healthy GM-free India given by health icon (5)  
30 Father disembarks from tender, moving nimbly (5)  
31 Cool guy has to accept workplace injury, getting emotional relief (9)  
32 Top removed from prison cells? That's an error (5)  
33 Energy and force about Frenchmen in online business (1-8)  
34 Father disembarks from tender, moving nimbly (5)  
35 Succeeded despite your initially being nervous (5)  
36 Bearing up, consuming American orange juice and wine (5)  
37 Practise heading off downturn (4)

DOWN

1 Like an easy job? Copper's retiring (5)  
2 Get better of several deliveries with an edge, bagging 50 (9)  
3 Top cleaner hiding man (4-5)  
4 Top removed from prison cells? That's an error (5)  
5 Energy and force about Frenchmen in online business (1-8)  
6 Father disembarks from tender, moving nimbly (5)  
7 Succeeded despite your initially being nervous (5)  
8 Bearing up, consuming American orange juice and wine (5)  
9 Practise heading off downturn (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



## The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

## Ebola raises questions over pandemic preparedness

*Aid cuts and US hostility to concept of global public health endanger us all*

The world's media has spent weeks worrying about an outbreak of hantavirus on a small cruise ship. Meanwhile a more dangerous pathogen, one that kills up to half the people it infects, has been quietly spreading in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The latest outbreak of Ebola disease, a haemorrhagic fever, is suspected to have already killed at least 131 people and infected more than 500. It has appeared in multiple locations in eastern DR Congo, and in Kinshasa, the capital, 2,000km away. It has also jumped to neighbouring Uganda.

The particular virus species, Bundibugyo, cannot be easily diagnosed with standard kits. Nor is it treatable with approved vaccines or medicines. The virus's stealth progress prompted the World Health Organization this

weekend to declare it an emergency of international concern.

The latest Ebola outbreak, the 17th in DR Congo since the virus was first identified in 1976, underlines the threat of zoonotic diseases, which jump from animals to people. Deforestation, human encroachment and climate change have multiplied the dangers.

The outbreak probably began in March. That it gathered so much steam without earlier detection shows there are big gaps in early-warning systems. The danger is that such gaps will only widen. Health systems in poorer countries are having to adjust to lower levels of international aid, which fell by a record 23 per cent last year. The US, hitherto a champion of global public health, is now hostile to the very concept.

The WHO has been weakened by the exit of the US. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has previously played a leading role in containing epidemics, is in turmoil thanks

to swingeing cuts by a Trump administration that holds it in suspicion.

Globally, six years after the shock of Covid-19, attempts to prepare for the next major pandemic have been slow. The WHO concluded a pandemic treaty with its members last year, but crucial details, particularly concerning sharing of diagnostics, vaccines and medicines with poorer countries, remain unresolved.

To make matters worse, the US, under its America First Global Health Strategy, has negotiated bilateral memorandums of understanding with more than 30 countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. These trade aid for health data and specimens in a manner that critics say contravenes multilateral efforts and damages trust.

This should not obscure the progress that has been made. Even though DR Congo is poor and in many ways dysfunctional, it has built up admirable expertise in tackling outbreaks of infectious disease. Through rapid testing,

*That the outbreak gathered so much steam without earlier detection shows there are big gaps in early-warning systems*

quarantine and vaccination, health workers have learnt how to stamp out periodic outbreaks.

The task now is to build on these valiant homegrown efforts, not do active damage. Not all aid was good, and recipient countries rightly criticised organisations such as the now abolished US Agency for International Development for running parallel systems that hollowed out local expertise and undermined agency. Rich countries need to support sovereign efforts by poorer ones to build robust systems that both serve their own people and help global surveillance.

Fortunately, health experts believe this Ebola outbreak is unlikely to be the cause of the next pandemic. Unlike Covid, it is not an airborne disease. Grimly, the fact that it kills its human host with such efficiency reduces its chances of rapid spread. But future outbreaks will pose bigger threats. The world looks unprepared to deal with them.

## Opinion Environment

## Can geoeengineering avert a climate catastrophe?



Anjana Ahuja

**D**am that strait. Not a misspelt venting of frustration about the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, but an eye-catching proposal from climate scientists about a different waterway entirely.

Researchers in the Netherlands have floated the idea of building a dam across the Bering Strait, the shallow 85km-wide channel separating Alaska from Siberia. The closure, they suggest, could help to stabilise ocean currents crucial for regulating the climate.

In engineering terms, the proposal is not orders of magnitude afloat of other marine megaprojects, such as South Korea's record-breaking 34km Saemangeum Seawall. In geopolitical terms, with its need for long-term American and Russian co-operation, it seems preposterous.

**Damming the Bering Strait could help to stabilise crucial ocean currents**

Its real value, however, lies in the fact that it has been broached at all. In an increasingly unstable world, climate targets have slipped from view. Complacency about reducing emissions today is likely to heighten the call for more drastic action tomorrow. Against this background, the very madness of extreme geoeengineering alternatives is the message.

At the heart of the concept lies the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC), a conveyor belt of ocean currents that shift warm waters from the tropics northwards. The water cools, becoming denser, and sinks before sloshing back southwards.

That cycling — into which the Gulf Stream feeds — redistributes heat, carbon, salt and other nutrients in the ocean and helps to set climate patterns. But global warming is tugging on the conveyor belt, with melting ice interfering with the circulation. The AMOC is slowing and, according to some models, might collapse altogether in the coming decades.

"A substantial weakening [of AMOC] could have significant impacts, including shifting rainfall patterns, increasing sea levels along the US east coast, changing European climate, and reducing ocean carbon uptake," explained Jon Baker, a UK Met Office

scientist who studies AMOC but was not involved in the new research.

Researchers Jelle Soons and Henk Dijkstra, from Utrecht University, decided to simulate whether closing the Bering Strait might avert an AMOC shutdown, long regarded as a climate tipping point (when the climate suddenly changes irreversibly). Their approach was inspired by two clues: first, the strait is a gateway for fresh water flowing from the Pacific to the Atlantic via the Arctic, which has a net weakening effect; second, a previous study showed the conveyor belt was stronger about 5m years ago, when sea levels were lower and the strait was a land bridge.

Running the numbers showed that, under certain conditions, a dam "could be a feasible climate intervention strategy", the pair wrote last month in the journal *Science Advances*. "It was a very exciting moment when a simulation showed that a closure of the strait can prevent a collapse," Soons told me.

But the paper also shows that timing is everything: closing the strait when the conveyor belt is already weak could make matters worse. Soons said the calculations are intended as a proof of concept but a dam could be "a possible measure in a worst-case scenario". The researchers stress that the engineering details are beyond the scope of their paper.

For others, massive geoeengineering climate fixes are themselves the worst-case scenarios. A spokesman for the Met Office told the FT: "The Met Office does not advocate geoeengineering solutions to climate change, which can often bring dramatic and unintended consequences... Fighting to stave off every fraction of a degree rise of global temperature is the more sustainable and pragmatic approach."

There are other obstacles besides: damming the strait completely, as modelled, would seal off a migration route for mammals and disrupt indigenous communities. It would scupper a vital shipping route. The waterway — named after Danish-born explorer Vitus Bering, who led expeditions for the Russian Navy — is used by Russian tankers, bulk carriers and LNG carriers, and for tugs and barges serving Alaskan coastal communities, as well as transporting mined ore.

In addition, many aspects of the AMOC remain poorly understood, including how stable the conveyor belt is under future warming scenarios and how close it is to any tipping point. The Utrecht researchers deserve kudos for showcasing this costly, speculative and politically impossible megaproject, if only to remind us how vital it is to keep existing climate commitments afloat.

The writer is a science commentator

## Letters

## China's ambitions for its currency need to be taken seriously

Ruchir Sharma concludes that without a bolder opening of its financial system, China will never challenge America's financial dominance and fully realise its superpower ambition (Opinion, May 18).

In drawing that conclusion, he relies on established measures to assess the internationalisation of the Chinese renminbi that derive from the longstanding architecture of the global financial system. And yes, by those measures, the Chinese currency has a considerable distance to travel if it is to

overtake the dollar in global importance.

However, this does not mean that one can dismiss its global prospects and conclude that the US will continue for the foreseeable future to maintain its global hegemony via its control of the plumbing of the global financial system. It is by no means assured that the US will retain its stranglehold on that plumbing. The architecture of the global financial system is ripe for disruption. Just as in the case of the auto industry where China positioned

itself to become dominant with the disruptive impact of electric vehicles, so today it is positioning itself to be able to take advantage of the opportunity for disruption in the global financial system. Already it is well advanced in the development of an alternative architecture to that of the existing global financial system and is making great strides in the area of digital currency.

Over the past several decades the west has approached a rising China with a mix of overconfidence and

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## Metals supply chains — why they're really security assets

Sir Keir Starmer's decision to move towards public ownership of British Steel marks a profound strategic shift in UK industrial policy ("British Steel to be taken back into public hands", Report, May 12; and "UK manufacturers warn of 'significant problems' from steel tariff changes", Report, May 14).

Oxford Economics estimated in April that British Steel supports more than 20,000 UK jobs upstream, with a further 142,000 jobs and £9.8bn of GDP linked to downstream activity. For every 100 people directly employed by British Steel, another 340 jobs are supported across the wider economy.

Yet this debate extends well beyond steel. The metals industry contains multiple strategic assets we cannot afford to lose. Once closed, blast furnaces, smelters and associated industrial capability are extraordinarily difficult and expensive to rebuild. Britain and Europe also remain dangerously dependent on imported critical materials just as electrification, defence spending, AI infrastructure and the energy transition are accelerating demand for steel, aluminium, copper and rare earth metals.

The move towards public ownership reflects a wider reality now being recognised across the world: metals supply chains are security assets. Industrial capability, energy security and national resilience are increasingly inseparable. I believe this is progress and the US and China already understand this, while Britain and Europe are only beginning to catch up. Resilience has a price. Strategic dependence costs far more.

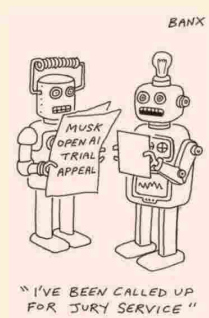
Jay Hambro  
Founder and CEO, Verdigris Scientific,  
London W1, UK

## British Steel: the blunt truth

As the prime minister's authority slowly seeps away, the government continues its desperate search for popularity. Its latest target: the crisis at British Steel.

The blunt truth is that not only are its ageing blast furnaces horrendously dirty, they are also horrendously inefficient and expensive to run, hence the huge losses. The Chinese owners know this, and planned to close the UK furnaces and import the base steel product from their furnaces in China before rolling it into finished steel in the UK, while at the same time seeking adequate government support for the transition to cleaner and greener electric arc furnaces, recycling steel scrap.

But the UK government wants to avoid the loss of jobs that the blast furnaces' closure would incur, and is willing to support an uneconomic and polluting operation.



Furthermore, to avoid the high cost of doing they are now introducing tariffs of up to 50 per cent on steel imports so as to allow the UK blast furnaces to push prices up and profit. The obvious problem is that the industry consuming that steel will become uncompetitive. Think of the likes of JCB, steel being their major raw material.

There is a commonly held political mantra that new steel production is essential to a country's security, as there is a perceived risk in being dependent on imports. But without iron ore and coking coal you can't make new steel in a blast furnace, and on these we are totally dependent on imports. Especially so since this Labour government's refusal to grant permission for what would have been the UK's only coking coal mine in Cumbria!

The answer of course is recycling steel scrap in electric arc furnaces, and the UK does have an abundance of steel scrap, as do all the developed economies of North America and Europe. The government needs to get on with this, and at the same time work to reduce our industrial energy costs. Dick Sands  
Former managing director, Stemcor; and past chair, International Steel Trade Association, London TW8, UK

## I told her 'get a headline with an answer machine'

Re John Gapper's op-ed "King's Cross is the new Silicon Roundabout" (May 15), my daughter lives right in the heart of this fantastic development. It is vibrant and exciting. High-tech companies like Google and Meta are on her doorstep.

Ironically she has no phone signal in her building and very little outside it for 100 metres.

It is such a frustration that I have advised her to get a headline with an answer machine.

You couldn't make it up. Graham Vickers  
Prestbury, Cheshire, UK

## New EU consumer rules are not just America's concern

Your article on the concerns over the revised EU product liability directive (Report, May 8) usefully highlights the growing importance of this issue for competitiveness and legal certainty. But one point deserves emphasis: this is not simply a US concern.

British and European businesses, academics and other policy experts are also increasingly concerned that, absent clear guidance from the European Commission, key provisions of the directive — particularly those relating to presumptions of defect and causation — are being interpreted unevenly across member states. This will create legal uncertainty and divergent liability standards across the single market, which is the opposite of what a harmonising measure should achieve.

Nor is this an argument against consumer protection or access to justice. The real question is whether the new PLD rules will remain proportionate and predictable for all parties, and consistent with the EU's key economic objectives, while avoiding incentives for abusive or speculative mass litigation. At a time when the commission is rightly focused on competitiveness and the deepening of the single market, this should not be dismissed as a narrow sectoral complaint or a transatlantic lobbying exercise. It is a broader question of whether Europe's liability framework will augment or fragment the market it is trying to strengthen.

Seema Kennedy  
Executive Director, Fair Civil Justice,  
London EC4, UK

## Leave electoral reform to parliament, not a plebiscite

Charles Mercey is wrong to argue that electoral reform must first be put to a referendum (Letters, May 13).

The 2011 Alternative Vote referendum demonstrated how difficult it is to engage the electorate on intricate electoral systems. Expecting voters to resolve competing models of proportional or preferential voting within the confines of a binary campaign risks repeating a decade of constitutional stalemate.

Parliament itself is the constitutionally sovereign mechanism for electoral reform. Rather than outsourcing the issue to referendum politics, the government should legislate directly. Although Labour's manifesto was silent on Commons voting reform, the current representation of the people bill — already proposing votes at 16 — could establish an independent commission, ideally chaired by Vernon Bogdanor, to recommend a refined electoral system for the Commons.

Steven Fogel  
London NW11, UK

## Blunkett's warning chimes with this Trump supporter

David Blunkett's description of the advent of rank partisan hatred in British politics ("The disintegration of British democracy", Opinion, May 18) fits aptly with what is happening in America.

When I came out in support of Donald Trump in 2016, the worst of the insults that came my way was that I was a "low-information voter". The vitriol has grown worse every day since then, to the point where I believe it is fair to say one half of the US hates the other.

This is not mere disagreement over policy choices. Indeed, as shown in the recent gubernatorial and mayoral debates in California, the Democrats chant "Trump" like a voodoo talisman, instead of telling us what they would do differently.

It is rank hatred. And that is unhealthy for the individual and society.

Mike Bond  
Mercer Island, WA, US

## A football chair's gesture that probably backfired

As a life-long (suffering) Spurs fan I cannot agree more with Omar Chaudhuri, who was quoted in Josh Noble and Samuel Agini's article ("Tottenham's game plan questioned as losses grow amid relegation fight", Report, May 19) regarding their relegation fight as saying that there was clearly a cultural issue where players have got worse over joining the club.

This immediately reminded me of a quote from Hugo Lloris' autobiography as he recalled the gift from the then chairman, Daniel Levy. Each player received a luxury aviator watch from the club engraved with their name and "Champions League Finalist 2019".

As much as the gesture was appreciated, the message was loud and clear — it's OK even to be second best.

Daniel Amini  
Milan, Italy

## Austria is of course completely landlocked

What is it about Austrian writers and ocean liners? asks the headline on Konstantinos Magliavira's letter about your review of *The Last Movement*. Robert Seethaler's new novella about Gustav Mahler (Letters, FT Weekend, May 16). Surely it is blindingly obvious? Austria is a completely landlocked country.

Malcolm Shiffin  
Leatherhead, Surrey, UK

OPINION ON FT.COM  
The US is still being paid to borrow  
But its net international investment position is  
internationally different to other sovereigns  
writes Toby Nangjue  
www.ft.com/alphaville

# Opinion

## America's ailing one-trick pony

**POLITICS**

**Edward Luce**



a greater margin of error than any other power. The US has the world's most powerful military and is flanked by vast oceans to its east and west and benign neighbours to its north and south. But such blessings can induce lazy thinking. Decades before Trump's Operation Epic Fury, America picked up the habit of confusing its military superiority with an ability to impose its will on faraway lands. The only thing that is novel about Trump's Iran war is the immediate obviousness of its bankruptcy.

Count the obliterated targets. Tally the corpses of senior leaders. Behold America's military prowess. By any measure, Iran has taken a pummelling. Yet threats of more US strikes are yielding no concessions. Donald Trump's threats, including bombing Iran into the Stone Age, have sounded empty since early March. Yet he keeps repeating them. Threatening a failed tactic over and over again and expecting a different outcome is the definition of insanity.

Epic Fury is no departure from American tradition. When Trump was a young man pulling strings to escape military service in Vietnam — a privilege he shared with other future US presidents, including George W Bush — the Pentagon announced regular "kill ratios" of the number of enemy dead versus American. The Tet Offensive in early 1968 was heralded as a major US victory since so many Vietcong insurgents had

been killed. In reality, Tet delivered a crushing political defeat to America since it conveyed the enemy's iron will. The Pentagon did not see it that way. Pete Hegseth, the US "secretary of war", is a very different figure to Robert McNamara, the then secretary of defence. But his playbook is similar. In crude terms, success is judged by how

**While it is comforting to blame Operation Epic Fury on Trump's recklessness, it is no aberration**

many things and people America can blow up. Hegseth's favourite words are "precision" and "lethality". The similarity between Lyndon B Johnson's Operation Rolling Thunder and Trump's Epic Fury is almost exact. Just as LBJ used

war-style unconditional surrender.

But his only way out is via sustained diplomacy on multiple fronts. On Monday he called off the next wave of strikes on Iran scheduled for yesterday. He wanted to give the Pakistan-mediated talks another chance. At the forefront of Trump's mind is that he must do better than Barack Obama did with his 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Nowhere in his mind, apparently, is the recollection that it took Obama's negotiators 20 months to nail it down. The idea that much less knowledgeable US officials could do better in a few days is delusional. That Obama could have pulled off a serious agreement without once threatening to bomb Iran is inconceivable to him.

The lesson from Epic Fury is the same one that Obama drew from Iraq. Diplomacy should always be the first resort. There is no need even to mention US military power, still less to brag about it daily. To paraphrase a maxim, the mili-

tary that fights best is that which fights least. The comforting take is to blame Epic Fury on Trump's unique recklessness. But he is no aberration. Once you screen out his uniquely self-defeating verbal incontinence, you discern a Washington traditionalist. His approach is the *reductio ad absurdum* of one lost US war after another preceded by strings of victories on the battlefield.

As the world googles Thucydides and digests the emerging G2 China-US reality, the question is whether Washington is capable of reinventing itself. Better informed US figures than Trump are calling on him to "finish the job" in Iran. Had they learnt from the recent or distant past, they would be revising their advice. But that would require thinking. Good strategy is the product of intellectual humility. Trump's lack of it puts him in plentiful company.

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## The Gulf crisis may just be starting

**Martin Wolf Economics**

Oil futures markets are sanguine, but history shows expectations have often been disappointed



First came the war. Then came the blockade. Now come the shortages. The tankers full of essential commodities — oil, liquid natural gas, urea, refined oil products, hydrogen, helium and so forth — have not sailed through the Strait of Hormuz since the end of February. Those that left before the closure have mostly arrived. From now on, the shipments that did not leave will increasingly be missed. As inventories are also drawn down, we will move into an era of physical shortages.

Gulf refineries are fully or partially out of action. So is the Ras Laffan LNG facility in Qatar. How long it will take to repair the destruction is still unknown.

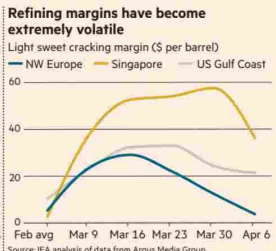
Second, as the Substack "Crack The Market" explains, shortages should not be viewed solely in terms of crude oil. They will disproportionately affect specific products, because refineries are designed to deal with certain types of crude oil. The Gulf region not only produces specific types of oil, but, notes Crack The Market, "was exporting 3.5mm barrels per day of refined products and 1.5mm barrels per day of LPG before the crisis. These are finished fuels, diesel, jet fuel, naphtha, gasoline, that were flowing directly into the supply chains of Asian and European consumers." The loss of exports of specific crudes and refined products means that no simple substitution is possible. Butler writes that the main shortages now are in jet fuel and diesel. Given these product-specific realities, the US is not self-sufficient in oil. Yes, it is a net exporter. But it is, as market pundit Charlie Garcia argues, also a large importer, since its refineries must have access to the crudes they can process.

Until now, shortages have been mostly imaginary. Now they will become real. They must be managed, ultimately by suppressing demand. The latter in turn will require some combination of rationing and recession. A blend of higher prices with tighter monetary policy could deliver both. The longer the strait remains closed and the bigger the physical damage, the longer shortages will remain and the worse their impact.

Third, the impact has been muted hitherto by a rapid drawdown of stocks. But stocks are necessarily finite. It is hard to expand production outside the Gulf or reroute oil away from the strait, even in the medium run. Thus, much of the world's spare production capacity of oil is in the Gulf region itself. After that, the largest additional source is Russia.

This, in a nutshell, is what Nick Butler, formerly group vice president for strategy and policy development at BP and now at King's College London, argues in a Substack post entitled "The end of the beginning". Here, then, are some of the main elements in this worrying story.

First, the problems the world confronts are not just the result of the effective closure of the strait. The targeting of infrastructure, mainly by Iran, which was as predictable as the closure itself, has caused significant damage. According to Butler, "at least eight significant



But, apart from the evident political difficulties, Russian capacity is limited. The pipelines from Saudi Arabia to the Red Sea and Oman to Ras Markaz are limited in capacity. Enlarging them would take a long time. Replacing the lost refining capacity would also take time and cost a great deal. In Europe, refinery capacity has declined for years. This could not be changed quickly. Making such investments would also be costly and risky.

Finally, the shortages are far from limited to energy. Also affected are supplies of helium, naphtha, methanol, phosphates, urea, ammonia and sulphur. The reduction in supply of helium damages production of microchips. The reduction in supply of commodities essential to making artificial fertilisers will reduce global food production. There is also a negative impact on world shipping, since the longer routes are more expensive. Not least, 20,000 seafarers are now stuck in the Gulf.

The markets seem to have persuaded themselves that these looming realities will lead, sooner rather than later, to a stable ceasefire and a reopening of the strait. This might happen. But it is not hard to imagine why it might not. Donald Trump insists he does not care about Americans' financial situation. Instead, the "only thing that matters, when I'm

talking about Iran, they can't have a nuclear weapon".

Will Iran agree to that, even in principle? Why would it trust Trump to keep his side of any deal? How would such a deal be monitored and enforced? Why would Iran, having imposed control over shipping in the Gulf, surrender it? Would its leaders not at least insist upon their right to charge tolls? Would Trump be willing to accept such a humiliation?

Yes, the oil futures markets suggest that prices are set to fall and so will be well. But the oil futures curve is not a crystal ball, as my colleagues Jonathan Vincent and Malcolm Moore have noted. Indeed, expectations have quite often been disappointed. I can see no good reason why that might not continue to be the case. If the worst happens, prices will have to rise enough to

balance the constrained supply with demand. Since these are essential commodities, which face price-inelastic demand, the cost of products and crude oil could soar. Moreover, a part of this adjustment is likely to work via rising inflation expectations, higher interest rates and so a strong recessionary impact on the world economy.

Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency, has warned that we are entering the biggest energy crisis in history. If things do not soon change, this warning will prove correct. Nor would such an outcome be surprising. The US called its war "Operation Epic Fury". But "Operation Epic Fury" would have been a more realistic name.

martin.wolf@ft.com

**Its impact has been muted so far by a rapid drawdown of stocks. However, stocks are necessarily finite**

## China and the US crave hegemony without responsibility

**Elizabeth Economy**

Although the summit between US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping turned out to be little more than a low-risk set of photo opportunities, with each side largely telling the story it wanted to tell, it nonetheless sent important signals about both the bilateral relationship between the two countries and their relative standing on the global stage.

plunging poll numbers at home and mounting resistance abroad. His bullying behaviour and military adventurism have eroded US soft power globally. Meanwhile, Xi projected patience, discipline and confidence that time was on China's side. He repeatedly advanced China as a stabilising force in the global trading and security systems and an alternative to a reckless and disruptive US.

All of this appeared to confirm the increasingly popular narrative — obliquely referred to during the summit by Xi himself — of China's rise and America's decline. Yet that interpretation misses a deeper reality: the core architecture of US policy towards China remains highly competitive, while China has struggled to translate perceptions of an American retreat into lasting geopolitical gains.

degree to which a hard-edged China policy has become institutionalised in Washington. Tariffs, export controls and investment restrictions have strong bipartisan support. Industrial policy, once controversial in the US, has

**Beijing calls for stability during international crises but does not assume the costs of real leadership**

become an essential element of economic security and technology competition.

This strategic continuity matters. While the US president prioritised a "historic" summit, his administration continued to levy new economic sanctions on Chinese companies. In the sectors that will define long-term economic

and military power, including AI, semiconductors, biotechnology, quantum computing and critical minerals, Washington's objective is not accommodation but dominance.

Competition with China also defines US security strategy. The 2025 National Security Strategy identified the Asia-Pacific as the central theatre of geopolitical competition, emphasised co-operation with allies and partners to deter China militarily — including with respect to Taiwan — and called for countering predatory Chinese economic practices. Beyond the Asia-Pacific, the administration is engaged in a larger campaign to reduce Chinese influence over global port infrastructure, to constrain Beijing's ambitions in the Arctic and to exclude Chinese companies from critical digital infrastructure.

Nor has the US abandoned all multilateral arrangements. Where the administration sees direct economic or

security benefits, it has maintained or even expanded engagement. For example, the White House has supported new multilateral agreements around critical minerals, AI supply chains and digital trade. The President's Shield of Americas and Board of Peace initiatives also reflect a continued commitment to American-led multilateralism, although the scope and substance of these efforts remain unclear.

Meanwhile Beijing's own policies generate deep international distrust. Its support for Russia's war against Ukraine and military assertiveness in the East and South China Seas raise security concerns in Europe and Asia. And its economic policies face global blowback. In early 2026, the German research institute MERICS reported that over the previous year, 52 of the world's 70 largest economies launched new trade defence measures or investigations targeting China.

Moreover, China has not stepped forward to fill the vacuum in international leadership left by the US. Its foreign aid budget remains a fraction of what the US has historically provided. It calls for dialogue and stability during international security crises but does not assume the costs or responsibilities of real leadership. And it continues to flout international norms when they run counter to Chinese interests.

There is a difference between the US losing credibility as a global leader and China successfully claiming it. The world is confronted now with two superpowers that want the rights of global leadership without any of the responsibilities. Faced with this choice, the response of most other countries appears to be "none of the above".

The writer is Hargrove Senior Fellow and co-chair of the Program on the China, and the World at the Hoover Institution

OPINION

# Anthropic vs. China



**GEN. HENRY 'HAP' ARNOLD**  
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, commander of the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II, wanted to know how rockets, satellites, jet engines and nuclear weapons might change warfare in the postwar world. Today, he wouldn't have to invent the RAND Corp. Anthropic, one of America's leading builders of artificial intelligence, perhaps later this year to become a trillion-dollar public company, is perfectly happy also to be its 21st-century anti-China think tank.

CEO Dario Amodei has been unflinching in claiming that we face a race with China, that the survival of democracy depends on who wins. Even amid its weird fight with the Trump Pentagon, Anthropic tools are almost certainly being used right now by the National Security Agency in its twilight cyber struggle with Chinese spies and hackers. While President Trump visited Beijing, Anthropic posted a 5,500-word manifesto on how to conduct this new AI Cold War with China.

The fight only begins with the fact that the latest cutting-edge U.S. models, led by Anthropic's Mythos, seem to be uncannily good at finding dangerous and unsuspected vulnerabilities in all major software systems. China and criminal hackers are, at most,

only a year behind. Next question: Is this one problem or two?

Increasingly a sinister hue attaches to Beijing's preference for "open weight" models. Any user is free to adapt and modify them at will; their Chinese builders, unlike Western AI builders, don't reserve the ability to monitor how the models are being used or exercise a kill switch over anti-social activities.

Is this because China believes its national firewall and comprehensive surveillance renders it immune? Because it plans to put such tools in the hands of anti-Western hackers while preserving deniability? Beijing is still thought by some to have remained mum on early Covid because it believed China enjoyed a relative advantage in a global pandemic.

During Mr. Trump's Beijing summit, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told CNBC a key goal would be "to make sure non-state actors don't get a hold of these models."

To Anthropic and others, the pressing danger is to their business models, and to any hope of getting paid back for their billions and billions in investment, which China, they believe, is deliberately trying to undercut.

Anthropic's pitch for fighting back comes down to two things: China's access to top-tier chips and "distillation"—the illicit use of Western models to train Chinese models, hijacking (in the company's words) "decades of foundational research, billions of dol-

lars in US investment, and the work of thousands of the world's best engineers."

There's nothing like sitting down with AI mavens, as I recently did, to make a columnist swell with pride for (possibly) coining the term AI Chernobyl. Big questions loom. The Obama administration used drone assassinations against foreign terrorists. Should the same be visited on cyber kingpins? Kinetic and cyber action can both do severe economic damage. Both can cause civilian casualties. Should we stop treating one as warfare and the other as crime?

It doesn't solve everything, but mutual assured destruction worked passably well for 70 years to hold off nuclear Armageddon. China's economy is no less subject to comprehensive cyber shutdown than ours, especially given its reliance on software-based systems for almost every kind of transaction (cash being all but obsolete there). Not to mention its government's giant investment in software-based monitoring of citizens and their movements.

The China fears are real. Don't underestimate, though, how much they are tangled up in worries about a coming AI shakeout. Take this week's de-

feat of Elon Musk in his lawsuit against rival OpenAI. Nominally the case turned on OpenAI's conversion to a for-profit company and Mr. Musk's worries about *Homo sapiens* being displaced by superintelligent robots.

In fact, Mr. Musk was engaged in the great American tradition of waging warfare against a business rival. This comes at a moment when he and others are looking to loft AI-related IPOs. Don't say it too loudly: This may be a race to shift to the public some of the losses from an AI bubble that seems increasingly unlikely to yield profits for every contestant.

Such problems Hap Arnold didn't face. RAND was born as an arm of defense contractor Douglas Aircraft, but it was quickly spun off into a non-profit to become America's premier Cold War think tank. Meanwhile, Douglas (now McDonnell Douglas) found it perfectly possible to sell fighter jets to the U.S. military even while it set up a passenger-jet factory in communist China.

Monday's court ruling, in the chagrin of Mr. Musk, settled one software-based system: OpenAI isn't a charity but a business with a trillion-dollar valuation in the private market. A similar question may face Mr. Amodei and fellow Anthropic executives sooner than they think: Is Anthropic a business or an anti-China think tank? America may need both but the company likely will have to choose if it wants the public to invest.

BOOKSHELF | By Tunku Varadarajan

# A Couple At a Crossroads

**Newcomers**  
By Alan Mikhail  
*Liveright, 240 pages, \$29.95*

Anthony the Turk" sounds like the sobriquet of a scoundrel in a Mafia movie. He was, in fact, a real-life character from early American history, thought-wisely, by some—to be the first free Muslim to set foot in the New World. Most Muslims in the first American colonies had arrived from Africa as slaves. That Anthony came of his own volition isn't in dispute. But was he a Muslim?

In "Newcomers," Alan Mikhail tells the colorful story of Anthony and his wife. The man's true name, we learn, was Anthony Jansen. His marriage certificate from 1629—issued by the Oude Kerk, or Old Church, of Amsterdam—records his age that year as 22 and place of origin as Cartagena. We cannot be sure if this was the city in present-day Colombia or the port of the same name in Spain. His wife, Grietje Reyniers, was a German living in Amsterdam, where she worked as a housemaid, a barnmaid and an occasional prostitute. It's likely she met her husband in this last capacity.

Amsterdam, writes Mr. Mikhail, was "one of the most significant global metropolises" of the 17th century, its population tripling between 1585 and 1622. Immigration was the driver of this demographic explosion, as foreigners flocked to the center of a global shipping and trading network. But life wasn't easy if you weren't Dutch. Anthony and Grietje—outsiders in a prosperous but swirling city—chose to seek their fortune in the Americas. Grietje, we're told, had almost certainly been raped by the master of the house where she worked.

Mr. Mikhail is a professor of history at Yale and the author of the most controversial residents of New Netherland, the Dutch colony on America's east coast—spanning parts of present-day Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island—that existed from 1614 to 1667, when it was annexed by Britain. Dutch colonial records refer to Anthony as a Turk or "Mauhammetan," despite the absence of any Muslim religiosity on his part. "No action in his life," writes Mr. Mikhail, "ever evidenced an adherence to Islam."

Nonetheless, he had an aura of Muslimness, even though the "only religion he ever manifested" was Christianity. Mr. Mikhail speculates that this may have been due to his exotic origins ("van Cartagena," read his marriage certificate; from Cartagena); or his brown skin, suggestive of Moorish antecedents. There was even a mistaken belief in New Amsterdam, where the couple made their American foothold in 1630, that he was the son of Jan Janssen, a Dutchman who'd converted to Islam in Morocco after being seized by Barbary pirates (and thereafter becoming a pirate himself).

"The 'Turk' (or the 'whore,'" Mr. Mikhail tells us, were unpopular in New Amsterdam, being outspoken, litigious and—most unpalatably to their frugal neighbors—commercially successful, owning fertile land and a large grove of fruit trees. The couple were "indeed salty, swarthy, and sexual," and yet, like all the others, they came to colonize," proving to be very adept at dispossessing the Native Americans.

Mr. Mikhail shows great sympathy for Grietje, who had to contend with a lawsuit after a "witness" accused her of being a prostitute. She fought back, giving as good as she got in court and on the streets, where she told an accuser to "Kiss my ass!" (This, we are told, after lifting her petticoat and "pointing to, or possibly slapping, her buttocks.")

admirable books on the Ottomans. "Newcomers" is a micro-history, a slim, biographical account of a couple who came to be the most controversial residents of New Netherland, the Dutch colony on America's east coast—spanning parts of present-day Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island—that existed from 1614 to 1667, when it was annexed by Britain. Dutch colonial records refer to Anthony as a Turk or "Mauhammetan," despite the absence of any Muslim religiosity on his part. "No action in his life," writes Mr. Mikhail, "ever evidenced an adherence to Islam."

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## Anthony and Grietje left the maelstrom of 17th-century Amsterdam to start over in the New World. Their lives didn't get any easier.

The author likens Grietje to the women of Salem and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, describing her as one of early America's "unfairly and heinously maligned women." She was, after all, married to a man thought to be a Muslim, and the "Dutch authorities judged sexual relations across even inchoate lines of race as transgressive and perverse." Mr. Mikhail cannot resist adding that Grietje's coupling with Anthony was "akin to Desdemona's love for Othello."

After Anthony's dog savaged another man's hog—hogs being precious in New Netherland—the couple was banished in 1639 to Long Island, where the two started a new life on land the Dutch wished to colonize. And so an outcast couple, immoral and ungovernable, served as the vanguard for new European settlements. Again they thrived, their energy for a fight serving to make them industrious.

Mr. Mikhail's book brims with details of their lives. Grietje predeceased Anthony, dying in 1669. Anthony would marry again, this time to a woman who was a Dutch burgher of impeccable standing. His material success and status as a courageous colonizer helped repair his reputation and scrub the stigma of his perceived Muslimness.

It's this last facet of his character that Mr. Mikhail deploys most insistently (and at times tediously) to make assertions about the nature of early America that are somewhat contentious. He suggests that New Netherland was what is today lazily called Islamophobic (to his credit, he never uses the word). Islam, he writes, was "the most extreme form of otherness"—or alienness—in the Old World, and the animosity toward the "Muslim" Anthony in New Amsterdam drew "from a deep well." Let's not forget, however, that the fear of Islam in Europe at the time was entirely rational, based as it was on a range of civilizational confrontations in recent memory, including the kidnapping of European people by North African pirates on an epidemic scale.

Mr. Mikhail's broader thesis is more benign. He wants us to see Anthony as someone who "feeds into a story of new beginnings in North America," the origins of our melting-pot society. Anthony, he says, "proves foundational" in showing how Islam helped forge New York and America. This is, of course, an overstatement. But much less overblown is his assertion that the lives of Anthony and Grietje comprise a very American Story, in which a one-time maid-servant and prostitute and a man of obscure antecedents became masters of their own destiny.

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at NYU Law School's Classical Liberal Institute.

# Democrats, Don't Fight Fire With Fire



**POLITICS & IDEAS**  
By William A. Galston

As Democrats wrestle with the second Trump presidency, they face a crucial choice: rein in executive power and restore the rule of law, or prepare for a future Democratic president to use the powers President Trump has arrogated to his own purposes.

Influential Democratic voices are urging the latter course. "In order for us to correct the abuses that are happening now, we have to do the same in similar capacities that Trump has given himself," Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D, N.Y.) said earlier this year.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D, Mass.) is as blunt on the subject. "Donald Trump has made clear that there are no guardrails on executive power that are effective," she told the news source NOTUS. "So, the idea that the next president somehow just doesn't pick up the tools and use them to execute on the policies that they run on makes no sense. . . . We can't play the game that Republican presidents get lots of power and Democratic presidents don't."

Kamala Harris, the once and perhaps future Democratic presidential nominee, believes the party should fight

fire with fire. "This is a moment where there are no backsliders," she said last week while discussing what she dubbed a "no bad idea brain storm" for Democrats.

I beg to differ. There are plenty of bad ideas. In their zeal to erase the legacy of the Trump administration, Democrats could end up perpetuating its worst excesses.

During his first term, Mr. Trump told an audience at a 2019 event: "I have an Article II, where I have the right to do whatever I want as president." His actions since are evidence that he was serious about this, as are the people who work for him.

The Constitution gives the president broad powers, but within a system of checks and balances. Senior administration officials have waved Article II like a magic wand to justify their excesses as legal, constitutional behavior. Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought insists that the Impoundment Control Act of 1974—which limits a president's ability to withhold, delay or cancel funding appropriated by Congress—is unconstitutional. Why? Because it somehow infringes upon the president's inherent powers. This view turns Congress's Article I power of the purse into a mere suggestion, giving the president the last word on whether to spend funds appropriated for specific pur-

poses. Should Democrats embrace this fringe view, rejected by prominent conservative legal scholars, in the name of fighting fire with fire?

The U.S. faces serious policy challenges at home and abroad. But the threat to constitutional government and the rule of law is even graver, and Democrats have a responsibility to confront it, even if others won't.

The expansion of executive power has disrupted the balance among the branches of government. It didn't start with Donald Trump, but it must end with him. Restoring balance means respecting the legislative process as the main way to achieve policy changes. It means presidents' issuing executive orders that remain within legal and constitutional bounds. It means using the emergency powers granted by legislation only when necessary and clearly warranted. It means executing the laws—all of them—regardless of whether the chief executive likes them or not, and it means doing so evenhandedly. (Partisan consider-

ations should never influence the distribution of funds for disaster relief, for example.) It means adhering scrupulously to the requirements of the War Powers Resolution of 1973 unless the Supreme Court decides that it is unconstitutional. That presidents of both political parties regard it as unconstitutional proves nothing.

When the next president swears an oath to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States," he undertakes both to obey the Constitution and to remove threats to it. Poorly drafted emergency-power laws, some dating back to the early days of the Republic, are unexplored ordinance that could blow up the constitutional order. They should be repealed, and all such powers should be time-limited.

Even if the next president gives his responsibility to the Constitution the priority it deserves, no one should expect a new era of Good Feelings to break out. Partisan polarization is entrenched and will ebb only slowly.

But as we fight fiercely among ourselves, none of us are really winning. Only our foreign adversaries are. The national interest requires that we, the American people, really want—a time of healing, when we relearn the ancient truth that what unites us is more important than what divides us.

# The Pro-Israel Case Against Military Aid

By Daniel J. Samet

There's a call to end U.S. military aid to Israel, and it comes from a surprising source. "I want to draw down to zero the American financial support, the financial component of the military cooperation that we have," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told "60 Minutes" on May 10.

Washington should embrace the proposal. American assistance, totaling about \$3.8 billion a year, has become a political liability imperiling the future of the U.S.-Israel relationship. The sooner it's phased out, the better for both countries.

Anti-Zionists have long criticized aid to Israel—to little avail, since Americans have been strongly pro-Israel. Not anymore. One recent poll found that 60% of Americans view the Jewish state unfavorably, while 33% believe that Washington provides too much military aid.

The latter view is increasingly popular on the left and

right. "The taxpayers of the United States must no longer be complicit in destroying the lives of innocent men, women, and children in Gaza," Sen. Bernie Sanders has said. Last month, he sponsored a resolution to block arms sales to Israel. Forty senators, all Democrats, supported it.

**The Jewish state is self-sufficient and can deprive its enemies of a convenient target.**

Republicans are much more supportive of Israel, but some figures on the right rail against military aid. "We're spending tens and tens and tens of billions of dollars over time defending Israel," said Tucker Carlson, who has called Mr. Netanyahu "completely evil." At the University of Mississippi in October, a student asked Vice President JD Vance why Christians should favor "this

multi-hundred-billion dollar foreign aid package to Israel" when "their religion . . . openly supports the persecution of ours."

Israeli officials grasp that the political winds have turned against the Jewish state. Pro-Israel American officials should recognize the same. Both countries should begin phasing out aid now, while Donald Trump, the most pro-Israel president ever, is in office, and Republicans control Congress.

If Democrats win in 2028, expect them to punish Israel. President Biden denied arms deliveries when he objected to the Jewish state's prosecution of the war in Gaza. What will happen if a Democratic president or a Democratic Congress suddenly cuts off assistance, shocking the Israeli system? Better to begin before than so Israel can wean itself off on its own terms.

Ending military aid would deprive detractors of a talking point: that America subsidizes purported Israeli

crimes. Although these people won't warm to Israel once the aid ends, its termination will weaken their anti-Zionist argument.

Unlike other American security partners, Israel can get by without a check from Uncle Sam. The Jewish state now has a higher per capita gross domestic product than Germany or Qatar. Assistance from Washington accounts for about 8% of Israel's approximately \$45 billion defense budget, a smaller share than before.

Military aid to Israel, which Washington began supplying in significant amounts during the 1960s, has been a sound investment. The U.S. has financed a reliable ally that fights and wins wars against America's enemies. Yet Israel no longer commands the affection of the American people as widely as it once did. Ending military assistance is a political imperative in changing times.

Mr. Samet is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## A Housing Bill to Hurt Housing

Anyone who buys a home without an inspection is asking for trouble. Yet that's essentially what the Trump Administration wants Congress to do by passing housing legislation so Republicans can claim a victory on "affordability."

The House on Wednesday will vote on legislation that makes partial repairs to a ramshackle housing bill the Senate passed this spring. But even with the piecemeal fixes, the legislation's ban on institutional investors buying single-family rental homes will harm housing investment and lead to unintended consequences.

Under the Senate bill, investors that own 350 or more homes would be prohibited from acquiring new rental properties with limited exceptions—namely, buying them from other large institutional investors or building with the express purpose of renting them out. Even then, investors would have to sell homes they acquire after seven years.

This often isn't enough time to recoup investment, and investors would have to evict renters to sell the homes. Construction on build-to-rent projects stalled after the Senate bill passed amid uncertainty that the developments could be effectively banned.

Enter House Republicans, who have tried to patch the Senate's worst flaws. The House bill would eliminate the seven-year divestment requirement, which would save build-to-rent programs, as well as add minor exemptions to the acquisition ban.

Over the last decade, large investors have renovated some 300,000 distressed homes to rent out. The bill would make it harder to do so, while at the same time providing grants to local governments to award to low-income homeowners to repair dilapidated homes. Why would Republicans want to replace private capital with government management?

Perhaps because House Republicans are trying to please Mr. Trump. But in doing so, they would also be giving a future Democratic Ad-

ministration sweeping new powers over housing. Both chambers' versions of the bill would also give the Treasury Secretary carte-blanche power to rewrite the legislation "to minimize market disruptions" and "mitigate, to the extent possible, negative impacts" on consumers, and communities. If they recognize the ban will do harm, why pass it in the first place?

Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren championed the ban on investor-owned rental homes, and Mr. Trump embraced it because it polls well. But it rests on the misconception that institutional investors are driving up home prices. They make up only 0.65% of the nation's single-family housing stock and have been selling properties on net for two years.

The Federal Reserve's uber easy monetary policy during the pandemic combined with government stimulus drove up housing prices. Now higher mortgage rates have created a lock-in effect limiting homes for sale. Most single-family home renters lack the savings or credit profiles to buy homes.

House Republicans have improved other parts of the Senate bill, and their version is a marked improvement. But the investor ban is too problematic to salvage. The original bipartisan housing bill the House passed this year didn't include the provision. But then Mr. Trump insisted on it to Democratic glory.

Now we're told Democrats are refusing to vote for the bill without it. They are also trying to extort Republicans by making more demands like Davis-Bacon prevailing wage requirements for housing construction because they know the White House is desperate to pass anything called a housing bill.

The White House is pressing Republicans to accept the Senate bill rather than work out differences in a conference committee. But it would be better if the legislation collapsed than for the Senate bill to become law. Mr. Trump may want to tout the bill, but as it stands the biggest winners would be the political left.

## Trump Makes Chuck Schumer's Day

In January 2021, Republicans needed to hold a pair of Georgia seats to keep their Senate majority. But President Trump divided the GOP with his claims that weak Republicans had cost him the presidential race, GOP turnout fell, and Democrats narrowly won both races. Is he trying to make the same mistake again?

You have to wonder after his last-minute endorsement Tuesday of Attorney General Ken Paxton in next week's GOP Texas Senate primary. In doing so Mr. Trump spurned Sen. John Cornyn, who has been a reliable vote for the Trump agenda across both presidential terms. Mr. Trump chose to ignore Majority Leader John Thune and go along with Mr. Paxton's supporters in the plaintiffs bar who love his lawsuits against business.

All politics is personal for Mr. Trump, and he explained on Truth Social Tuesday that Mr. Cornyn "was not supportive of me when times were tough," citing a late presidential endorse-

ment. More likely, he wanted to do a favor to the Tucker Carlson-Steve Bannon wing of the GOP he has upset on Iran.

Mr. Trump is making Democratic Senate leader Chuck Schumer's day because a Paxton primary victory puts the Texas Senate seat in play. Mr. Paxton has been impeached by his own party and has a history of personal and political scandals. Many Republicans may stay home rather than vote for him, and we understand the impulse.

Mr. Cornyn has proven over four terms he can win a November race, but the polls say Mr. Paxton is in a dead heat with Democratic nominee James Talarico. Mr. Cornyn trailed Mr. Paxton in the first round of voting but came out ahead on Election Day as a quiet anti-Paxton vote turned out.

If Mr. Paxton wins next week and Texas ends up being the seat that turns Senate control to the Democrats, Mr. Trump will deserve "COMPLETE AND TOTAL" credit, as he likes to put it.

## Trump's \$1.776 Billion 'Weaponization' Fund

President Trump, his elder sons, and the family business moved Monday to dismiss their federal lawsuit against the Internal Revenue Service for the leak of Mr. Trump's tax returns. In exchange, the Justice Department said it will create a \$1.776 billion fund to compensate targets of government "weaponization." Could future historians ask for a better emblem of today's warped political age?

The DOJ says the Anti-Weaponization Fund "will have the power to issue formal apologies and monetary relief," outside of the typical legal process. The Trump family isn't eligible for payouts, but the rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, are likely to apply. They'll be eager to explain that they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that a police officer suddenly began smashing his face into their fists.

"The machinery of government should never be weaponized against any American, and it is this Department's intention to make right the wrongs that were previously done while ensuring this never happens again," Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche said. "We are setting up a lawful process for victims of lawfare and weaponization to be heard and seek redress."

Mr. Blanche will appoint a five-member commission to run the fund, and Mr. Trump can fire the commission members. Soon enough they might be receiving claim paperwork from James Comey. "I'll talk to my lawyers," the former FBI director told CNN, "but it certainly sounds intended for someone like me."

When IRS contractor Charles Littlejohn stole years of tax filings, he wronged Mr. Trump and many other Americans, and he did it with an ideological motive. Mr. Littlejohn's lawyers said he was worried about "inequality" and hoped leaking confidential information would "cause meaningful change." The leak was a huge scandal, and it didn't get the attention it deserved, because the press largely agrees with Democrats who want to squeeze the rich.

While Mr. Littlejohn was given five years in prison, civil cases can also be in order. Citadel CEO Ken Griffin sued the IRS, and his settlement involved a formal apology from the federal gov-

ernment. Other parties have filed suits against Booz Allen Hamilton, the consultancy that employed Mr. Littlejohn.

Mr. Trump sued the IRS this January, asking for \$10 billion, but he's simultaneously the agency's boss. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent reports to the President and serves at his pleasure, and so does Mr. Blanche. When Donald Trump sues the Trump Administration, can President Trump agree to a settlement?

Given the inherent conflict in *Trump v. IRS*, the federal judge assigned to the case wasn't sure she had jurisdiction to hear it. Mr. Trump "is the sitting president and his named adversaries are entities whose decisions are subject to his direction," Judge Kathleen Williams wrote last month. "It is unclear to this Court whether the Parties are sufficiently adverse to each other so as to satisfy Article III's case or controversy requirement."

Judge Williams set a May 27 hearing on that question, and now the parties seem to be working in coordination to avoid her inquiries. Mr. Trump's court filing Monday sought voluntarily to dismiss the case. News reports say the Justice Department doesn't believe the agreement needs judicial approval. Mr. Blanche's two-page memo identifies the \$1.776 billion as coming from the Judgment Fund, a permanent appropriation for U.S. settlements.

As legal precedent, Mr. Blanche points to the Obama Administration's \$680 million debt in *Keeseagle v. Vilsack*, a case alleging Agriculture Department discrimination against Native American farmers. But it went through a judge. Also, Mr. Obama isn't a Native American farmer, and it wasn't *Obama v. Vilsack*. The Obama Administration made plenty of outrageous settlements, including telling big banks to donate to outfits such as La Raza, a tactic that Republicans at the time rightly decried.

Mr. Trump's settlement fund is an astounding precedent, and if it proceeds it is sure to become a highlight reel of Trump Administration payments to Mr. Trump's friends and allies. Imagine the fun Democrats will have documenting it all between now and 2028 as the worst kind of Washington political payoff.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Civics Gets a Reboot in American Education

Advocates of civic renewal across America should be encouraged by your recent editorial ("The 'Civic Life' Success at UNC," May 13) about the announcement that the School of Civic Life and Leadership (SCILL) will become an independent school within the University of North Carolina. The announcement is evidence of a true renaissance in civic learning.

The civics program at UNC isn't the only such emerging institution. Flagship public universities have opened dozens of similar institutions in the past five years. The only problem is that we can't staff them fast enough. They need academics with training in the traditional liberal arts, not ideological fads. But too many universities have downgraded or eliminated the teaching of American civics and history.

We must support new and expanded Ph.D. programs, as well as auxiliary assistance with professional development and research. It is a new world for civics, and it is up to each of us to advance this vital mission.

**JACK MILLER**  
Founder and chairman emeritus, Jack Miller Center  
Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

We support your editorial's call to strengthen civics education and viewpoint diversity on college campuses. But the University of North Carolina's School of Civic Life and Leadership and

similar institutes shouldn't be called a success.

Many supporters, including conservatives, have criticized SCILL for ideological bias and mismanagement. Jonathan Williams, the chief economist for the Federal Communications Commission, called the school "an unmitigated disaster" and resigned from its advisory board.

The school's curriculum focuses narrowly on selected aspects of American history and features Christian religious themes. The growing enrollment may be attributed in part to the scholarships offered to students who minor in the civics program. But North Carolina's program isn't the only civics institute mentioned to skew right. Conservative politicians and lobbyists played an outsized role in the establishment of the University of Florida's Hamilton School for Classical and Civic Education, and it isn't a coincidence that these centers appear almost exclusively in red states.

Whether civics institutes will support discourse across ideological lines or mimic the ideological conformity they decry remains to be seen.

**DAVID WIFFMAN**  
President emeritus, Hamilton College  
Bethesda, Md.

**PROF. GLENN ALTSCHULER**  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, N.Y.

## The Full Scope of Chinese Spying in America

Regarding "Hong Kong's Spy Campaign Is Exposed" (Review & Outlook, May 8): The former mayor of Arcadia, Calif., Elias Wang, recently agreed to plead guilty to being an illegal agent for the Chinese. She's hardly alone. New York Governor Kathy Hochul once employed a ranking staff member that has been charged with acting as an agent of the Chinese government.

Boston Mayor Michelle Wu seems to favor China. Former Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D., Calif.) had a Chinese spy on her staff for roughly two decades. Eric Swalwell (D., Calif.), once on the House Intelligence Committee, had a close relationship with an alleged Chinese spy, Christine Fang.

These examples of China's asymmetric invasion of the U.S. represent

only the tip of their advancements. Other examples include the hundreds of thousands of acres of American farmland owned by the Chinese apparatus—substantial acreage of which is near U.S. military installations. And don't forget the weeks-long Chinese balloon flier of American bases. Meanwhile the U.S. government allows Chinese foreign-exchange students, acting as quasi-intelligence agents, to roam freely throughout the nation.

President Trump and his administration have temporarily blocked injury to the nation by acting strongly against the Chinese. But when Democrats once again regain control of the government, expect disastrous consequences.

**EARL BEAL**  
Terre Haute, Ind.

## America Built Beijing's Negotiating Position

Thomas Duesterberg writes powerfully about tariff negotiations ("Trump Heads to Beijing With a Strong Hand," op-ed, May 12). But he overlooks a key reality: Countries around the world are turning to Beijing as a primary trading partner not because China earned that position but because U.S. trade policy last year signaled that America is retreating from longstanding alliances.

American tariffs and the unpredictability they signal have pushed traditional allies to seek deals elsewhere, and China has been eager to oblige. We did not weaken Beijing's

negotiating position. We helped create it.

China depends on economic performance to sustain legitimacy and maintain power, but it is likely to negotiate patiently while building alternative partnerships. The U.S. should do the same. As Mr. Duesterberg notes, America still holds most of the economic cards. We don't need protection from Chinese competition as much as we need domestic policies that unleash the potential of the American worker—and foreign policies that remind our allies the U.S. is a better partner than China.

**RYAN YONK**  
Senior research fellow, American Institute for Economic Research  
Salt Lake City

## We're Rigging In-Home Care

Your editorial "The Great California Medical Grift" (May 16) is right about waste in the Golden State. Another example is the rampant waste in California's In-Home Supportive Services program, where family members are hired to care for other relatives.

For as little as 20 hours a week, these people receive tax-free compensation, highly subsidized healthcare and state-backed retirement options. As a former California business owner who delivered medical equipment directly into patients' homes, I commonly witnessed patients trapped with negligent caregivers.

This program is subject to rigid federal overtime rules, and providers even accrue paid sick leave via California's mandate. Like most things in Sacramento, the program has been incrementally rigged for waste and abuse.

**GREG MCMORROW**  
Franklin, Tenn.

## Free Expression

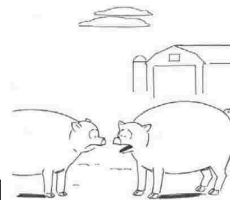
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## Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"A pulled pork sandwich gives me the shudders."

OPINION

An Easy Way to Defeat Medicaid Fraud

By Vivek Ramaswamy

There's a simple way to lower healthcare costs without requiring Americans to bear unacceptable trade-offs: prosecute Medicaid fraud and put the recovered funds back into citizens' pockets.

The underlying problem is that Medicaid rewards states with more money when they waste money. Here's the solution: deal with the federal government that allows states that combat Medicaid fraud to keep a greater share of what they save.

States would do more to police improper payments if they had better financial incentives to do so.

Consider the math facing a governor today. In Ohio, about 65% of every traditional Medicaid dollar comes from the federal government. That means for every dollar a state recovers by hunting down a fraudulent home health agency or a phantom hospice, less than 35 cents return to the state treasury.

Now reverse the math. On Jan. 8, 2021, the first Trump administration approved an agreement that for the first time let a state, Tennessee, keep a share of the savings it gener-

ated through better management of its Medicaid program. By late 2025, TennCare's "shared savings" had exceeded \$1 billion, money the state has used for rural health, coverage for children and pregnant women, and no-interest disaster-relief loans for counties hit by 2024's Hurricane Helene.

A more tailored version can focus on fraud recovery alone, creating incentives for state and local law-enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute the criminal misuse of Medicaid dollars.

Perverse incentives aren't unique to Medicaid. Many federal programs that were designed as federal-state partnerships, from food stamps to Housing and Urban Development subsidies, have turned into moral-hazard machines.

With combined federal and state spending of roughly \$900 billion a year, Medicaid is one of the largest single lines in the federal budget. As the program has ballooned, fraud has too. The Paragon Health Institute estimates more than \$1.1 trillion in improper federal payments between 2015 and 2024, a gap that exists largely because federal auditors stopped checking eligibility for most of the decade.



\$4.3 billion in double payments to insurers that were reported to have paid twice for the same services because a patient enrolled in Medicaid in multiple states.

A second front in the fight against fraud is opening. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act for the first time conditions Medicaid eligibility for low-income adults under 65 without dependents on a work requirement: 80 hours a month of work, job training, schooling or volunteering, beginning in January 2027.

Many enrollees already work or will qualify for an exemption; the able-bodied who don't are a minority. But once the requirement is law,

every dollar paid on behalf of an able-bodied enrollee who declines to work is an improper payment, and the burden of verifying eligibility for all 18.5 million will fall on the states. Under today's math, a state that does the work keeps barely a third of what it saves.

Under my proposal, the federal government may end up with more money in absolute terms even if it takes a smaller percentage of the returns. In Ohio, even a 10% reduction in Medicaid spending would send

roughly \$1.6 billion to Washington and save Ohio \$3.1 billion; across 50 states the savings could approach \$100 billion.

A more technical concern is how to set a credible baseline for Medicaid spending so states can't inflate projections and pocket the difference. We also don't want states with high recovery rates to be punished with smaller budgets going forward.

Most healthcare policies force a painful trade-off between cost, access and quality. This one doesn't. It takes money from criminals and returns it to the families who play by the rules.

Mr. Ramaswamy is the Republican nominee for governor of Ohio.

What Would Jefferson and Madison Make of Musk and Altman?



UPWARD MOBILITY By Jason L. Riley

A judge tossed Elon Musk's \$150 billion lawsuit against OpenAI's Sam Altman this week after the jury determined that the Tesla CEO waited too long to file his claim.

Essentially, Mr. Musk sued Mr. Altman for being deceitful. The two teamed up to create a nonprofit AI lab in 2015, and Mr. Musk contributed most of the capital.

Mr. Altman was briefly ousted as CEO in 2023 after the board determined that he "was not consistently candid in his communications." Within a week, however, he was reinstated, and several directors who had voted to remove him left the board.

Mr. Molo: "But you don't know whether you're completely trustworthy." Mr. Altman: "I'll amend my answer to yes."

Mr. Molo asked the witness if he "always" tells the truth. "I believe I am a truthful person," Mr. Altman responded.

Mr. Altman: "I'm sure there's some time in my life when I have not."

Humans are fallible, and few if any of us can claim to have "always" been truthful in life, so it may seem odd that Mr. Altman was pressed on this point.

The idea was to find these extraordinary men, put them in charge, and align policies with their understanding of the common good.

America's Founders and Adam Smith knew better than to entrust the future to philosopher-kings.

A lengthy profile of Mr. Altman in the New Yorker magazine last month noted that the "founding premise of OpenAI was that it would have to be different." How so? "The firm was established as a nonprofit, whose board had a duty to prioritize the safety of humanity over the company's success, or even its survival."

future of humanity." I'll pause while you chuckle.

Theories about the need for a "philosopher king" or "great man" to advance society date back centuries. Intellectual figures from Plato to Machiavelli and Thomas Carlyle emphasized personal traits such as superior wisdom and exceptional moral character in choosing leaders.

March marked the 250th anniversary of Smith's seminal text, "The Wealth of Nations," published the same year as the Declaration of Independence. As we reflect on America's milestone, it's worth noting that the Founders shared Smith's skepticism of philosopher-kings and the approach to choosing leaders that today's AI poobahs seem to have embraced.

"What the American Constitution established was not simply a particular system but a process for changing systems, practices, and leaders, together with a method of constraining whoever or whatever was ascendent at any given time," Thomas Sowell wrote in his book on social theory, "The Quest for Cosmic Justice."

Perhaps there's a lesson here for our high-tech "betters" who are leading the revolution in artificial intelligence. Disruptive AI is coming sooner or later, in one form or another. The transition may be unpleasant for some, but the U.S. would be wise to embrace the technology and stay ahead of global rivals.

The Economics of Victory in Ukraine and Defeat in Iran

By Tom Tugendhat

The war in Iran teaches an old lesson about military spending.

Six hundred years ago, on a muddy field near Agincourt in northern France, King Henry V's outnumbered, half-starved English army faced the flower of French chivalry. French knights were expensive, each man-at-arms the product of many years of training, his armor and warhorse a major investment.

Henry's archers carried longbows that cost little, drawn by men trained in every village across the kingdom. When the volleys came, the knights fell by the hundreds. Quantity overwhelmed quality—and the mud helped. France lost the battle, but defeat in the war came not in the dying. It was the impossibility of replacing what had died.

workforce trained, and the production lines tooled. We are running short of the raw materials for our exquisite weapons while our adversaries flood the battlefield with cheap drones.

Next-generation fighters, multibillion-dollar carriers and so much more mean that although each is a marvel, we have too few, and they're too hard to replace, making them too valuable to risk.

Sophistication has become our vulnerability. Ukraine shows the alternative. More than 1,000 interceptor drones roll off Ukrainian production lines every day, at \$1,000 to \$3,000 apiece. The bodies of Kyiv-built attack drones are redesigned within months, not years, their engines even more quickly, and their guidance software within a matter of days.

Behind this show of force sits a market the government built. Programs like Brave1 connect investors directly to startups and to the user on the front line, giving fast feedback. That's how a country at war fields more than 2,000 defense companies and runs production cycles from outline to front line in months, not years.

Ukraine produced four million drones last year and plans to produce seven million this year, 10 times its output three years ago.

We're not the only ones who have noticed. Gulf monarchies, which have bought American for decades, are looking at Kyiv as the partner for drone warfare. Their models are cheap, quick to produce and still in active development on the Donbas front.

While the U.S. is cautious about allowing even close allies to use cruise missiles, Ukraine has an alternative. See Spider's Web, the June 2025 operation that smuggled more than 100 drones deep inside Russia and struck four air bases and 41 aircraft, including several bombers, causing an estimated \$7 billion in damage.

The U.S. uses \$4 million Patriot interceptors to destroy drones that cost \$20,000 to \$50,000.

Ukraine produced four million drones last year and plans to produce seven million this year, 10 times its output three years ago.

For Ukraine, that's the economics of victory: billions of dollars of weapons destroyed by drones that cost around \$2,000 each.

The cure to what ails the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's militaries isn't another exquisite platform. It's a radically industrial base that can take an idea and turn it into a million in a year. That means pivoting civilian production lines to defense and giving contracts to the manufacturer that can deliver 100,000 drones a month, not the one that delivers a dozen platforms in a decade.

The goal is no longer the perfect weapon. You build the best you can. Then build it again, 90% as good, at 80% of the cost, in 50% of the time. Then do it again and again, a thousand times more. That not only fills the army; it creates a system to keep it full.

In the Iran war, we're equipping like the French at Agincourt when what we need is an army of archers.

Mr. Tugendhat, a Conservative, is a member of the British Parliament and a distinguished fellow at the Hudson Institute.

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Notable & Quotable: Poetry

Katha Pollitt writing for the Nation, May 12:

About a year ago, I asked ChatGPT to write a poem "in the style of Katha Pollitt." The result was fairly ridiculous: more like a greeting-card jingle than a poem by anyone over the age of 10.

[The poem] has all the tics of contemporary mediocre poetry: the knowing nudge ("as meetings do"), the look out the window ("Outside,

the city"), the careless mixed metaphors. There is nothing fresh or original here, no wit or zing, no pressure on language or form or voice or thought. It's full of decorative phrases like "the stubborn verb of living" that sound "poetic" but do no work. It's boring and generic and there are probably dozens of magazines that would publish it. But do you know that bothered me the most? The thought that this is what ChatGPT "thinks" my poems are like: obedient, sardish, "feminist" but defeated (get that woman a dishwasher!). Please believe me, reader: This is not how I write.

# Opinion

## France has a new picture of the Holocaust

A new collection of propaganda photos shows the first roundup of Jews in Paris, in 1941.

Jean-Marc Dreyfus

In 1950, Robert Doisneau photographed a kiss you've surely seen. The man and woman seem to have been stopped by ardor amid the midday rush, in front of the Hôtel de Ville, Paris. Though staged, it became, nearly immediately, one of the most iconic images of the 20th century.

Surely unknown to Mr. Doisneau, nine years earlier, there was another kiss captured on film in Paris that was much more spontaneous, just as passionate — far more desperate — between two Jews about to be separated by Vichy police. This kiss, found on a contact sheet of Nazi propaganda images in a Reims flea market six years ago, is now at the heart of a new exhibition of 98 Nazi propaganda photos at the Shoah Memorial in Paris curated by Lior Laleu and me. This kiss, perhaps destined to become just as iconic, reveals a very different midcentury Parisian moment.

The photos provide a detailed visual account — almost minute by minute — of the very first, and little known, roundup of Jews in France on May 14, 1941. That day, some 3,700 foreign-born Jews obeyed a summons by Paris police with a notice, printed on light green paper (it became known as the “green ticket roundup”), for what they believed would merely be a check of their immigration and identity papers. The operation was organized by a man named Theodor Dannecker, the envoy of Adolf Eichmann in Paris. A photographer with the Nazi propaganda unit in the city was on hand to observe.

What gives these newly discovered photographs their singular power is not only what they show but the fact that they survived at all. They remind us that the past is never entirely buried, and that images can unexpectedly return to challenge the void of memory and representation. They function today not as propaganda, the purpose for which they were originally produced, but as fragments of truth — painful, incomplete and indispensable — that allow us to better understand the way the roundup was organized and conducted and also to get a glimpse of the victims' shock, fear and pain.

There are only a few hundred photographs of roundups or murders of Jews from the 1930s and 1940s, a disparity of mass proportion considering the extent of the genocide. Some were taken by victims as acts of resistance, some by bystanders, and others, like this collection, were by an authorized photographer for the Nazi propaganda machine. From time to time, grandchildren of Nazi perpetrators find these images in attics and boxes when the older generation passes away.

This particular group of photographs was meant to document a Nazi success story. They begin with the trap: Jewish men and their spouses were summoned to over 60 locations in Paris: police offices, various administrations and a sports facility in the 11th Arrondissement. Women, we know from eyewitness testimony, were asked to return home to gather items; a list was provided. When they returned, as the images we now have on hand show, they were barred from

reuniting with their male relatives. The doors were closed and guarded by French policemen. We can see the women's pain, their bewilderment, many with bundles in their arms. We see couples as they part from each other.

Other photos document the departure of guarded buses, commandeered from the Paris bus company, filled with the captured men. We see the arrival of the internees at Paris's Austerlitz train station. The same photographer captures the imprisonment of these Jews a few days later at the French internment camps Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande. Some 700 of those Jewish men were later liberated, or escaped, after the green ticket roundup. About 3,000 of those taken that day were later deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau; of that group, just a scant few returned.

Taken months before the decision to annihilate the Jews of Europe was made, these 98 photos do not show extermination camps, gas chambers, shootings or even starvation. What they do show is the careful, methodical beginnings of racially motivated separation that later enabled the mass murder. The noted historian Raul Hilberg called this phase of the Nazi genocide “concentration.” There is no sign of outright violence; indeed, the despair of the ensnared Jews and their bewildered spouses is shown with a strange sensitivity by the German photographer.

At first the photos were kept on file by the German Propaganda Unit in Paris. After the war, six of the 98 photos were found in the archives of the N.I.O.D. Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, an indication that they were shared among the various propaganda units across Western Europe. A few others circulated among archives. But the vast majority were languishing, unseen, on contact sheets, until 2020, when two amateur collectors came upon them at a flea market. They brought the sheets to Ms. Laleu, the director of photo collections at the Shoah Memorial in Paris, who analyzed the images in an effort to identify as many people as possible. Ms. Laleu also identified the photographer as Harry Croner, a man from Berlin, who had gone on to have a stellar career in postwar West Berlin, as a famous cinema and opera photographer. (Half Jewish himself, he spent the end of the war in a labor camp.)

After the photos were found, Ms. Laleu invited first and second-generation survivors to the memorial in an attempt to identify their parents or grandparents in the pictures. There were some extraordinarily moving moments. Though only five attempts at identification were successful so far, each marks a small victory against the backdrop of Nazi cover-up and of the looming loss of memory. A few of the photographs were shared publicly for the first time in 2021.

One year after these photos were taken, in mid-July 1942, about 13,000 Jews — mostly women and children —



© Mémorial de la Shoah

PHOTOGRAPHS VIA MÉMORIAL DE LA SHOAH



were rounded up, pulled out of Paris apartments and taken to an indoor sporting arena, the Vélodrome d'Hiver, in southwestern Paris. They received little food or water and were subject to abject conditions. Depleted and distraught, they were sent from there to the internment camps of Drancy, Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande. Later, a majority were sent on to Auschwitz.

It was an arrest of mass proportions, a stain on French history. We know this history from eyewitness testimonies, from memoirs of the few survivors and from the mass of police documents. Only a single photograph of the roundup is known. In it five buses are parked alongside the Vélodrome d'Hiver. The image was most likely taken clandestinely from an overlooking window. With the discovery and exhibition of this new group of photographs, the picture and understanding of the Holocaust in France have deepened.

The value of an image is entirely dependent on context. Taken to prove racial superiority, these 98 photos on display through December now show depravity. They also jar awake memory, shore it up against time. In an ephemeral era of mass documentation — of our own lives, of our public and private existence — the re-emergence of these photographs is a tangible reminder that some images refuse to be erased from our collective past.

JEAN-MARC DREYFUS is a Holocaust historian at the University of Manchester. He is a co-author, with Lior Laleu, of “La Rafle du Billet Vert. 14 Mai 1941. Les Photos Retrouvées.” They are also co-curators of the exhibition of the 98 photographs at the Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris.

Above and left, photos found on a contact sheet of Nazi propaganda images in a flea market in Reims, France, six years ago.

OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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We've become too savage for 'Lord of the Flies'

Junot Diaz

Back in my school days, William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies' was ubiquitous, an almost inescapable rite of passage, and while the novel is still on shelves, kept there as much by its Nobel pedigree as its length, Golding's island has been on the wane for some time.

After all, few novels from the '50s have aged well in a non-reading, present-obsessed conjuncture. This novel's dystopic vision of human barbarity might have been stuff in the Ye Olden Times (1954), but in these days of school shootings and soaring teen suicide rates, the travails of Piggy and Company come off a little like John Bunyan — too hoary, schematic and, worst of all, too timid, especially if you grew up on 'The Chocolate War' or 'The Hunger Games' or Japanese bangers like 'Battle Royale' or 'The Drifting Classroom.'

Savagery, as we all know too well, sure ain't what it used to be. And it is into these carnivorous times that a supposedly faithful adaptation of 'Lord of the Flies' has arrived from Jack Thorne, the writer of 'Adolescence,' to Netflix, a return that prompts this brother, at least, to ask: Does Golding's original severed pig-head on the stick have anything left to say to us?

With its savagery generation-gapped, Golding's novel doesn't have a lot to learn on a whittled-down as-is to characterological minima. Even more demoralizing: 'Lord of the Flies' is a victim of its own success, a co-creational powerhouse that has inspired a lot, and I mean a lot, of contemporary takes in these past 70 years. If, as the writer Drew Baste notes, Robinson Crusoe 'was the man responsible for a million islands,' Piggy and Company are responsible for an endless archipelago of darker, crazier islands. The text is one that inspires not an anxiety of influence but a voracity of influence, and it struggles as consequence to interest the very present audiences it has had an incalculable role in shaping.

Not everyone has read 'Lord of the Flies,' but thanks to the novel's million descendants, everyone's has encountered the novel's core conceits and feral mythology, generic monuments that loom titanic over the psycho-oceanography of the zeitgeist. At the cultural level, Golding's island has become, in effect, a repeating island par excellence, our culture's dark Brigadoon with fragments scattered across a dizzying variety of media: graphic novels ('Plutona'), video games ('DayZ,' 'Rule of Rose'), television ('The 100,' 'From,' 'Yellowjackets') and of course novels (Sarah Goodwin's 'Stranded,' Pierce Brown's 'Red Rising'). There's so much 'Lord of the Flies' in Stephen King's gothics that I

could write a dissertation on it. There are his obvious tributes like 'The Long Walk' or the recurring fictional town Castle Rock, named after the fortified outcrop that one of the novel's tribes inhabited. A reader need only squint at 'The Stand' to discern a version of 'Lord of the Flies.' Same with 'Under the Dome.' Same with 'The Mist.' Same with 'The Shining.'

Golding's novel might feel somewhat dated, but his delirious beast-haunted island, in shattered refracted form, sure as hell does not. And many of these newly risen Hispaniolas of depravity have kept up with our rising incivility, our deepening tribalism, our social media derangements.

So could a talent as massive as Mr. Thorne make Golding's island haunt and disturb when we live in a society that isn't just obsessed with brutality, it almost is brutality? In a society that has so much patience for historical objects as the show's bully Jack has for the trappings of civilization? As he says: 'An adventure island, what do we do on it? Nothing but boring things. Toilets. Water. Hut building. Boring.'

Spolier alert: Mr. Thorne fumbles the pig's head, producing a faithful adaptation that wouldn't qualify to sit on the bench with far superior and eminently unfaithful adaptations like 'Yellowjackets,' much less carry their water.

Mr. Thorne makes some halfearted feints at updating our tale. Simon is maybe queer. Ralph is mixed-race Black. But both these diversities end up backfiring, doing both too little and too much. The show pitches Simon's may-be-queerness and Ralph's Blackness as anachronistically inconsequential in a society of boys that seems to lack much overt bias — over diversities without difference, in — other words — but then makes their otherness consequential in sneaky ways.

Maybe-queer Simon ends up mobslain, a maybe-victim of the 'bury your gays' trope. Similarly, Ralph suffers a massive agency demotion — reverse affirmative action — in comparison with book Ralph. In the novel, white Ralph helps organize the boys early on. In the show, Piggy does it all. In the novel, Ralph calls Simon's death a murder, a judgment that novel Piggy outright rejects. In the series, white Piggy is the one with the moral clarity to call a may-be-homophobic slaughter murder, while mixed-race Ralph equivocates. A bizarre glow-up for Piggy when one recalls that in the original editions of the novel, he's the only character to use the N-word.

You would think the Netflix show would at least do justice to the novel's violence. But you would be wrong. Here's Piggy's death in the original:

The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time for even a grunt... fell 40 feet and landed on his back across the square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red. Like a pig's after it has been killed.

DIÁZ, PAGE 11



ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. PHOTO BY J. REZAL/LEVIN/SONY PICTURES TELEVISION AND NEXTEL/REDAWARDS VIA GETTY IMAGES

What A.I. did to my college class

Theo Baker

At Stanford University, where I am a senior, tech chief executives are something like rock stars. When the Nvidia founder Jensen Huang showed up to give a guest lecture late last month, students mobbed him. They offered up their laptops and personal workstations, desperate for a signature from a kingpin of the artificial intelligence era. Last year, speaking to the same class, Mr. Huang went off shining \$4,000 graphic cards with his name autographed in gold ink — the ultimate dorm room status symbol.

Stanford has always been a haven for aspiring techies, but recent events have taken the school into uncharted territory. A.I. is everything. We talk about it at the dining halls and in history classes, on dates and while smoking with friends, at the gym and in communal dorm bathrooms. Nearly all of higher education has been overtaken by this technology, and Stanford is a case study in how far it can go. For the past four years, my classmates and I have been the subjects of a high-stakes experiment.

We are the first college class of the A.I. era — ChatGPT arrived on campus about two months after we did. When we graduate next month, this technology will have altered our lives in very different ways. For some, it has opened the door to staggering wealth. But for many who came to Stanford — just four years ago! — when a degree seemed like a guaranteed ticket to a high-paying job, the door has been slammed shut. For all of us, A.I. has permanently changed how we think and behave.

STANFORD ALREADY HAD a shaky reputation for integrity when I arrived in 2022. It was the origin place of the Theronas fraudster Elizabeth Holmes (now serving a 10-year prison sentence), the cryptic founder Do Kwon (now serving a 15-year prison sentence) and the founders of Juul (which was forced to pay billions for getting kids hooked on vapes). All of those scandals were in the news when freshman year began. Many of my classmates arrived idealistic and hopeful, but among the strivers seeking a path to fortune, hustle culture was the accepted way of life. Now A.I. has made deception easier and more remunerative than ever before.

Cheating has become omnipresent. I don't know a single person who hasn't used A.I. to get through some assignment in college, yet the school was at first slow to realize how widespread this would become. As freshman year went on, some professors suggested that the "nuclear option" might be called for: allowing faculty to proctor in-person exams, a practice banned at the university for over a century to demonstrate "confidence in the honor" of students.

In our tech-enabled, newly A.I.-powered world, students were increasingly fudging just about everything. They would embezzle dorm funds to spend on their friends and lie about having Covid to get the UberEats credits that the school offered to those in quarantine. Some kids I knew published a paper that claimed a groundbreaking new A.I. advancement. Online sleuths quickly pointed out that it appeared to be just a stolen Chinese model, to which the two Stanford co-authors responded by blaming the plagiarism on the third author. In junior year, 49 percent of the 849 computer science majors who responded to an annual campus survey said they would rather cheat on an exam than fail. A friend of mine captured the school's ethos while we were discussing the tech hardware and other issues: student club neglected to return to corporate sponsors. It was all, I recall her saying, "just a little bit of fraud."

About halfway through freshman year, some coding classes started requiring students to sign a declaration: "I did not utilize ChatGPT" — to submit each assignment. During the first term these attestations began to appear, I watched a freshman I knew sign the declaration that he'd done his homework without A.I. as ChatGPT was still open in the next window — while on the deck of a yacht party financed by venture capitalists. The incentive structures were not aligned toward honesty. One could get ahead, quickly, by cutting corners, by focusing on self-presentation. The money is a big part of it. A.I. has merely accelerated a trend that was already underway at Stanford and has been reflected by many of the country's most corporatized universities: Education itself can be seen as a secondary goal to enabling future success, frequently defined as a future windfall.

THE FIRST TIME OUR college class gathered together was for a convocation ceremony in late September 2022. As one of the speakers draped on, I remember looking around and seeing a number of my classmates slumped over in the shade, dozing off. One of those kids is going to become a billionaire soon, it occurred to me. I wondered who it would be, and how. At first the answer seemed to be cryptocurrency, and then it was A.I.

Most of my friends remember where they were and what they were doing when ChatGPT came out on Nov. 30, 2022. I was nearing the end of my time in Stanford's infamous computer science

"weeder" course, CS107. Like organic chemistry for pre-meds, this was the class that filtered out the true coders from those without the requisite hustle (with lots of shameless public tears involved).

The velocity of change that began on the day ChatGPT entered our lives was stunning. A friend texted me a link to the research preview of OpenAI's latest demo: "Have you seen this yet? It's INSANE." We began kicking around silly prompts, revealing as ChatGPT explained the bubble-sort algorithm "in the style of a fast-talking wise guy from a 1940s gangster movie." It's "very good. Very very good." I messaged my friend. Still, neither of us understood that this would mark the transformation of A.I. from a technology to a product.

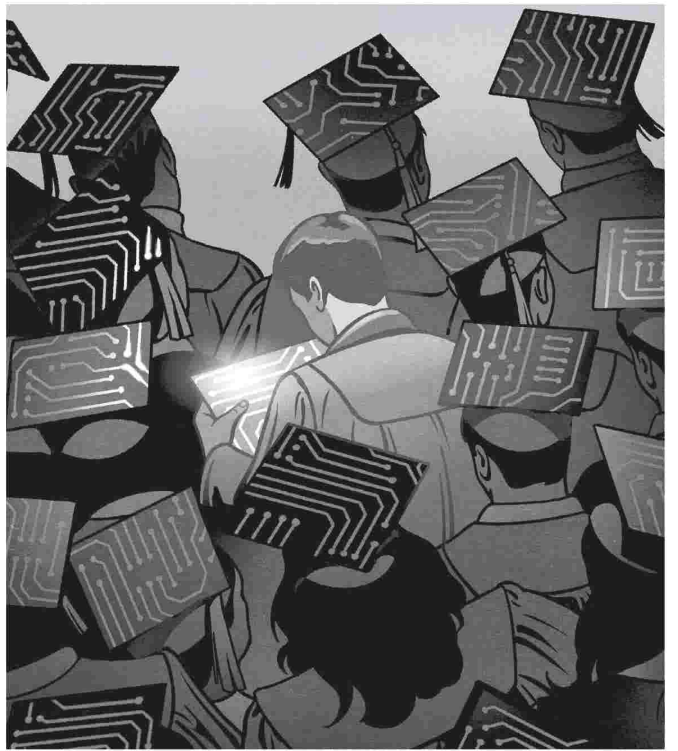
Students were probably the earliest wide-scale adopters. After all, it was far and away the quickest route to an A. When I took CS107, the only viable way

company with "A.I." in the name, there is a nearly surefire route to monetary gain. Perplexity, started right when my freshman year began, is an example of a "wrapper" start-up — in other words, a company that does not have its own proprietary A.I. and merely repackages existing models in a different form. It is a search tool, and loses money essentially every time a new user inputs a query. In April 2024, it reached a billion-dollar valuation; two months later, that number tripled. In May 2025, it announced that it was fund-raising at a \$14 billion valuation, which had grown to \$18 billion by July, and \$20 billion by September.

Money in Silicon Valley has become a game of almost meaningless numbers handed about in a breathtakingly casual manner. It contributes to the whirlpool effect students at Stanford have felt around tech and lucre — if your roommate can drop out and start a

attempts to quantitatively prove Freud's theories about the "flow of psychic energy." I don't think I really sold Grams on why he should care — but to me, the development of A.I. was human genius at its finest, and I could not wait to open the arXiv links people would text me containing the latest and greatest research. The output of a model didn't matter anywhere near as much as how it was designed.

Now, the opposite is true. A.I. is an application that people actually rely on, and companies have become less and less transparent about its design. What counts is the immediate response you receive when you send a reading to ChatGPT to be summarized on your walk to class. Most students call OpenAI's model "Chat." Many refer to it familiarly, consulting with Chat repeatedly over the course of a day, letting it decide how to text a relationship and confidently repeating hallucinated



MAXIME MAJESTRE

for people to cheat was to seek out a student who'd gone through the class before and beg for solutions to the notoriously difficult problem sets. There was no alternative to putting in a large amount of work. Even if one did obtain the answers from another student (engaging, by the way, in a social act, if nothing else), the students I knew who did this still spent hours sculpting their stolen code so as not to be caught.

Few cheated in this most overt fashion back then. But a month later, any student could instead turn to a chatbot, plugging in a prompt alone in a dorm room and mindlessly regurgitating the result. "I remember the first time I used it feeling an immediate sense of guilt," a friend recently told me. "Now it's just normal."

Half of the laptops in any lecture seem to be open to ChatGPT or Claude. In the beginning, experimenting with models was a pastime for the nerds; showing off the early access you got to the next frontier large language model was a status symbol, and people would come pleading for your authorization keys to try it out for themselves. In just a few short years, however, A.I. has become a fact of life. "It's all we talk about," my ancient Greek art history professor remarked recently. In April 2025, the proctored exam policy finally went into place. Because of A.I., most of us now take our tests by writing in blue books, like students a century ago, scribbling out answers by hand under keen observation. Meanwhile, we wonder constantly what will happen next.

Many students view these large language models as a job threat. The machines have gotten so much better at coding that junior engineers can't really compete. A Stanford computer science degree means something very different today from what it did when we set foot on campus — no longer is there a functional guarantee of an entry-level position. So, for those willing to dream up a

nine-figure company, why shouldn't you profit, too? Why put all your energy into being a student when it seems like everyone around you is getting richer? One time during sophomore year, I was working on homework in my dorm common room with an acquaintance when she offhandedly remarked, "I bought a house in Las Vegas last week." She continued, "It's good for taxes." It's hard to put your carbo-din and get right back to your problem set when someone says something like that.

YET THE SAME STANFORD dropouts who seem to be making the most money right now are often working on the very technology that is worsening life for their former college classmates. Emerging research has begun to show that most people feel its obvious: Relying on A.I. for cognitive tasks can reduce one's own intellectual capacity and resilience. It's one thing to use in the workplace, but in the classroom, difficulty is often precisely the point. Sure, a robot can lift 600 pounds much more easily than I can — but that doesn't much help me if I'm trying to work out. The same goes for the thinking exercise of education. However, telling that to students is about as attractive a message as "eat your veggies" or "sleep eight hours." It feels like scolding.

Even in the heart of the Silicon Valley techno utopia, most people know that our tech is bad for us, or at least that it can be. A.I. is often a tremendous productivity boost, yet my friends increasingly refer to both short-form video and their A.I. chat logs in the language of addiction. It's becoming baked in, shaping our generational character. We are a digital generation, growing only more attached to the virtual world.

The technology behind A.I. is wickedly clever, and back when large language models were still a research experiment — before they propped up the U.S. economy — my friends and I bubbled with excitement. I remember trying to explain to my grandfather, who has since died, that "backpropagation," a technique vital to A.I., grew out of

assertions while in line at the coffee shop. For years, online livestreamers have used the word "Chat" to interact with their audiences, asking commenters to tell them what choices to make in video games. That students now use the same name for A.I. feels appropriate. What really is the distinction between a nameless, faceless human you'll never meet except over the internet and a statistical approximation of the same thing?

The internet has already allowed us to feel more connected than ever while becoming lonelier than ever. A.I. lets us cut out the human part of human interaction entirely.

When I was sitting in a recent class on love in French fiction — exactly the kind of course that a senior takes before it all comes to an end — I listened to the first student presentation, entitled "Applying the Gale-Shapley Algorithm to 'The Princess of Cleves.'" The enterprising presenters sought to resolve the conundrums of the 1678 romantic novel through a computer science matching algorithm. Love was something to "be optimized." Next to me, one student scribbled on a branded notepad from Hudson River Trading, a quantitative trading firm where fresh graduates can earn upward of \$600,000 a year. Another had a sticker on her laptop: "Practice safe C.S." The class could not have felt more Stanford.

Living on campus for the past four years has been an eye-opening journey. Higher education was not equipped for the A.I. revolution. Someday in the future the fully autonomous Clawdroids or Molibots (or whatever people call them) will take to themselves about this silly interregnum when universities seemed paralyzed, trying to bridge the gap between the liberal education of yore and the future in which humans have no monopoly on intelligence.

For us, this was college.

THEO BAKER is a college senior and the author of "How to Rule the World: An Education in Power at Stanford University."

# Trump's theory of power is all wrong

POLGREEN, FROM PAGE 1

rebuttal. But the Trump administration has done more than misjudge American force and the wherewithal of its adversary. It has fundamentally misunderstood what power is, conflating it with the capacity to inflict violence when the two are, in truth, opposed.

Miller's chest-thumping recalls one of the most ancient and influential texts about war, Thucydides' "History of the Peloponnesian War." Across eight detailed books, it tells the story of an epic fight between two rival hegemonies in the Mediterranean, Athens and Sparta. "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," the powerful Athenians tell the citizens of Melos, a neutral Greek island, ordering them to submit or be slaughtered.

This declaration is often cited as an unrealistic law of might equaling right. But there's an irony that often escapes those who cite the line, perhaps because they didn't read the whole text. If they had, they'd discover that the Melians were not powerless victims but clear-eyed prophets. "And what is this but to make greater the enemies that you have already, and to force others to become so who would otherwise have never thought of it?" the Melians asked their attackers.

Unmoved, the Athenians laid siege to the city, slaughtering all its men and enslaving its women and children. But the triumph at Melos was a false victory. Drunk on the violence they mistook for power, the Athenians blundered on to a far riskier gambit, an invasion of Sicily. The Athenians, initially divided on the war, were eventually persuaded by leaders who believed that the Sicilians were weak and corrupt. They were sitting ducks, unable to defend themselves against so fearsome a foe. It would be an easy victory bringing Athens greater glory.

But strength was not enough. The timbers of Athenian ships, enforcing a long blockade, rotted; supply lines dried up. The Athenians, increasingly short of money, had to impose new taxes to fund the war. Finally, in a fierce battle at Syracuse, they were routed. It wasn't the end of Athens' hegemony, but it was the beginning of the end. Eventually, Sparta took its place as the Mediterranean's pre-eminent power.

It is not hard to see the parallels to America's situation. Like the Athenians,

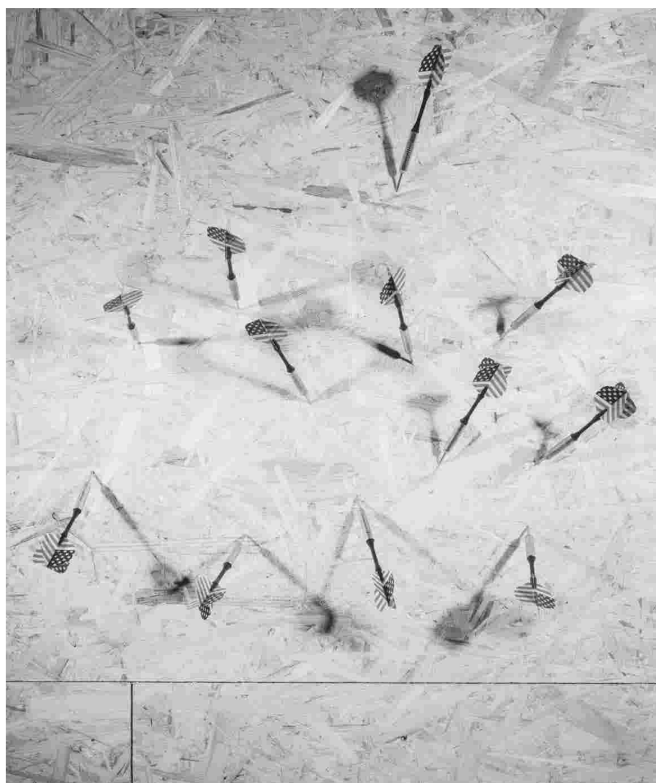
the Trumpians saw their romp in Venezuela as a sign of their irrefutable power. And like the Athenians, they overreached — attacking an enemy they underestimated with muddled motives, uncertain support and no clear plan for victory. Entranced by their own capacity for violence, they thought their power to effect their will was limitless.

Their strategic mistake rested on a misreading of power. In 1970, the philosopher Hannah Arendt published a slim book, "On Violence." In it, Arendt argues that violence is not a form of power but its opposite. Written amid America's falling war in Vietnam, the book was partly critiquing the calls for violence among left radicals who opposed the war. Yet reading the book in recent weeks, I was struck by how resonant it is for the American predicament in the Persian Gulf.

Power, Arendt argued, is collective, consensual and relational. Violence, by contrast, is instrumental and coercive, its strength evaporating the moment the threat is evaded or withdrawn. "Violence can always destroy power," Arendt wrote. "Out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power."

We see this dynamic playing out in the stalemate with Iran today. For all America's military prowess, its endless ability to inflict violence, including Trump's barely veiled threat to use a nuclear weapon, Iran has not capitulated. Its brutal theocratic regime may be widely reviled by its own people, but in the face of obliteration many Iranians have rallied around their government. Years of economic isolation wrought by sanctions have honed the country's survival skills.

Trump has been reduced to playing down Iranian attacks on American destroyers trying to blockade the Strait of Hormuz, calling them "a trifle." Evidence has emerged of widespread damage to American military bases across the Gulf, turning barracks and mess halls into heaps of rubble and ash. The war has already



MAN SHARODRA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

cost \$29 billion, according to the Pentagon, in what is surely a huge underestimate. And American intelligence officials have reportedly concluded Iran could endure the blockade for months.

Trump's supporters bring home, meanwhile, is in free fall. In poll after poll, large majorities of Americans say they oppose the war, do not understand its purpose and deeply dislike the havoc it

is wreaking on their pocketbooks. Seeing the political peril ahead, Trump has urgently sought an offramp, promising an imminent deal even as he issues empty threats of total annihilation and baseless claims of total victory. Few seem to believe him.

"All governments rest on opinion," as the Federalist Papers famously declared. Yet Trump has been unable to persuade Americans to accept a modicum of suffering to achieve his strategic aims. For all his defiant projection of unbound command, the war has revealed extraordinary weakness at the core of his presidency, the true pinnacledness of his power.

This weakness is hardly limited to the war. When Trump tried to use violence to prosecute his harsh deportation agenda in Minnesota, he was defeated by the relentless efforts of a coordinated, nonviolent civic opposition, which rallied public opinion against him. The vast operation in Minneapolis has been almost entirely abandoned, the presence of federal agents in the state dwindling from thousands to hundreds of agents, not much more than before the operation began.

Many of Trump's attempts to rule through the different force of executive orders have met a similar fate — be they imposing tariffs, slashing government spending or building opulent monuments to himself. In the court of public opinion and even, at crucial moments, at the Supreme Court, Trump keeps losing his fights. Perhaps it is no surprise that Miller has been awfully quiet of late. His entire theory of power, and perhaps Trump's presidency, is in peril.

Yet America, unlike Athens, faces no Sparta. Its only credible rival for global hegemony, China, has shown little interest in foreign adventurism. Instead, it has set about strengthening its power in an Arendtian fashion: through the accumulation of willing allies rather than coerced vassals, using trade deals, foreign investment and diplomacy. These are precisely the tools that the United States once used to great effect to build its power and wealth.

The Trump administration, however, has shown nothing but contempt for the patient work of building durable power based on consensus, preferring the blitzkrieg of violence. Last week's long-awaited summit in Beijing underscored the divergence. "Our two countries should be partners rather than rivals," China's president, Xi Jinping, pointedly said.

For the beleaguered Trump, the scale of defeat must have been unmistakable.

# We've become too savage

DIJAZ, FROM PAGE 10

In the series, Piggy is rocked in the head by one of the boy-savages, but he's allowed to limp off to indulge in a long didactic exhort, with no brain matter in sight.

No last words for Simon, alas. Maybequeers, on this updated island, die in silence.

In an attempt to make '50s intolerances palatable, Mr. Thorne has replaced them with occulted versions of our own intolerances and as a result, the sequence makes Simon's famous observation for him. There is no beast on the island; it's only us.

Watching this timid, bloated show a third time, I keep trying to imagine what an "average boy" would make of it. The kind of boy whom Mr. Thorne essayed so piercingly in "Adolescence."

Would he echo Jack — who in this iteration has become recognizably MAGA-coded, with mansphere ties — and denounce the whole four-hour affair boring? Would he see in the muddle a dim reflection of his own precarious life? Both are possibilities, but more likely than not this will be a flick viewed in meme form, something to run in the background as he scrolls on his phone and tries to survive a society far more demonic than the one that unraveled Piggy and his friends — a society that denies him education, housing, employment, medicine, even as it adimits his

mind and heart to isolation, misinformation, gambling and porn — and where all sorts of very reasonable people take to social media to advocate their gender's supremacy or another's outright destruction.

It ain't just savagery that ain't what it used to be; civilization also ain't what it used to be.

I wonder what might have been had the show, instead of stripping the characters of their historical granularity, honored Fredric Jameson's famous edict: Always historicize! If Mr. Thorne had filled in what the novel left unsaid with telling details about what life was like for a motley group of boys grappling with war, adolescence,

societies' relentless degradations in the declining days of Empire? Not an unfamiliar reality for many of us. You wish to add a mixed-race character and a queer protagonist into the mix — characters who plausibly could have been on the evacuation camp? Excellent! Just ground them in a faithful depiction of what life was like for such people in '50s Britain.

Focus on the hypocritical homosociality of the era, on the small, vibrant early-Windrush Black presence, but don't hurt characters like these into the present, stripped of the period lifeways that would make them meaningful.

Because ultimately when you deny the present the specific suffering, everyday banalities and subtle resilience of the past, you rob the past of its genius and its humanity, and you rob the present of the opportunity to meet itself in this strange genius and to be inspired by this immigrant humanity. Such a faithful adaptation could have become an opportunity for young people and the rest of us, as Jameson wrote, "think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" — to break us from the hammerlock of our present and its tyrants and put us into dialogue with our ancestors in all their flawed human dimension.

What Mr. Thorne's adaptation wishes us to forget, and what a novel like "Lord of the Flies" could remind us of, in the hands of an apt teacher or showrunner, is not only the sameness of our savage islands but an even more urgent lesson: We were different once, really different, and by wrestling with those differences we could be different again, really.

**JUNOT DIJAZ** is a professor of creative writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the author, most recently, of "Islandborn." He writes the StoryWorlds newsletter on Substack.

## FROM READERS

### Trump in China

Re "Trump butters up Xi, who stands his ground" (online, May 14):

President Trump's China visit exemplifies his approach to governing: meaningless pomp and circumstance, vague diplomatic pronouncements signifying nothing, unseemly meddling by billionaire chief executives, nepotism and the palpable diminishment of America's influence and prestige on the global stage.

Further, it is entirely fitting that before leaving for his overseas trip, Mr. Trump went out of his way to state that he doesn't care about the financial concerns of the American people when he is talking about Iran.

This is a president who views those whom he serves with utter disdain, a feeling that is reciprocated more with each passing day.  
MARK GODES, CHELSEA, MASS.

### How A.I. will shape our future

Re "Scientists fear A.I.'s capability to design biological weapons" (online, April 29):

I think we sensed that flooding the population with A.I. free of any guardrails was not much different from putting



KENNY HOLSTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

a loaded gun in the hands of a child. Bad outcomes were assured.

My primary concern had been how A.I. was harvesting the past work of writers, artists, journalists, filmmakers, etc., and erasing their futures.

Now I can worry about biological weapons being developed and deployed by readily available information

on a chatbot.

History has shown us time and again that when we are faced with an instrument capable of creating mass carnage, relying on mankind's good intentions is never enough.

A.I. can be a lethal weapon. We must control its existence.  
ROBERT WAGNER, NEW YORK

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Easy Baked French Toast BY THE NEW YORK TIMES Rating: ★★★★★

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YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB  
*I did not set out to torment those who envy me,  
yet whoever jostles with the ocean is bound to sink.*  
Al-Mutanabbi  
(Abbasid-era Arab poet)

# Opinion

## New realignments rise from ruins of the Iran war

The US-Israeli war on Iran may not yet be over but its ramifications for the region's security architecture are already being felt from Riyadh to Ankara and from Abu Dhabi to Cairo. Nearly every country in the Middle East has been adversely affected by the military and economic fallout — consequences that neither Washington nor its regional allies and partners had anticipated in their complexity or depth. Among the more sobering surprises were Iran's strikes against Gulf neighbors, targeting military, energy and civilian infrastructure with alarming brazenness. Tehran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz throttled the economies of the industrial world and triggered an unprecedented global energy crisis. Meanwhile, US and Israeli strikes fell short of their declared objectives: the Iranian regime, severely wounded, did not collapse and the new leadership emerged more hard-line than before, unmoved by American pressure. The war has torn open a geopolitical fault line, undermining decades of regional security alignments. Gulf Arab states,

which had long outsourced their security to Washington, operated under the assumption that the US presence alone would deter Iran from firing missiles or closing the strait. That assumption has been shattered. While dependence on America is unlikely to disappear overnight, the crisis has been a sobering wake-up call for Gulf leaders. At least three strategic shifts are now underway, individually and collectively. The first is consolidating the Gulf Cooperation Council's joint defense architecture to reflect new realities: a modern antirone system, a capable antimining naval force and a significantly upgraded air defense network. The second involves deepening regional alliances. Saudi Arabia, for example, has activated a defense cooperation pact with Pakistan, is strengthening military ties with Turkey and Egypt, and is reinforcing its leadership role in the Islamic world. The third is pursuing a comprehensive nonaggression agreement with Iran — one that individual states or the GCC as a bloc could negotiate once hostilities end and the nuclear threat is eliminated. None of these realignments contradict

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existing security arrangements with Washington. There is another dimension that regional capitals cannot ignore. This was openly a joint US-Israeli war, launched — as most analysts agree — largely at the behest of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who continues to shape the negotiations and their trajectory. Netanyahu has been explicit: the war is not over and he wants Donald Trump to resume strikes despite the political costs to the American president and his party. Trump, for his part, did little to consult his Arab allies, who were given no warning before the February attacks on Iran. Netanyahu's rhetoric about forging a new Middle East with Israel as its dominant power goes far beyond neutralizing Iran's military capabilities — and it resonates uneasily in Riyadh, Cairo and Ankara. This is not an outcome regional leaders are willing to accept. What may ultimately emerge from this war is a post-American, multialigned Middle East: more transactional, more self-reliant and considerably less predictable. At some point, regional states will have to negotiate with Iran and reach agreements

grounded in mutual respect for sovereignty, freedom of navigation in the Gulf and shared security arrangements. The US, increasingly focused on China, will remain a partner — but no longer a guarantor. Writing in Foreign Affairs this week, David E. Roberts argued that Gulf states must stop treating security as a commodity and begin building the regional capabilities and political arrangements that serve their own long-term interests. He proposed a comprehensive treaty between the Gulf states, the US and Iran, centered on a phased American military withdrawal from the Gulf — tied to verifiable Iranian concessions. A future American administration may well choose to relocate its military resources away from the Middle East. Even Trump has suggested that the US is neither dependent on Middle Eastern oil nor obligated to keep the Strait of Hormuz open. That statement alone underscores the urgency of building a new regional security framework — one grounded in sustainable realignments rather than the assumptions of a passing era. Saudi Arabia's evolving strategic posture in the wake of the Iran crisis is a promising start.

**The war has torn open a geopolitical fault line, undermining decades of regional security alignments**



COURTESY: AMARU HINDI/SHARAF AL-ARABI

**Increasingly, elections across Western democracies produce fragmented results and unstable governments**

## Have Western democracies become fatally ungovernable?

YOSSI MEKELBERG



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As British Prime Minister Keir Starmer battles for political survival following a damaging set of election results earlier this month, what increasingly appears to be a rearguard action to save his premiership raises a more profound question: have the UK and other Western democracies become so fragmented that they are no longer governable? Increasingly, elections across Western democracies produce fragmented results and unstable governments. Traditional center-left and center-right parties, once dominant, are in constant retreat, challenged by populist movements from both the right and the left. The only way to convincingly expose populists for what they are is to allow them to govern. Yet this is often a dangerous and costly experiment. It is often argued that legislatures without an overall majority are not necessarily harmful to democracy. Such systems can

encourage broader representation, while coalition-building narrows political differences within the executive branch, where decisions are ultimately made for the duration of a parliamentary term. There is considerable merit in this argument. Yet its effectiveness is diminishing, leading to politics characterized by electioneering even when there are to be no elections for a long while. Without dismissing the importance of adversarial, though constructive, debate among elected representatives, modern politics increasingly revolves around scoring cheap points. Many parliamentarians now rise through political systems with little significant real-world experience, yet considerable skill in advancing arguments, even when those arguments are poorly developed or weakly supported by evidence. Social media has intensified this trend. Images and punchlines often matter more than carefully reasoned arguments or data-driven, substantiated analysis. As a result,

a new type of politician can rise rapidly beyond the limits of their competence: highly effective at delivering persuasive messages to millions of people on TikTok or Instagram, yet lacking meaningful solutions to the increasingly complex problems governments face. The business of government is among the most demanding responsibilities anyone can undertake. Charisma and personality can help, but they are no substitute for substance, commitment to public service and responsibility. Nevertheless, politicians alone cannot bear all the blame. Although they are the individuals elected to guide societies through turbulent and uncertain times, the wider public must also accept a share of responsibility. A culture of short-termism, the mentality of "wanting it and wanting it all now," has become deeply embedded in modern societies. Governments are increasingly unrealistically expected to solve complex problems instantly and

without cost or sacrifice from citizens. At the same time, social media moguls, driven by vested interests while presenting themselves as defenders of free speech, often fail to curb hate speech or the spread of blatant falsehoods. Education systems must also adapt. Greater emphasis should be placed on critical thinking and digital literacy, not as replacements for human interaction in classrooms but as complements to it. The same holds true for sections of the written and broadcast media. We are all in the same boat and it is unstable. This instability exists even before the full disruptive potential of artificial intelligence has been unleashed. Western liberal democracies are at an inflection point. They can either confront and reverse these trends by restoring a political culture that is inclusive, evidence-based and grounded in liberal democratic values or risk the erosion of the system itself, while the majority of us ultimately pay the price.

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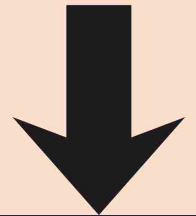
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## Opinion

## The Nakba never truly ended

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**F**or Palestinians, the Nakba was never merely a historical event confined to 1948. It was not a tragedy that began and ended with the displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians during the creation of Israel. Rather, the Nakba is a wound that is still open — one that continues to bleed across generations through occupation, displacement, violence and the denial of fundamental human rights.

Seventy-eight years later, Palestinians are still living the consequences of that catastrophe. The geography may have changed, political realities may have evolved and generations may have come and gone, but the core suffering remains painfully familiar. The same themes that defined the Nakba in 1948 — forced displacement, destruction of homes, fear, statelessness and loss of dignity — continue to shape Palestinian life today.

This is why many Palestinians describe the Nakba not as a closed chapter of history but as a continuing reality.

The scenes emerging daily from Gaza are impossible to separate from that historical

context. Entire neighborhoods reduced to rubble, families displaced multiple times, civilians trapped without food, medicine or safety, and thousands of innocent lives lost under bombardment have revived painful memories deeply rooted in Palestinian collective consciousness. For many Palestinians, the images from Gaza are not simply reminders of the Nakba; they are extensions of it. At the same time, conditions in the West Bank continue to deteriorate.

What makes the Palestinian tragedy particularly staggering is not only the scale of suffering but its persistence. Few modern conflicts have remained unresolved for so long while continuing to generate cycles of trauma across generations.

The occupation has ensured that the Palestinian wound never truly heals. Every demolished home, every displaced family, every child killed in conflict and every settlement expansion reinforces a painful message to Palestinians: that their suffering remains politically manageable in the eyes of much of the world.

The humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Gaza today has reached levels that many global organizations describe as

unprecedented in modern Palestinian history. Entire civilian infrastructure systems have collapsed. Hunger and displacement have become daily realities for hundreds of thousands of people. The suffering is no longer abstract or distant; it is visible in real time before the eyes of the world.

The Nakba is therefore not only about remembering the past. It is about understanding the continuity between past

and present. Palestinians are not simply commemorating historical displacement; they are warning that the structures of occupation and dispossession that began decades ago continue to shape their reality today.

Unresolved injustice does not disappear with time. It deepens resentment, fuels instability and perpetuates cycles of violence. The failure to address the Palestinian issue in a just and sustainable manner has prolonged one of the world's most enduring and emotionally charged conflicts.

Today, the Palestinian cause stands at a dangerous crossroads. Gaza lies devastated, the West Bank faces escalating tensions and hopes for a negotiated political solution

appear increasingly distant. At the same time, the human cost continues to mount with every passing day.

The occupation may control land through military force but it cannot erase memory, identity or Palestinians' connection to their homeland. The Nakba survives not because Palestinians refuse to move on but because the conditions that created it have never been fully resolved.

As the world reflects on the anniversary of the Nakba, the central question is no longer whether Palestinians suffered a historic catastrophe in 1948. The evidence of that suffering is undeniable. The real question is whether the international community is willing to confront the reality that the consequences of that catastrophe are still unfolding today.

The Palestinian wound continues to bleed because the underlying causes of injustice, displacement and occupation remain unaddressed. And until those root causes are confronted with honesty, accountability and political courage, the Nakba will remain not only a memory of the past but a painful reality of the present.

**For many Palestinians, the images from Gaza are not simply reminders of the Nakba; they are extensions of it**

**The Gulf provides the physical route through which Indian goods, data and clean energy will reach Europe**

## How the Gulf became indispensable to India's rise

ZAID M. BELBAGI



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**T**hroughout most of the modern era, the Gulf states' relationship with India was limited. The Gulf was seen largely only as a place to buy oil and send workers for remittances. More than two decades after the first India-Gulf Cooperation Council political dialogue in 2003, however, the Gulf is now stitched into the fabric of India's growth story. New Delhi's energy security, infrastructure financing, physical trade routes, current account, defense posture and strategic hedge against a slowing China all now run through Gulf capitals.

The energy relationship is the most visible example of this. India remains one of the world's largest crude importers and a December 2024 report by the Standing Committee on Petroleum and Natural Gas put the Gulf's share of Indian crude imports at more than 60 percent. That share has been volatile since the closure of the Strait of Hormuz following the US-Israeli air campaign against Iran beginning in February, with New Delhi accelerating its diversification toward other routes.

Beyond energy, the financial dependence answers a specific Indian need. Infrastructure-led growth requires patient

capital and Gulf sovereign wealth funds, with their long investment horizons, are tailored precisely to that profile. The UAE now ranks among India's top investors.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, announced at the 2023 G20 Summit in New Delhi, is designed to link Indian ports to Europe through Gulf rail networks, undersea cables and pipelines, with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel forming the connective tissue.

The corridor is being reframed in real time from an ambitious connectivity project into resilience infrastructure. For India, this matters in a way the financial and commercial channels cannot match. The Gulf provides the physical route through which Indian goods, data and clean energy will reach Europe.

As US-China tariff escalations turn overexposure to Beijing into an open risk, Gulf capitals are diversifying their Asian bets and India sits at the head of the queue. The International Monetary Fund's April forecasts put India's 2026 growth at 6.5 percent against China's 3.7 percent, with India retaining its status as the fastest-growing major economy. Standard Chartered has identified India as the Gulf's top market for sourcing, manufacturing and export.

In January, India and the UAE signed a letter of intent toward the conclusion of a bilateral strategic defense partnership covering defense-industrial co-production, defense innovation, advanced technology, special operations, cyberspace and counterterrorism. Indian hardware is gaining traction in the UAE's procurement plans. Desert Cyclone II, the second joint India-UAE military exercise, was conducted in Abu Dhabi last December.

The relationship has therefore crossed a threshold, now operating in the domain of security architecture. But the picture is not uniform across the Gulf. Saudi Arabia signed a mutual defense pact with Pakistan last September and Riyadh's strategic alignments differ from Abu Dhabi's in important ways. India's defense partnership is strongest with the UAE, while its economic and energy partnerships run deep with both. The Gulf is not a single bloc but its two largest economies are now woven into different layers of India's strategic posture.

Finally, India is the world's largest recipient of remittances, drawing in a record \$138 billion in 2024. The GCC accounted for 37.9 percent of that total, according to

the Reserve Bank of India, with the UAE alone contributing 19.2 percent. The GCC share has receded from a peak of above 46 percent a decade ago. The Gulf nonetheless remains the single largest regional source of remittances and those inflows quietly absorb pressure on India's current account deficit year after year.

The institutional plumbing is deepening alongside the headline numbers. This year's operationalization of the local

currency settlement system has lowered transaction costs for Indian workers in the Gulf. The diaspora is no longer only sending money home. Wealthier and middle-class nonresident Indians are increasingly channeling their savings into Indian equities and financial instruments rather than real estate, turning the Gulf into a consequential source of portfolio capital for Indian markets.

What these channels share is duration. None of them can be unwound on short notice and that separates an external partner from an indispensable one. India trades with many countries and courts capital from many more, yet it is difficult to identify another region whose presence is woven so tightly into the basics of how it grows.

**The Gulf is not a single bloc but its two largest economies are now woven into different layers of India's strategic posture**

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## EDITORIALS

### Chicago, meet Stonepeak Partners. Stonepeak Partners meet a Chicago that's ticked off about your big parking meter deal

Stonepeak Partners, which looks set to own all of Chicago's parking meter revenue until many of us will be in our graves, might not have crossed your radar before.

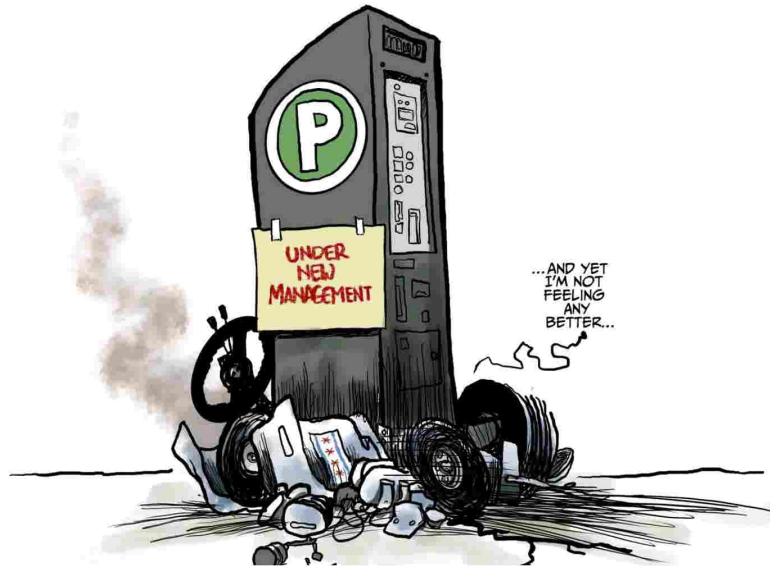
Private Equity generally doesn't like publicity. As a sector, it has mastered the art of not returning calls if at all possible. That probably explains why Stonepeak, which is headquartered in the hip New York neighborhood of Hudson Yards and has \$88 billion in assets under its management, did not return the call of a Tribune reporter this week who was exploring what might happen in City Council Wednesday when that august and we hope, deeply irritated body debates whether or not to approve the sale of what, to paraphrase the words of former Mayor Lori Lightfoot, was the most incompetent fiscal act of municipal (mis)governance in the history of municipal governments.

We've written about the Chicago parking meter debacle, which has been so calamitous for our city, on several prior occasions, including the issue before us now, which is whether or not City Council should approve the sale by the prior owners, Chicago Parking Meters LLC, who have already made bank. Oh, have they made bank!

We won't make you suffer through the agonizing details of this deal from hell again, although we could and are sorely tempted. We'll just note, for the umpteenth time, that the 2008 deal netted the city about \$1.15 billion in return for the future revenue from those 36,000 parking meters. Chicago Parking Meters LLC (a group led by Morgan Stanley, Allianz Capital Partners and the Sovereign Wealth Fund of Abu Dhabi) had already more than recouped its entire initial investment heading into year 18 of the 75-year lease. So with hundreds of millions of profit already in the bank and more than five decades still to go, the lucky group of investors who played the Daley administration raffle has decided to sell. And since both the original and the renegotiated deal give the city the right to approve that sale, we know in advance the name of the buyer: Stonepeak.

We don't hold out a lot of hope for what might happen in City Council, which will have the matter introduced on Wednesday and then will have to decide how to proceed. As we read the clause at issue, the council (not the mayor, interestingly, who doesn't have approval authority for a sale like this under the deal) could just say, no, Chicago Parking Meters LLC already took us to the cleaners and we're not going to

STONE  
PEAK  
PARTNERS



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

let them monetize what's left on this contract. (Because, after all, the men making the decisions for the current meter owners all will be dead, too, once this deal runs its course and presumably would rather count their money now.)

We'd understand why the council would make that choice on an emotional or moral level. Lawsuits would surely ensue, and that same lousy original deal still would be in place. Still, we'd be cheering such a move.

More realistic, though, would be to try and impose some kind of conditions on the sale and that would mean City Council holding onto its leverage and rapidly getting on the same internal page in terms of the asks.

We have a whole menu, including eliminating the egregious convenience fee that comes with every transaction and time addition, sold initially as a way to pay for the parking app, which is now ubiquitous in the industry. Or no longer charging city taxpayers those egregious and unreal-

istic "true up" fees when the city holds street festivals and permits outdoor dining places (the current owners sued, just cause they wanted yet more money from us). Or giving us Sundays as a day off. Or helping the Loop by reducing those usurious evening parking rates that confound theater and concert goers and undermine our arts audiences. We think whatever benefit is negotiated should benefit all Chicagoans who have been paying these parking fees, not one particular group or some unrelated entity.

So, today, we are addressing Stonepeak Partners, which has a lovely website wherein it says: "We invest in the infrastructure that underpins our daily lives." That, of course, does not describe this deal, which actually does the opposite to our minds.

That website says further: "Our track record is founded on investing in essential infrastructure that delivers enduring social utility," but, in fact, this deal does precisely the opposite.

It has zero social utility to our minds.

That website says yet further: "We seek out opportunities to create value for our investors while also seeking to actively drive positive long-term outcomes for our environment and communities."

A positive long-term outcome from that parking deal? For investors, no doubt. For Chicago? You've got to be kidding us.

Let's be clear. We don't blame Stonepeak Partners, which is led by billionaire Michael Dorrell, former senior managing director in private equity and co-head of the infrastructure investment group at private-equity giant Blackstone, for this deal. Stonepeak did not create this monstrosity. And, in fairness, it now assumes some risks, principally that of the city defaulting on its obligations and thus this deal becoming null and void and also that autonomous vehicles will significantly reduce future demand for street parking. And, frankly, if we needed another reason to be supportive of Waymo and its ilk in

this city, here is that reason.

But Stonepeak has chosen to associate itself with a deal made by the demonstrably incompetent on behalf of the people and loathed by pretty much every Chicagoan — every politician, every business leader, every person at the end of a Chicago tavern, we meet. Unlike many other transactions it does, Stonepeak won't enjoy quiet anonymity with this one as it rakes in our hard-earned cash for decades.

We'd like to see Stonepeak be proactive here. Show up and talk to the council. Come up with some concessions to show us you will be a better citizen than Chicago Parking Meters, LLC. Give us a break as you vacuum our parking fees and show us you also will invest in this city's economic growth.

Simply put, prove to us that you are willing to live up to that lofty rhetoric on your own website.

Otherwise, given the perilous financial state of this city, that five decades of cha-ching may not last as long as you are hoping.

### An appreciation of the voices in our pages who imagined a better Chicago in 2050

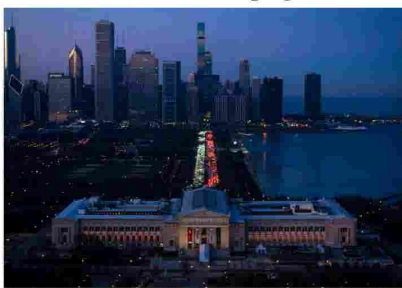
What will Chicago look like in 2050? Will it be a thriving metropolis? A hollowed-out shell? Something in between?

How you answer those questions largely depends on whether you view Chicago as a city in decline or a landscape full of potential.

We heard from a wide variety of hopeful, forward-looking voices — from poets to scientists to transit experts — in our recent Chicago 2050 series, which brought together notables from around the city to explore what Chicago could and should look like 25 years from now in a package of thought-provoking essays.

What tied these pieces together was not ideology but a refusal to surrender to cynicism.

In a city often consumed by political fights, budget crises and population anxieties, the Chicago 2050 project asked a rarer and more valuable question: What kind of city are we actually trying to build?



The Chicago skyline is in the background, with the Field Museum in the foreground, as vehicles navigate DuSable Lake Shore Drive during rush hour on Feb. 13, 2024. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The project saw the welcome return of longtime Tribune columnist Mary Schmitt, who reflected on her many reasons for staying in Chicago, which she dubbed

a "complete city" — one that contains some of everything. Art, weather, people, languages and neighborhoods that offer enough variety to keep a person here

happily for decades.

Daniel Holz studies black holes. No, the payoff here is not an allegory about Chicago and its finances. Holz, a professor of physics at the University of Chicago who oversees the Doomsday Clock, understands the fragility of humanity and the intolerably high risks civilization faces from the threat of nuclear war. But, he wrote, our city's geographic location insulates it from the influences of Silicon Valley, Washington, D.C., and Hollywood in a way that may better position Chicago to navigate an uncertain future.

Tracy Baim reflected on Chicago's civic identity and its role in the Great Migration, which brought 6 million African Americans from the nation's rural South to Chicago and other Northern and Western cities. She imagines a new "Great Migration" to the city to build on that legacy, and argues that in the future, cities will increasingly compete not just on jobs or taxes,

but on culture, rights and quality of life, and that Chicago should lean aggressively into being an open, pluralistic city.

Our readers also shared their thoughts. Many yearn for 2050 to bring us a metropolis that better connects Chicagoans to their city, making it safer for kids to bike and play, and giving everyone better access to Lake Michigan, our greatest natural resource.

Poet Leslie Honoré's vision of Chicago as an Emerald City ties up the series in a beautiful green ribbon.

This project, in partnership with World Business Chicago, started an important conversation. Chicago always has been a city built by people confident enough to imagine something bigger than what already existed. The next 25 years will test whether we can maintain that identity.

You can read all of the Chicago 2050 essays at [chicagotribune.com/chicago2050](http://chicagotribune.com/chicago2050).

#### ON THIS DAY 41 YEARS AGO BETRAYAL IN THE LOOP PRISON

When federal officials built their skyscraper prison in the South Loop, they said civic groups were silly to worry about its impact on nearby residential and commercial development. They promised it would house only suspects awaiting trial and the least offensive of convicts, those sentenced to a year or less.

That promise was scrapped soon after the Metropolitan Correctional Center opened 10 years ago. Pleading overcrowding in its penitentiaries, the Justice Department began using it for criminals with long sentences for violent crimes. Yet it's still considered a minimum-security insti-

tution, with rules so lax that inmates can leave their cells at night and roam around the place looking for things to help them escape.

That's what happened last week when two convicted killers used a barbell to punch a hole in the cinder-block wall and slipped to freedom down a 75-foot cord.

Be careful, federal officials warned area residents. These two killers are extremely dangerous.

But it was the officials' responsibility to be careful, and they failed miserably. They brought two of the most clever, brutal murderers in their prison system to this casual insti-

tution because the two had promised information about planned escapes. And then they set the stage for an escape, treating the killers as if they were mild-mannered bank tellers who had embezzled a bit of cash.

After a decade of deceit, federal law enforcement officials had better come clean about what they're doing in their South Loop correctional center. If they're going to continue to break their promise and put violent criminals there, it can no longer be just a minimum-security institution. It must have some maximum-security protection.

Tribune editorial board, May 20, 1985

# Congressional gerrymandering is a circular firing squad

By Jim Nowlan  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Frenzied congressional gerrymandering across the states has become a circular firing squad. Both parties mow down the other's representation, with Lady Democracy and the public caught in the crossfire.

Readers of editorial pages by now know the arguments. To recap, extreme gerrymandering:

- Makes the primary of the dominant party the election, depriving about 7 of 8 registered voters a role in the election process, as they don't vote in that primary.

- Reduces competition and voter turnout, increasing cynicism toward Congress, which is already at a low ebb.

- Treats voters as pawns in the game, moved around by computer remapping to ensure reelection for incumbents and political control by the party in the majority.

- Drives polarization. Primary nomination winners can ignore voters outside their very narrow support base, in both elections and governing.

- Diverts quality candidates, who refuse to play the game and join voters on the sidelines.

Prior to 1962, many states had not redrawn their congressional and state legislative districts in generations. As a result, for example, one state senator in California represented 5,000 people, whereas another, in Los Angeles County, represented 5 million. In Baker v. Carr (1962) and subsequent decisions, the U.S. Supreme Court dictated that all districts have equal populations, drawing upon the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution.

My back-of-the-envelope reckoning shows that at present, with more partisan changes likely, Republicans across the South from Texas to South Carolina and Florida are projected to capture 83 congressional seats to 22 for Democrats. To counter, Democrats in the major blue states of California, Illinois and New York are set to win 84 seats versus 11 for Republicans. Regional polarization, you say?

In my state of Illinois, the majority Democrats are publicly talking about creating a congressional map that could result in 17 Democrat and no GOPers! This, in a state in which statewide elections in recent years have tended to be about 54% to 46% Democrat over Republican. And they would call this representation?

Further, state legislative lead-



A demonstrator holds up a sign outside the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery, Alabama, on May 7. KIM CHANDLER/AP

*For readers who skipped history in college, be admonished that democracy is a rather fragile construct. Just ask descendants of our Grand Army of the Republic, or our friends in otherwise civilized Germany, Italy, France and central Europe. Furthering short-term, hyperpartisan goals over representativeness risks destabilizing our system of government.*

ers in Illinois have floated a state constitutional amendment on redistricting that, in a literal reading, would not require that districts be contiguous (within unbroken boundary lines). Think of unconnected nodes of voters in the same district. Don't put anything beyond mapmakers in the present, perfervid environment.

For readers who skipped history in college, be admonished that democracy is a rather fragile construct. Just ask descendants of our Grand Army of the Republic,

or our friends in otherwise civilized Germany, Italy, France and central Europe.

Furthering short-term, hyperpartisan goals over representativeness risks destabilizing our system of government.

The U.S. Supreme Court has stated firmly it won't intervene in partisan redistricting. So, members of Congress must stand back from the mayhem and provide the states (which do the redistricting) with reasonable guidelines that would result in fair, not perfect, districts. Article I,

Section 4 of the U.S. Constitution provides Congress the authority to do this.

My insider friends say Congress will never act. Never is a long time. In the 19th century, they said women would never get the vote.

Indeed, nothing will happen in the present environment. However, the path to the 2030 Census and 2031 redistricting will be paved with change. Donald Trump has been the agitator for extreme gerrymandering and will be gone after 2028. The 2030 Census will also focus public attention on the 2031 redistricting process. Further, voters don't like being played for fools.

A poll taken in 2025 by Fair Maps Illinois found that 76% of voters in the state were repelled by gerrymandering, 73% of Democrats and 82% of Republicans. Advocates for fair mapping will continue telling voters that elected officials who pull us apart, rather than draw us together, are not to

be trusted.

Members of Congress interested in public service over personal and strictly partisan goals should create an informal study group now to look at fair-mapping guidelines to be used by the states.

In addition to equal population per district, these provisos might include compactness, the following of governmental boundaries wherever possible and a prohibition on the use of partisan voting history in drawing districts.

The circular firing squad must stand down. Congress has to put its own house in order.

*Jim Nowlan is a former Illinois state legislator, statewide candidate, senior aide to three unindicted Illinois governors, campaign manager for U.S. Senate and presidential candidates, chair of the Illinois Executive Ethics Commission and professor of politics at the University of Illinois.*

## Price controls on medicines are stymieing innovation. Trump's plan will make it worse

By Tomas J. Philipson  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Lawmakers in both parties are increasingly embracing the idea of price controls on medicines — and in doing so, they're making a losing bet.

Price controls involve a fundamental tradeoff: lower prices today in exchange for less innovation tomorrow. Consider the "most favored nation," or MFN, drug pricing proposal currently before Congress. It would cap U.S. drug prices at the lower rates paid in other countries — dramatically undermining the incentives that drive high-risk research and development (R&D).

Proponents of MFN are implicitly wagering that savings on existing medicines will outweigh the lost benefits of treatments never developed. But in fact, the opposite is true. That's because modern innovation is increasingly aimed at treating disease earlier and preventing progression altogether — driving compounding human and economic benefits over time.

As drug innovation advances toward earlier intervention and better long-term outcomes, the societal costs of undermining it through price controls will only grow.

Developing a new medicine is expensive and extremely risky. On average, it takes over a decade and costs more than \$2 billion. For every new drug that launches, nine candidates fail before completing the gauntlet of clinical trials necessary to win Food and Drug Administration approval. And much of the value of medicines comes from "follow-on" improvements developed after their initial launch, which require further spending and clinical study.

Companies and investors cannot take on those risks without confidence that if a drug succeeds, they will be able to earn the return



Pharmaceutical pills are seen in North Andover, Massachusetts, on June 15, 2018. ELISE AMENDOLA/AP

on investment that enables them to continue to pursue new innovations. The United States has long been the world's drug development powerhouse — accounting for at least half of global pharma investment — because of its commitment to market-based pricing and strong patent rights, which provide investors the assurance they need.

By curtailing drugmakers' expected returns, price controls would undermine these core incentives, discouraging companies from investing in valuable, high-risk research. And as drug research increasingly focuses on treating earlier stages of disease, the potential costs of undermining that innovation are only growing.

That's because addressing disease at earlier stages can help

forestall potential productivity losses and costly health complications, creating substantial long-term benefits.

Research I conducted with colleagues at the University of Chicago found that from 2000 to 2024, nearly 60% of improvements made to existing cancer medicines focused on treating the disease earlier in its course.

Consider Keytruda, an immunotherapy that began as a treatment for advanced melanoma. Over time, follow-on R&D added over 40 indications across numerous cancers — including early-stage applications that allow treatment to begin before cancer worsens.

Imfinzi followed a similar trajectory: Originally approved to treat advanced bladder cancer,

the immunotherapy now helps patients with certain types of early-stage lung and stomach cancers.

Or take the multiple myeloma immunotherapy Darzalex Faspro. In November, it became the first drug approved to treat smoldering multiple myeloma, the precursor condition that can eventually develop into the active blood cancer. Clinical trials showed the therapy cut the risk of progression to multiple myeloma or death in half.

These early interventions offer a valuable way to lessen strain on the healthcare system.

By the same token, addressing disease before it debilitates patients may also bolster economic productivity. Research has estimated that drug innova-

tion increases productivity by 4.8 million workdays per year and \$221 billion in annual wages.

Price controls would cut off these downstream benefits at their source. Blockbuster medicines are the exceedingly rare successes companies rely on to finance the rest of the R&D pipeline. Capping companies' returns on these breakthroughs would undermine the continued research needed to improve them, develop new drugs and generate benefits that ripple across society.

We've seen in recent years how price controls gut incentives for drug development. The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, which enabled Medicare to set prices on certain medicines, has forced companies to halt more than 55 drug R&D programs since it became law.

The repercussions of MFN would be even greater. My colleagues and I estimate that applying MFN pricing in Medicare and Medicaid could cut drug R&D spending roughly in half, preventing roughly 500 drugs and follow-on improvements from being developed over the next decade.

Policymakers impose drug price controls in pursuit of short-term savings, they risk sacrificing even greater long-term benefits. Medical innovation increasingly creates value not merely by treating disease, but also by treating it before it becomes more severe, disabling and costly to manage.

Medical breakthroughs are not the pinnacle of progress. They are proof that the most valuable innovations still lie ahead — if we preserve the incentives to develop them.

*Tomas J. Philipson is an economist at the University of Chicago and served as a member and acting chairman of the White House's Council of Economic Advisers from 2017 to 2020.*

## OPINION

# The GOP doesn't need to stick with Trump's ballroom plans. Perhaps a wrestling ring?



Laura Washington

President Donald Trump wants to dance the night away, courtesy of you and me.

It is hard to believe that Republican lawmakers are sticking their necks out for a White House proposal to spend \$1 billion of taxpayer money to "secure" a White House ballroom.

A ballroom? Imagine if Joe Biden had requested a cool billion for a party spot to stretch his legs, dress up and hobnob?

The \$1 billion pitch is included in a budget reconciliation package currently under congressional consideration. Many of Trump's Republican allies support the glittering ballroom bauble, arguing the hefty price tag is needed to pay for high-level security measures in the wake of multiple assassination attempts against the president.

Trump's presidential poll numbers are plummeting, the midterm elections are approaching and his party has the nerve to promote a ballroom.

The plan hit a major speed bump Saturday when the U.S. Senate parliamentarian ruled that the proposal would violate the Senate's "Byrd Rule," meaning it could not be approved by a simple Senate majority.

GOP leaders, however, are vowing to revise the pitch so that it will pass muster.

Republicans have taken leave of their senses. If this boondoggle passes, I cannot wait to watch them grapple with the consequences on the campaign trail. American voters are already drowning in skyrocketing gas prices and inflation. They are disconsolate over how elected officials are spending their taxpayer dollars.

Anyone with any gray on their noggin will remember the famed "Golden Fleece" award. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. Sen. William Proxmire of Wisconsin bestowed the honor on the "biggest, most ridiculous or most ironic" instances of wasteful



President Donald Trump speaks to reporters during a tour of his ballroom project construction site at the White House campus in Washington on Tuesday. DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

government spending. If that award were still around, we would need a new category. How about "reckless spending above and beyond the call of duty?"

Well, it's a ballroom, so maybe Trump and his congressional minions want to break out their colorful tights and fancy brooches and pivot around a gaudy and gilded dance floor.

Such frolic won't be held in high esteem by Trump's down-to-earth, blue-collar MAGA voters. They will not take kindly to Strauss waltzes. "The Blue Danube" is unlikely to be a big hit with that crowd. Republican lawmakers might want to reconsider the ballroom request.

However, if they remain desperate to please "The Man," I am happy to offer alternatives that might be more amenable to the Trump trade.

For starters, how about a wrestling ring? Think of the possibilities. Trump's voters all roar with delight when he shows up at WWE bouts. The president could conduct diplomacy from the ring.

Why not hold wrestling matches with world leaders? The White House could host a rumble between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, president of Russia. Trump could referee. They are all such good buddies, after all. War or peace in Ukraine could be the prize in a matchup between Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Or Trump could wrestle an Iranian mullah for a shot at opening of the Strait of Hormuz. In war, why is it that soldiers and civilians must die while their leaders are situated comfortably on the battle lines? Let's put them in the ring. It could change the way we wage warfare.

If a wrestling ring is too radical for Congress, how about installing an Olympic-size swimming pool on the White House premises?

That would be a convenient spot for the president to take a dip or two and give the world a chance to see Trump in a Speedo. Can't miss that, right?

Trump could channel an Esther Williams vibe. It could allow America and the world diplomatic elite to participate in a different kind of ballroom dancing. Call it synchronized swimming.

That might be extremely popular with older voters and even help him pull the wool over their eyes as he cuts their Social Security.

One more verdant option: a conservatory or a botanical garden. That would certainly improve his appeal to the Green Party crowd. It could be an iconic place to educate Americans on the appeal of greenery. It could also provide Trump with the opportunity to "have vine leaves in his hair."

This Dionysian suggestion for Trump would spell sweet bliss for the MAGA contingent, which idolizes the cult of masculinity. The president might go for this image of himself.

Besides, a mega "garden" could offer Trump a new sideline. It would be the ideal spot to produce a hefty supply of cannabis. That produce could pay for the whole project and spare the taxpayers. Think of it: Trump's own brand of marijuana. Yet another grasping opportunity for him to make corner of the megabucks he craves. Call it "A Toke With Trump."

Trump could be the new Marlboro Man. Let it roll.

Laura Washington is a political commentator and longtime Chicago journalist. Her columns appear in the Tribune each Wednesday. Write to her at [LauraLauraWashington@gmail.com](mailto:LauraLauraWashington@gmail.com).

## Voice of the people

### Incentivize riding CTA buses

I moved to Chicago to live car-free. I am grateful I was able to fulfill my objective. However, in the 12 years I've lived here, I've been disappointed by the lack of dedicated bus lanes and signal priority for buses. We have an opportunity with high gas prices and drivers being more open to transit because of said high gas prices to really provide a great alternative to driving.

This past weekend, it took my bus an hour to go from Irving Park Road and Cicero Avenue to the Sheridan Red Line stop. Service like that will not convince drivers to give up the car. Dedicated bus lanes don't cost much to create, but our elected officials are more afraid of the political cost than doing the right thing. Oil has always been a precious commodity, and it's even more precious in the age of climate change and high energy costs. Why not make the most of it by running efficient bus service via dedicated lanes and signal priority? Let's actually meet the moment instead of continuing to sleep at the wheel.

Chicago has so much untapped potential when it comes to sustainable transportation. Currently, we punish bus riders by forcing them to sit in mixed traffic. The city of Los Angeles has more miles of dedicated bus lanes than Chicago. The city dragged its feet in setting up cameras for a downtown bus lane pilot, and even now the pilot is poorly run. Considering our mayor loves a good photo-op, if the bus lane camera-enforcement pilot was truly resulting in shorter bus commute times, he would be singing its praises.

Sadly, Mayor Brandon Johnson has proved he doesn't care about transit, but there's no time like the present to course-correct to meet the moment and allow our buses to truly shine.

— Courtney Cobbs, co-founder, Better Streets Chicago

### Traffic snarls near Goose Island

Like a lot of people on the North Side, I've spent the last few months sitting in traffic on Division Avenue, trying to get down Elston Avenue or watching cars do dangerous things just to get around the congestion near Goose



A man gets on the 77 CTA bus near the intersection of Clark Street and Belmont Avenue in the Lakeview neighborhood on Aug. 5, 2025.

EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Island.

The lack of coordination among Mayor Brandon Johnson and his allies, including Ald. Daniel La Spata, has turned what should have been manageable infrastructure work into a daily headache and safety hazard for residents, commuters, cyclists and local businesses.

The closures of the Chicago Avenue bridge, the Halsted viaduct and nearby bridges were all happening at the same time in the same area. None of this was a surprise. The Bally's casino project was approved years ago, and traffic studies were done then. City Hall had plenty of time to think through how all of these projects would impact the same streets and neighborhoods. Instead, it feels like everyone approved their own piece of the puzzle without anyone looking at the bigger picture.

The result has been chaos. Traffic backs up for blocks every day. Drivers are illegally using protected bike lanes to get around congestion, creating dangerous situations for cyclists and pedestrians.

Now, many residents and business owners along Grand Avenue feel like the same thing is happening again: major decisions being pushed forward without enough honest engagement from the people most affected by them. Wanting better planning and coordination does not make some-

one anti-bike or anti-safety. Most people just want streets that work better and are safer for everyone. Nobody expects construction to be painless, but people do expect basic competence and common sense from city leadership.

Right now, too many residents feel like no one at City Hall is listening until after the decisions are already made.

We deserve better than that. — Bill Thanoukos, Chicago

### Riding Metra beats driving

The editorial "Naperville is wonderful. Unless you have to drive to Chicago every day" (May 13) raises understandable frustrations about the grind of commuting, but it overlooks one of the most practical, proven tools we have to reduce stress and congestion: Metra.

First, Metra offers something that driving rarely does — predictable. Metra has stops on the BNSF Line at Aurora, Illinois Route 59, Naperville and Lisle, with more than 32 inbound and outbound trains a day — including nine from Naperville during the morning rush. The line has an average on-time performance rate of 96.2% since 2021. The UP West Line, with nearby stops in West Chicago, Winfield and Wheaton, may also be an option.

While we have occasional delays due to weather and infrastructure, Metra provides a reliable, on-time alternative

to driving. Even when traffic is moving, a crash, construction or weather can turn a routine drive into an exhausting delay. Trains allow commuters to plan their day with greater confidence and to reclaim time that would otherwise be spent behind the wheel. Second, taking Metra improves quality of life. Time on the train can be used to read, answer emails, prepare for meetings or simply decompress. For many, that's the difference between arriving ready for the day and arriving already burned out.

Third, increased Metra ridership benefits the region. Every commuter who chooses rail over driving helps reduce roadway congestion, lowers wear and tear on infrastructure and their own vehicle, and supports a transportation network that is more resilient when highways are less crowded. It also expands access to jobs and cultural opportunities without requiring every trip to be a car trip.

If the editorial's concern is that commuting has become too costly, too stressful or too time-consuming, the answer is not to resign ourselves to more traffic — it is to make better use of the transit options that already connect our communities.

Metra, along with partners Pace and the CTA, is not a niche alternative; together, we are core regional assets that deserve to be part of the solution.

— Joseph H. McMahon, chairman, Metra Board of Directors

### Our energy bill has doubled

Regarding the editorial "Commonwealth Edison bills are set to soar next month. Why won't the state help?" (May 18): My husband and I have been retired for 15 years. We have not changed how we use our electricity over these years. We have had a pool for 50 years and are used to restricting use of the pump as much as possible. We got a new energy-efficient air conditioner a few years ago. Our yearly bill has always been divided evenly over

12 months.

Our bill went up not the 12% mentioned in the editorial but 28%. I've pulled the plugs on all unused lights, small appliances, etc. What's in the editorial is not promising going forward; this is so disheartening.

I have always supported our governor, but that has certainly been changing. Illinois lawmakers need to step up to the plate to stop this insanity.

— Rosemarie Szewczyk, Mokena, Illinois

### Who is DraftKings kidding?

Regarding "DraftKings to end retail sportsbook at Wrigley" (May 18): I'm not sure who DraftKings thinks it's kidding when it blames Illinois wagering taxes for the closing of its Wrigley Field sportsbook. That would be like Borders blaming taxes for going out of business instead of Amazon. Sure, we'd all like to pay less in tax money, but c'mon.

The idea that the real reason isn't dwindling demand for an in-person service that people can get on their phones from the comfort of their own home (or at their seats in the ballpark itself while watching the game) is asking me to close my eyes and put my fingers in my ears.

Blaming the taxes would feel more real and less rhetorical if the location was otherwise thriving, but making less than \$900,000 in a market that generated \$1.48 billion in state revenue doesn't scream "taxes too high" to me — it screams "we miscalculated what the market was for this service, so we'll try to score a political point on the way out that may help our online business down the road."

— James Ross, West Chicago

### Note to readers

We'd like to hear from CTA riders about what frustrates you about the CTA as well as what you're grateful for. (Sincere thoughts only.) Send a letter of no more than 400 words to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com). Be sure to include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to [www.chicagotribune.com/letters](http://www.chicagotribune.com/letters). Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com). Include your full name, address and phone number.