



Saving faces

Use of facial recognition equipment at protest sites is worrisome

India appears to be normalising the technical ability to subject political gatherings to searchable biometric surveillance without first having settled, through legislation and judicial oversight, the circumstances in which the state may lawfully do so. While the Delhi Police have continued to deny the use of excessive force and manhandling people involved in the Cockroach Janta Party protests, contrary to protestors’ testimonies, facial recognition equipment was present at the protest site while the demonstrations were on. According to its affidavit to the Supreme Court of India, the police deployed a facial recognition system (including Artificial Intelligence-enabled cameras to scan faces in real-time against a database), a mobile surveillance van and a command and control vehicle, smart spectacles for identifying individuals on the move, and drones and videographers; the van and the spectacles have been tied to private contractors. The police have also not addressed whether actual biometric processing occurred with every individual within the range of cameras. Even if the police discarded the images associated with infructuous checks, that the data may have been accessible to private contractors, whose terms of engagement are unclear, is worrisome. However, no statute governs the use of facial recognition systems; the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, whose data-processing obligations are not yet in force, still makes broad exemptions for state agencies. The Automated Facial Recognition System of the National Crime Records Bureau can be used to identify criminals, unidentified bodies, and so on, and the Criminal Procedure (Identification) Act 2022 expanded the set of records that the police may collect from specified persons. However, these actions are still only allowed *vis-à-vis* specific groups of people.

Irrespective of the constitutional validity of the police’s actions, the chilling effect on potential participants may also curtail the right to protest. The state has to pass a well-established proportionality test when interfering with the right to privacy. While the first question – the existence of a legitimate objective – already poses important challenges to facial recognition en masse, the technology is indiscriminate at the point of capture. After all, there is a less restrictive but equally effective alternative (e.g., conventional policing). At this time, far too many questions are unanswered – including over the data-processing agreements, access, legal provisions that authorised major decisions, and the expected rate of false positives – for the use of facial recognition with all protesters to be justified.

Noise annoys

India must enforce noise pollution regulations uniformly and consistently

In a February 2025 hearing in the matter of *Surendra Prasad vs State of Bihar*, the Patna High Court acknowledged DJ trolleys and loudspeakers to be a major source of noise in Patna. After criticising the Bihar State Pollution Control Board (BSPCB) for failing to curb the menace, Justice Rajiv Roy directed the BSPCB to obtain reports from the police about permissions granted to operators of these noise sources and the action taken. In October, the police said they had seized equipment, levied fines, and so on over three months in Patna, Barh, and Fatuha but had taken no action in Masaurhi, a picture Justice Roy called “unbelievable” for suggesting that there were no noise violations there. In the course of these hearings, Justice Roy also summoned police officers and upbraided boilerplate affidavits, among others. The High Court’s August 14 order was a continuation of this escalation, culminating – for now – in Statewide directives on the emission of high-decibel noise. Effectively, the High Court’s actions illustrate how dismal enforcement has become despite the existence of comprehensive laws. Courts have repeatedly said that people have a right under Article 21 to be protected from unlawful noise. Today, with episodic enforcement having become endemic, the Patna High Court becoming a quasi-regulator is, at least as a stopgap measure, creditable.

It is absurd to expect the public to complain about every DJ or horn before the police can respond. The High Court’s directions to the authorities to pursue routine rather than complaints-based enforcement and to have DJs, sound-system operators, and event halls register themselves with the subdivisional authorities are the sort of proactive enforcement that regulating noise pollution in particular warrants. In fact, the High Court’s order also touched on a practical, everyday understanding of how loud-noise violations occur when it directed loudspeakers to stop playing at 9.55 p.m., five minutes before the law’s 10 p.m. cut-off, effectively allowing time for operators to wind up rather than permit the deceptively innocuous practice of carrying on past 10 p.m. because “it is just a few minutes”. Loud noise is often produced by ordinary social events such as festivals, weddings, political campaigns, and religious events, and enforcing rules creates friction with people who believe they have a right to practise their culture as they deem fit. Also, governments have an incentive to tolerate, rather than antagonise, their constituents. At the same time, having operators register themselves so that officials can regulate all of them equally rather than sporadically can also eliminate selective interventions. In the final analysis, the success of the High Court’s latest order should be measured by whether the State develops a consistent habit of enforcement.

The Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2025-26 report highlights notable progress in India’s school education system, covering 1.47 million schools, 240 million students, and 10.2 million teachers. Progress has been recorded in gross enrolment, student retention, dropout reduction, teacher availability, and educational infrastructure. However, the report also shows that regional and social disparities persist in access, resources, learning opportunities, and educational outcomes. Disparities in gross enrolment ratios (GER), dropout rates, pupil-teacher ratios, and infrastructure availability across regions and social groups indicate the ongoing challenge of guaranteeing equitable, inclusive, and quality education in India.

Regional and social imbalances

The report confirms that significant variations exist across socioeconomic groups and geographic regions in terms of various indicators. The distribution of enrolled students shows that Andhra Pradesh leads in Aadhaar seeding (99.6%), followed by Chandigarh (99%), while Meghalaya records the lowest rate (35%), compared with the national average of 90.2%. Uttar Pradesh accounts for the highest share of schools and student enrolment, while Meghalaya and Himachal Pradesh have the lowest shares of schools relative to enrolment, indicating higher student-school ratios.

At the school level, West Bengal has recorded the highest proportion of foundational and preparatory schools (79%) of total, and among the lowest secondary schools (11%); Chandigarh has the highest secondary schools (83%) and the lowest foundational and preparatory schools (5%) of total. The social composition of enrolled students shows significant variation across regions. Chandigarh and Delhi have the highest proportions of General category students, while Lakshadweep, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Ladakh have high proportions of Schedule Tribe (ST) enrolment. Punjab records one of the highest shares of Scheduled Caste (SC) enrolment, whereas Other Backward Classes representation is particularly high in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat.

At the national level, the GER has recorded highest for OBCs (49%), followed by General (27%), SCs (17%), and STs (10%). Thus, GER indicates large differences in school education enrolment in comparison to their corresponding population of each social group.

The Gender Parity Index across all school levels shows higher girls’ enrolment and participation than boys across most of the States/Union Territories. The UDISE+ data show that students from minority communities account for more than 20% of enrolment, with



Sahab Deen

Project Scientist at the Remote Sensing Applications Centre, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh



Navneet Sharma

Teaches education at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala

India’s educational progress needs stronger focus on equity, inclusion, accessibility, and quality

Muslims and Parsis among the major minority groups. The average enrolment per school shows that Chandigarh registers the highest average enrolment per school (1,194), followed by Delhi (788); while Ladakh records the lowest average enrolment (64), indicating variation in the size of the schools across the country.

The pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) is an important factor influencing students’ performance and achievement. The PTR varies highly, registering lowest in Union Territories and highest in densely populated States. A significant inter-State variation in PTR exists across pedagogical stages; i.e., foundational, preparatory, and middle PTRs are generally lower than secondary across most of the States. Jharkhand records the highest Secondary PTR (43), followed by Uttar Pradesh, signifying a heavy workload on teachers. On the other hand, Sikkim has the lowest secondary PTR (6), followed by Ladakh. The GER varies significantly at the levels of schools and regions across the country. Meghalaya records the highest Foundational GER (131), followed by Mizoram, while Bihar has the lowest GER (24), preceded by Uttar Pradesh. Meghalaya again records the highest Preparatory GER (171), followed by Manipur; whereas Gujarat has the lowest GER (74), preceded by Bihar. Chandigarh and Meghalaya record the highest Middle GER (118), followed by Delhi. On the contrary, Bihar has the lowest GER (70), preceded by Nagaland. Similarly, Chandigarh registers the highest Secondary GER (109), followed by Goa; while Bihar has the lowest GER (48), preceded by Nagaland.

The dropout rate determines the attainment and transition rate to the next stage of schools. Bihar accounts for the highest preparatory dropout rate (7.9%), followed by Meghalaya. On the other hand, many States/Union Territories such as Delhi, Haryana and Maharashtra do not report dropout. Similarly, Bihar records the highest middle-level dropout rate (9%), followed by Uttar Pradesh. While several States/Union Territories such as Chandigarh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh do not register dropouts at this stage, Ladakh records the highest secondary dropout rate (14.8%), followed by Karnataka. West Bengal has the lowest dropout rate (1.5%), preceded by Telangana.

Persistent gaps

Generally, access to schooling has improved significantly over the years. Most children now have a school at a suitable distance, but regional differences continue. Remotely located places, hilly, tribal and border areas still have limited schools and transport facilities, where school-going children face greater difficulties in attending school regularly, such as in Bageshwar district of Uttarakhand, Ganjam and Kandhamal districts of Odisha, Kathua district of Jammu and

Kashmir, and Palghar district of Maharashtra. Simultaneously, children from SCs, STs, minorities, and economically poor families have a greater likelihood to face different barriers that limit their enrolment, attendance, and completion of schooling.

School infrastructure has improved in several areas of the country, i.e., access to drinking water and electricity. However, the availability of infrastructure varies regionally across the country. Educationally backward districts are still struggling to provide a learning environment in rural schools in comparison to urban areas.

Teacher availability is a factor that significantly influences educational outcomes. The report shows that many States have recruited qualified teachers, while teacher shortages continue in several regions. Rural and remote schools often face a shortage of teachers performing multiple classes and subjects and many other non-teaching responsibilities allotted by the government. High student-teacher ratios reduce the individual attention students receive and adversely affect the learning process. Despite progress in girls’ schooling, challenges persist in reducing dropout rates, enhancing transition from primary to secondary education, and providing sufficient and suitable facilities for disabled children. Inclusive infrastructure, accessible classrooms, and supportive teaching practices are essential for equitable education.

Targeted investment will help

The UDISE+ 2025-26 report shows that educational inequality persists across accessibility, infrastructure, teacher availability, digital resources, and social inclusion. Addressing these dimensions collectively is essential for equitable educational development. In line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, targeted investment in educationally deprived regions, improved digital infrastructure, adequate teacher deployment, and stronger support for disadvantaged groups can help bridge persistent gaps.

Regional and social imbalances continue to influence educational opportunities and learning conditions. Reducing these disparities requires a balanced approach that collectively improves infrastructure, promotes equitable teacher deployment, strengthens inclusive social and economic policies, and provides dedicated support for disadvantaged social groups. A regionally and socially balanced approach that integrates educational quality, equity, and accessibility will help create a more inclusive education system, address the paradox of progress in India’s evolving school education landscape, and contribute to the country’s long-term social, economic, and regional development.

Unimpeded trade needs IPMDA as the answer



Pooja Bhatt

Teaches maritime geopolitics at the O.P. Jindal Global University

Maritime cooperation through the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) can strengthen the Indo-Pacific’s trading system

operationalisation is anchored in robust U.S.-India cooperation under Quad (India, Australia, Japan, the U.S.), which is now a strategic imperative. At the technological level, in 2025, India has already purchased SeaVision technology from the U.S., which includes software enhancements, training, and logistical support necessary for mutual MDA cooperation.

A surveillance deficit

The Indo-Pacific suffers from a persistent and widening maritime surveillance deficit. As a multilayered technological assimilation, MDA provides an effective understanding of the maritime domain and its impacts on security, safety, the economy, and the environment.

Across the broader waters of the Indian Ocean, which connect to the South China Sea and the Western Pacific, hundreds of vessels routinely disable their Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders – a phenomenon analysts call “going dark” – likely to evade sanctions, conceal cargo, and cause safety and environmental threats.

Such vessels may also be engaged in smuggling or ship-to-ship transfers of contraband. Many smaller fishing vessels fall outside mandatory AIS transponder carriage requirements, and depending on the applicable national and international regulatory framework, they are also found engaged in illegal fishing practices in other nations’ waters or even at high seas. This depletes regional stocks and undermines the food security of littoral states.

Furthermore, as witnessed in recent times, non-state as well as state-affiliated actors are conducting grey-zone operations designed to intimidate and coerce, while escaping any legal or conventional military response. The Quad’s Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration 2026 (IPMSC), under the IPMDA architecture, is as elegant in its pragmatism as in its cooperation, based on a shared understanding that no country can monitor the vast oceans alone. By integrating data from commercial satellite-based radio-frequency monitoring, radar fusion, and existing partner-nation sensor networks, and

sharing it with like-minded partners, it creates a layered, near-continuous picture of maritime activities.

The beneficiaries

For the U.S., regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean is essential if it aims to focus on its immediate neighbourhood in the Pacific and the Atlantic. For India, its Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in Gurugram in 2018, is a natural institutional complement to IPMDA’s regional hub architecture. IPMDA is precisely the kind of arrangement that respects India’s sovereignty while amplifying its reach. With the basics already in place, U.S.-India cooperation is necessary but not sufficient.

The full potential of IPMDA/IPMSC will be realised only through the active participation of existing Quad partners as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) partner states, the Pacific Island nations that constitute critical maritime corridors. The European Union, which has upheld the importance of free and open trade since the Hormuz crisis, signals an appetite for engagement that Washington and New Delhi must cultivate.

The contributions and benefits of IPMDA/IPMSC for smaller, capacity-constrained partners, such as Bangladesh, the Maldives, the Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and Fiji, are significant. These countries have independent surveillance infrastructure, but their waters are frequently exploited because these systems remain ineffective at addressing maritime crimes beyond their jurisdictions. This provides an opportunity for collaboration.

The strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific has systematically dismantled the assumption that open trade is unilaterally sustainable. The freedom of navigation upon which global supply chains depend is increasingly contested, and such contestation, un rebutted, has become precedent in recent years. In a region where coercion has increasingly become the currency of power, transparency must present itself as a form of deterrence.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Teaching with care

The report of a UKG student passing away after corporal punishment, was shocking to read. Such incidents remind us that children need to be taught with patience, compassion and understanding rather than fear or physical

punishment. Education is not merely about completing lessons or securing good marks; it is also about nurturing a child’s confidence, curiosity, discipline and emotional well-being. Instead of resorting to punishment, students can be encouraged

through positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. A teacher who takes the time to understand how a child is doing – academically, physically, emotionally and in the home environment – can build a strong bond of trust with the student. Even

a simple enquiry about a child’s health, difficulties, interests or progress can make the child feel valued. Such a relationship can have a lasting influence on the child’s attitude towards learning and school. **A.J. Rangarajan,** Chennai

Sowcar Janaki

The passing of veteran actor Sowcar Janaki has caused a deep shock and left an even greater vacuum in the world of acting. She left little unexplored in the art of acting and portraying diverse characters on the silver screen. Every scene

and every character she portrayed was a lesson and an example for those who aspired to pursue acting as a career.

S. Muthusubramaniyan, Coimbatore

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

GROUND ZERO



A farmer sits in his dry paddy field at Vilakudi near Thiruthuraiipoondi in Tiruvavur district of Tamil Nadu. R. VENGADESH

A dry spell along the Cauvery river

A weak monsoon has left farmers on both sides of the Cauvery struggling with dwindling water supplies. In Karnataka, farmers are worried about irrigation even as the State faces pressure to release water to Tamil Nadu, where large tracts of paddy fields remain barren. The competing demands have sharpened tensions between the two States. **Laiqh A. Khan** and **T. Ramakrishnan** report on the plight of farmers

Marilingaiah, a farmer from Karnataka’s Kuntanahalli village in Maddur taluk of Mandya district, has raised a nursery of paddy seedlings on his two-acre plot. He is waiting for water to reach his fields, which lie at the tail end of the Visvesvaraya irrigation canal system. The canal draws water from the Krishna Raja Sagara (KRS) reservoir, located across the Cauvery river near Mysuru.

Worried, he says, “If water does not flow into the fields in the next 10 days, I will not only have to give up hopes of sowing paddy, but also lose the ₹8,000 I have spent on raising the nursery.”

Marilingaiah knows that adequate rainfall, along with canal water, is essential for the paddy to survive. Yet, he is among the many farmers in Karnataka’s Cauvery basin who have defied official advice against sowing water-intensive crops such as paddy and sugarcane this season, amid a predicted deficient monsoon and inadequate inflows into the basin’s reservoirs.

The optimism of the farmers was fuelled by a brief revival of the monsoon in the first week of August, when the water level in the 124.8-foot KRS reservoir rose from 93-94 ft to over 100 ft within a few days, before stagnating at 109 ft.

While farmers like Marilingaiah have chosen to trust nature instead of switching to semi-dry crops such as ragi, pulses, or oilseeds, others are waiting for a clearer picture to emerge. D.K. Ramu of Kodihalli village in Maddur taluk and Raju of Siddapura village in Srirangapatna taluk are among them. “If there is a promise of water in the next few days, I will sow paddy. Otherwise, I will grow ragi,” Ramu says. However, he notes that heavy rain could also damage the ragi crop.

Farmers across Karnataka’s Cauvery basin are facing not only the pressure of a deficient monsoon and uncertainty over the availability of irrigation water, but are also concerned about the need to share the limited Cauvery water with neighbouring Tamil Nadu – a vexed issue that goes back more than 130 years.

Meanwhile, in Tamil Nadu, farmers in the Cauvery delta are facing a water crisis of their own. Low storage at the Mettur dam, Karnataka’s failure to release a sufficient share of the water it received in June and July, and the Tamil Nadu government’s decision not to open the dam for irrigation on the customary date of June 12 have left large tracts of paddy fields barren. The State continues its legal battle with Karnataka to secure its share of the Cauvery water.

Balancing competing water needs

With the monsoon falling short and reservoir levels under pressure, Karnataka has had to balance irrigation needs with drinking water requirements and its obligations under the Cauvery water-sharing arrangement.

On August 19, the Cauvery Irrigation Advisory Committee, a regional body chaired by Karnataka Water Resources Minister N. Cheluvarayaswamy, met in Bengaluru and decided to release canal water in only four rotational cycles during the crop season, instead of continuously. This decision was taken to conserve reservoir storage and



If water does not flow into the fields in the next 7-10 days, I will not only have to give up hopes of sowing paddy, but also lose the ₹8,000 I have already spent on raising the nursery.

MARILINGAIAH
Farmer from
Karnataka

to ensure water availability for other needs, including for drinking.

Devaraj, a farmer from Attahalli village near Mysuru, says the plan to release water for about 15 days and then stop it for the next 15 days will not provide enough water for paddy and sugarcane crops. “Farmers will be able to grow only dry crops,” he says.

The State is also under pressure from the Supreme Court and the Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA) to share the limited water with Tamil Nadu in what is shaping up to be a distress year. This central body was set up in June 2018 by the Union government to handle water-sharing from the Cauvery among Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry

On August 11, Karnataka appealed to the CWMA to immediately reduce water releases to Tamil Nadu from 12,000 cusecs (cubic feet per second) per day to 10,000, warning that there will be severe drinking water shortage if more water is released for crops in the Cauvery basin.

With water to be released under the rotational cycle only as long as reservoir levels permit, State Sugarcane Farmers’ Association president Kurub Shanthakumar questions whether the Karnataka government and its legal team were making a strong enough case for farmers and presenting the State’s position before the Cauvery water-sharing bodies – the Cauvery Water Regulation Committee (CWRC) and the CWMA – and the Supreme Court. He says the legal team does not appear to have succeeded in convincing the authorities about the water crisis in Karnataka.

Farmers in Maddur taluk are also bracing for a confrontation with the State government over the proposed diversion of KRS water to the Cauvery Stage VI drinking water project for Bengaluru, which requires an additional 6 TMC (thousand million cubic feet) of water annually. The Cauvery Stage VI drinking water project is a ₹6,939-crore infrastructure initiative approved by the Karnataka government this February to supply 500 MLD (million litres per day) of Cauvery water to roughly 30 lakh residents in Bengaluru as well as the adjoining towns of Bidadi, Hos-

kote, Anekal, Devanahalli, and Nelamangala.

“Is it fair for the government to starve us of water while diverting it to Bengaluru? Shouldn’t it identify other sources of drinking water for the city instead,” asks Mallesh, a Kuntanahalli resident, who is also a journalist.

A season of uncertainty

While farmers at the canal’s tail end bear the brunt of the distress, paddy transplantation is nearly complete in areas closer to the KRS reservoir, such as Karekura and Hosahalli. In a paddy field in Hosahalli, Cheluvvaraju says most farmers in the region typically grow two crops a year given the usual availability of water. But his hopes for a second crop this year have dimmed as reserves have depleted. “We are not sure if we will be able to raise the second crop,” he says.

Cheluvvaraju adds that he may have to work as a labourer to make ends meet if he is unable to grow the second crop. Most agricultural labourers in the region earn ₹400-500 for a day’s work from 7 a.m. to noon. The deficient monsoon has also cast a shadow over sugarcane fields. Farmers who have already harvested their crops are relieved, but many others are pinning their hopes on rain. Chikkalingaiah, a farmer from Chikka-byadarahalli in Pandavapura taluk, says his sugarcane crop needs another nine months before harvest – and without timely rain, it may not even be fit to use as cattle fodder.

Many farmers have taken not only interest-free short-term loans from primary agricultural co-operative credit societies, but also high-interest loans from microfinance companies. “If we are unable to grow crops, how will we repay our loans,” asks Nagesh, a resident of Chikkanahalli. He believes that the government should waive farmers’ agricultural loans and take steps to stop microfinance companies, notorious for deploying aggressive recovery agents, from harassing borrowers.

Though the despair among farmers over poor rainfall and the release of water to Tamil Nadu is reflected in the occasional protests, staged mostly by farmers’ organisations and pro-Kannada outfits across different parts of the Cauvery basin, these demonstrations, unlike in previous years, have remained muted. Even the Karnataka bandh, called by Kannada activist Vatal Nagaraj on August 13, drew a lukewarm response, barring parts of Maddur taluk.

Sunanda Jayaram, Organising Secretary of the Mandya District Raithara Hitharakashana Samithi, a farmers’ welfare committee, says with regret that farmers, the main stakeholders in the Cauvery water-sharing issue, were not responding to the calls for struggle.

An agriculturalist in Kuntanahalli, however, points to a different reason: ruling Congress leaders, he says, are actively discouraging farmers from taking to the streets, cautioning them against falling into what they call an “Opposition trap” – joining the protests only to later face the hassle of police stations and court appearances.

Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar has chastised activists for staging protests over the Cauvery issue “for the sake of publicity.” In particular, he warned them against wading into the river – a common form of protest – after the Water Resources Department issued a flood alert earlier this month over the release of water from the near-brimming Kabini reservoir.

While acknowledging that Karnataka’s dams were not yet full, Shivakumar vowed to protect the interests of the State’s farmers. But he has also emphasised the need to uphold the law by complying with directions on the release of Cauvery water to Tamil Nadu.

Crisis in the Cauvery delta

“Very bad, very depressing situation” is how Thanga Jayaraman, an agriculturist from Tiruvavur, describes the situation in Tamil Nadu’s Cauvery delta, considered the rice bowl of the State.

“Ordinarily, when water is released from the Mettur dam (built in Salem district in Tamil Nadu

across the Cauvery) on June 12 for irrigation, it reaches our area, about 300 kilometres downstream, by June 23 or 24. But this year, nothing,” says Jayaraman, who taught English at several institutions of higher education before taking up farming after retirement.

A drive of over 200 km from Tiruchi through Thanjavur, Thiruvaiyaru, Tiruvavur, and Mannargudi shows largely barren paddy fields. “You should have come last year. You would have found greenery everywhere,” says A.T.B. Balamurugan, a farmer of Andaankarai, about 15 km from Thiruthuraiipoondi in Thiruvavur district.

Ordinarily, paddy is cultivated across 5.3 lakh acres in the Cauvery delta during the ongoing short-term Kuruvai season, followed by cultivation across 12.9 lakh acres during the longer Samba-Thaladi season, which begins with transplantation in late July or early August and ends with the harvest in mid-January. According to Tamil Nadu government data, the area under paddy cultivation this year has fallen to 4.5 lakh acres.

However, some agriculturists dispute the figure. They say there have been instances of stunted growth and crops showing signs of withering, making the official figure unreliable. The impact, they say, extends beyond the fields.

“Economic activity in the region is getting crippled because of the erosion of livelihood opportunities,” says P.R. Pandian, president of the Tamil Nadu All Farmers Organisations’ Coordination Committee and a resident of Mannargudi. “Shops and other businesses here down their shutters by 7 p.m.”

Located along the eastern coast of the State, the Cauvery delta, spanning districts such as Thanjavur, Tiruvavur, Mayiladuthurai, and Nagapattinam, is characterised by fertile alluvial soil and a tropical climate with the flow of the Cauvery. Its importance can be gauged from the fact that during the procurement year of 2025-26 (September 1, 2025 to July 31, 2026), the region contributed 39.5 lakh tonnes of paddy out of the State-wide procurement of 57.5 lakh tonnes.



Ordinarily, when water is released from the Mettur dam on June 12 for irrigation, it reaches our area by June 23 or 24. But this year, nothing.

THANGA JAYARAMAN
Agriculturist from Tiruvavur

Yet many parts of the zone remain economically backward with a majority of the population depending on agriculture for livelihood, despite climate challenges. Scheduled Castes, who live in large numbers in the region, constitute the dominant segment of landless agricultural labourers.

These are the reasons why successive Tamil Nadu governments have been keen to protect the interests of the Cauvery delta.

Opening the Mettur dam

This year, given the poor forecast for the south-west monsoon, attributed to super El Nino, the government chose not to open the Mettur dam on June 12. “The authorities should not release water from the dam until the water level reaches at least 100 ft,” says Pandian. The level is now about 85 ft, against the full capacity of 120 ft.

The Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal and the Supreme Court have provided for greater share of the river water to be released by Karnataka to Tamil Nadu during the south-west monsoon (123.14 TMC out of the annual quota of 177.25 TMC). This share is mostly meant to support paddy cultivation during the Samba season.

The Samba crop is important not only for food security but is also the mainstay of the delta’s rural economy. Farmers also grow the shorter-duration Kuruvai crop, which can offer higher yields. This crop is largely dependent on groundwater, with farmers using energised pumpsets to irrigate their fields. But declining groundwater levels and salinity are making even this option increasingly difficult.

“My area is located between the Cauvery and one of its branches, the Coleroon (Kollidam). Even there, the water level is going down,” says R. Arivalagan, a farmer from Peramur, about 10 km from Thiruvaiyaru. Submersible pumpsets, once more common in the dry districts of Coimbatore and Dharmapuri, have become commonplace in the delta too. Over-extraction of groundwater has also led to salinity ingress in many areas.

So far, the Tamil Nadu government has not announced when the Mettur dam will be opened, even as it continues its legal battle with Karnataka to secure Tamil Nadu’s share of the Cauvery water. The government has strongly opposed Karnataka’s push to reduce water releases, pressing the Supreme Court to ensure strict adherence to the mandated 12,000 cusecs daily flow.

At the 31st meeting of the Southern Zonal Council held at Mamallapuram and presided over by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay said the legitimate rights of lower riparian States and the livelihoods that depend on assured river flows must be fully protected.

Meanwhile, several farmers’ groups have also begun demanding compensation for crop losses. They are unhappy with the crop loan waiver scheme announced by Vijay and are seeking a full, unconditional waiver of up to ₹1 lakh for all farmers who have taken crop loans.

Officials are also hoping that the monsoon will revive, with about a month left in the season. Any compensation for crop losses, meanwhile, will be subject to the Union and State governments’ norms for natural disasters and a survey by the departments concerned.

S. Vivekanandan, a farmer of Vilakudi, is increasingly worried over the prospects of the Samba crop. A senior official says that as the government is closely watching, it will take steps to safeguard the farmers of the Cauvery delta.

laiqh.khan@thehindu.co.in; ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in



@ieExplained

#ExpressExplained

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

• POLICY

CMs going abroad: The rules around political clearance

Shyamal Yadav
New Delhi, August 21

TELANGANA CHIEF Minister A Revanth Reddy’s visit to the US has been cancelled after the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) denied “clearance from political angle”, his office said on Friday. For a foreign trip, public servants need something called “political clearance” from the External Affairs Ministry.

What is political clearance?

Political clearance is granted by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). This is required not only for public servants but any government servant for a foreign trip. The MEA gets hundreds of requests for political clearance every month from ministries, secretaries, bureaucrats and other officials.

The decision to grant or deny clearance is based on multiple factors, such as the nature of the event, the level of participation from other countries, the kind of invitation that has been extended, and also India’s relations with the host country. The system is meant to ensure that official foreign visits do not have diplomatic or foreign-policy implications that have not been assessed by the government.

Since 2016, political clearance applications can be made on the MEA website epolclearance.gov.in. These

RULES FOR OTHERS

- For Union ministers, after getting political clearance from the MEA, additional clearance is needed from the PM, whether the trip is official or personal.
- Lok Sabha MPs need clearance from the Speaker, and Rajya Sabha members from the Chairperson.

Cabinet Secretariat circular on May 6, 2015, “... prior political clearance and FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) clearance are mandatory.”

CMs, ministers of state governments and other state officials also need clearance from the Department of Economic Affairs, and must send a copy of the application to the DEA Secretary. The DEA and the ministry concerned will entertain an application only if MEA’s political clearance is attached with the request.

How common is denial of CMs’ requests?

Political clearance being denied is nothing new. In 2022, Arvind Kejriwal, who was then the Delhi chief minister, had to cancel his Singapore visit after not receiving clearance. In October 2019, the Centre had not given him approval to attend another conference abroad.

During the previous UPA regime, the MEA had denied political clearance to trips by then chief ministers Tarun Gogoi (Assam, Congress) to the US and Israel, and Arjun Munda (Jharkhand, BJP) to Thailand. Gogoi had wanted to visit New York for a “high level meeting” on April 2, 2012; a note from the Ministry said: “... direct correspondence by a diplomatic Mission with a State Government being inappropriate”. About his proposed trip to Israel for an event on water and environment technology, the Ministry had said: “Concerned agencies would be hard put to provide special consideration for CM, Assam, both from the substantive and protocol angles.”

Drishti IAS		
IAS GS Foundation Course (Offline & Live Online Batches)		
Centre	हिंदी माध्यम	English Medium
9 Karol Bagh (Delhi)	20 अगस्त सुबह 11:30 बजे	26 Aug 11:30 AM
9 Noida (Noida)	17 अगस्त दोपहर 3:00 बजे	24 Aug 11:30 AM
9 Indore	24 अगस्त सुबह 8:00 बजे	18 Aug 5:30 PM
9 Lucknow	24 अगस्त दोपहर 3:00 बजे	31 Aug 3:00 PM
9 Prayagraj	18 अगस्त शाम 5:30 बजे	24 Aug 5:30 PM
9 Ranchi	12 अगस्त शाम 5:30 बजे	20 Aug 2:00 PM
9 Patna	17 अगस्त सुबह 11:15 बजे	4 Sept 8:00 AM
9 Jaipur	एडमिशन आरंभ	Admissions Open
9 Agra (New Location)	31 अगस्त सुबह 8:00 बजे	31 Aug 5:00 PM
Call Us 87501 87501		

• GOVERNANCE

Routine data or citizenship check? Why Census questionnaire sparked concern

Deeptiman Tiwary
New Delhi, August 21

THE QUESTIONNAIRE for the population enumeration phase of Census 2027 has triggered a political controversy, with the Congress alleging that the inclusion of detailed questions about respondents and their parents could facilitate surveillance and serve a “deeper nefarious purpose”. The Left has raised similar concerns.

The controversy follows an August 15 report in *The Indian Express* that several new or modified questions in the Census questionnaire were also part of the National Population Register (NPR) schedule notified in 2020, when the NPR had become contentious amid protests over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and fears of a nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC).

New Census questions, NPR link

The questionnaire has 40 questions, 14 of them new or modified compared with the 2011 Census. Eight of these — national-

ity as declared, father’s and mother’s particulars, mobile number, Aadhaar, voter ID, passport and driving licence — were also included in the NPR schedule prepared for the 2020 exercise.

The NPR schedule sought the date and place of birth of a person’s father and mother, including the district and State and, if they were born outside India, the country. These questions had been at the centre of the political opposition to NPR.

The controversy

There are two distinct concerns: privacy and the political context in which the NPR was revived.

On privacy, the argument is that Census data has traditionally been collected for population statistics and planning, while the new questionnaire seeks a much wider range of personal information, including details that can identify or link individuals to other government databases. The question is therefore not simply how much data the government collects, but how it is stored, protected and used.



Census officials in Delhi. PRAVEEN KHANNA

The second concern relates to citizenship. The NPR is a register of the country’s “usual residents”, not a citizenship register. A usual resident is someone who has lived in a local area for at least six months or intends to stay there for the next six months;

this can include a foreigner meeting the residence criterion.

The NPR is, however, linked in law to the process for preparing the National Register of Indian Citizens. The Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003, provide for preparation of a Population Register and its verification for preparation of the citizens’ register. The rules also provide for individuals whose citizenship is considered doubtful to be marked for further inquiry.

This legal connection became politically explosive in 2019-20. The NPR was being revived soon after the CAA was passed and against the backdrop of the NRC in Assam, which had excluded around 19 lakh people. Also, Union Home Minister Amit Shah repeatedly spoke of a nationwide NRC and asked people to understand the “chronology” in which the CAA would be followed by the NRC.

NPR itself was not new. It had first been prepared in 2010 along with the houselisting phase of the 2011 Census and was updated through a door-to-door exercise in 2015.

But this political context fundamentally changed how a previously uncontroversial exercise came to be perceived as one being associated with the possibility of citizenship being questioned.

What government said in 2020

The government sought to reassure people that the controversial questions on parents’ date and place of birth were optional. The government also maintained that NPR was primarily a database of residents intended to improve policy formulation and delivery of welfare schemes. Shah argued that knowing the demographic composition of an area would help governments plan services and identify beneficiaries.

There was, however, a contradiction that contributed to the mistrust. In December 2019, Shah said NPR data would never be used for an NRC and that the two exercises were governed by different laws. But earlier government statements in Parliament and the Citizenship Rules themselves had explicitly linked the Population Register to preparation of the citizens’ register.

But this political context fundamentally changed how a previously uncontroversial exercise came to be perceived as one being associated with the possibility of citizenship being questioned.

Government’s need for data

There is a legitimate administrative rationale for collecting detailed demographic data. The government has argued that a comprehensive database of residents can help it formulate policies, plan public services, identify beneficiaries and improve national security. Information drawn from different government databases can also help reduce duplication and discrepancies in records and cut paperwork for citizens.

The NPR was also envisaged as a way of bringing together basic demographic information with details such as mobile numbers and identity documents. Officials said this could make government services more efficient. These are not inherently unreasonable objectives. Nor are NPR and NRC, as exercises in themselves, necessarily “nefarious”. The problem in 2019-20 was the timing, as the NPR was revived amid dented public trust and government assurances failing to restore that trust. It explains why questions that might otherwise seem routine are being viewed through the prism of citizenship and surveillance.

• LEGAL

How to define ‘industry’: Inside SC’s split verdict



VINEET BHALLA

IN A landmark judgment that brings the curtains down on a legal debate spanning multiple decades, a nine-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court delivered a fractured verdict on what constitutes an “industry” under Indian labour law.

While the judgment comprises of five separate opinions that differ sharply on the interpretation of the law, they agreed on the practical position for pending proceedings: pending cases under the repealed Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, involving the definition of “industry”, will continue to be decided under the 1978 “triple test” laid down by a seven-judge SC bench in *Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board vs A Rajappa*. The new Industrial Relations Code, 2020, will have to be interpreted independently under its own text and scheme.

History of dispute

The dispute centres on Section 2(j) of the erstwhile Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 which defined an “industry”. Its broad wording led to decades of judicial debate over whether workplaces like hospitals, universities, charitable institutions and government departments came within its ambit — and whether their employees were entitled to statutory protections under the Act.

In 1978, a seven-judge bench in *Bangalore Water Supply* adopted an expansive interpretation. Justice V R Krishna Iyer’s leading opinion laid down the “triple test”: an undertaking would qualify as an industry if there was systematic activity, organised through cooperation between employer and employee, for the production or distribution of goods or services calculated to satisfy human wants and wishes.

The court held that the absence of a profit motive was irrelevant. It also developed a “dominant nature” test for establishments carrying on several activities and recognised a narrow exception for genuinely sovereign functions.

The judgment was not unanimous. The effective majority was 4:3 (two concurring opinions). The dissenting judges favoured an additional requirement that the activity

• HOW THE ISSUE DIVIDED THE CONSTITUTION BENCH

					
Chief Justice of India Surya Kant	Justice Satish Chandra Sharma	Justice Alok Aradhe	Justice Vipul M Pancholi	Justice Dipankar Datta	Justice Ujjal Bhuyan
“... this Court has repeatedly been required to navigate competing currents of thought in its search for a principled and workable understanding of Section 2(j)... it is our earnest hope that the present adjudication serves as a reliable beacon for courts and tribunals at various levels, bringing a greater measure of coherence, certainty, and finality to a question that has engaged judicial attention for decades.”				“...institutional credibility lies in respecting finality, not in perpetuating doubt; and, absent compelling justification, none of which exists here, the chapter must be treated as closed.”	
	“A statute that creates Conciliation Officers, Labour Courts and Industrial Tribunals and hands them... power... needs to say... who falls within its reach.”		“... a narrowly tailored definition of ‘industry’ would not assist in maintaining industrial peace, protection of workmen and employers...”		“... interpretation which yields to no manifest error, needs to be retained... the economic & technological changes since it was decided have weakened rather than strengthened the case for revisiting it.”
Justice P S Narasimha		Justice B V Nagarathna		Justice Joymalya Bagchi	

be carried on along commercial lines.

The expansive interpretation came under pressure. Parliament passed the Industrial Disputes (Amendment) Act in 1982, seeking to exclude, among other categories, hospitals, educational and research institutions, charitable and philanthropic bodies and certain government activities. But the amended definition was never notified — it never acquired legal effect.

Meanwhile, the SC’s own decisions diverged over issues such as government welfare activities and sovereign functions. In 1996, a three-judge bench held that the Social Forestry Department could be an industry, while a later two-judge bench took a narrower view in relation to a forest department.

In 2005, a five-judge bench in *State of UP vs Jai Bir Singh* expressed reservations about *Bangalore Water Supply* and referred the matter to a larger bench. In 2017, a seven-judge bench directed that it be placed before the present nine-judge bench.

Validity of reference

CJI Surya Kant, writing for himself and Justices Satish Chandra Sharma, Alok Aradhe and Vipul M Pancholi, upheld the validity of the reference. Justice P S Narasimha and Justice Joymalya Bagchi also agreed that the reference could validly be considered by the bench.

Balancing act

The ruling resolves the immediate problem created by the repeal of the Industrial Disputes Act without creating a new category of law for pending cases.

- By retaining the 1978 test for those proceedings, the court has avoided reopening their legal basis. But it declined to carry that jurisprudence forward as the governing interpretation of the new labour code.

Justice B V Nagarathna pointed out that the 2005 reference was based on an incorrect assumption that there was a conflict between two smaller bench decisions regarding the forest department.

Justice Dipankar Datta termed it a “faltering reference”. He criticised the 2005 bench for wrongly assuming that the 1978 Bangalore Water Supply judgment was not a unanimous decision simply because some judges had written separate concurring opinions. He noted that a settled precedent, particularly one laid down by a seven-judge bench and followed for decades, should only be revisited upon the satisfaction of exacting tests like a manifest error or public mischief. He concluded that the 2005 bench failed to meet this threshold. Thus, there was effectively a 6:3 split on the validity of the reference. Justice Bhuyan also signed off on Justice Datta’s opinion.

The triple test

Here, the judges differed more substantially. CJI Kant’s opinion said the triple test required “calibration”. In his view, an activity should have a discernible commercial character analogous to trade or business to qualify as an industry. This would keep the profit motive irrelevant while excluding activities divorced from economic enterprise, including purely charitable initiatives and

core sovereign functions. But this was not made the governing test for pending cases which, he held, would continue to be governed by the extant triple test.

Justice Nagarathna defended the 1978 approach, as did Justices Datta and Bagchi. They stressed the social-welfare purpose of labour legislation and argued that introducing a commercial requirement could deprive workers in institutions such as hospitals and schools of statutory protection merely because their employers were not profit-making entities. Justice Bagchi described the triple test as possessing a “rare felicity in judicial interpretation”, while Justice Nagarathna emphasised the importance of the test in protecting workers amid privatisation and changing economic conditions.

Justice Narasimha adopted a different approach. He wrote that the debate over modifying the triple test had become “unnecessary” because the Industrial Disputes Act had been repealed.

Pending cases

This is where the judges found common ground despite their differences.

The court declined to retrospectively replace the 1978 test with a newly formulated, narrower test. Pending proceedings under the old Industrial Disputes Act involving Section 2(j) will therefore continue to be decided in accordance with *Bangalore Water Supply*.

All the opinions also made it clear that the judgment does not have any bearing on the interpretation of the new Industrial Relations Code. The Code defines “industry” as any systematic activity involving cooperation between an employer and workers to produce or supply goods and services, regardless of capital investment or profit motive. Unlike the old law, the Code excludes charitable and philanthropic institutions, domestic services, and sovereign government functions from this definition. The SC has made clear that its provisions must be interpreted independently.

Sovereign functions

The ruling also dealt with the question of when government activities can be excluded as “sovereign functions”. The broad principle emerging from the opinions is that an activity does not become sovereign just because it is performed by the State or is connected with a welfare objective. The exception is confined to core governmental functions. This is consistent with the approach in *Bangalore Water Supply*.

Lifetime Free Newspapers Access

Editorials PDF

- English Editorials PDF with International Newspapers Editorials [35-40 pages]
- Hindi Editorials PDF
- Daily Vocabulary PDF

Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

International Newspapers

Newspapers around world.
Asian, European & American

Hindi Newspapers

- 1) दैनिक जागरण
- 2) जनसत्ता
- 3) हरिभूमि
- 4) हिंदुस्तान

Indian Newspapers Channel

1. The Indian Express

2. The Hindu

3. Business Line

4. Financial Express

5. Times of India

6. Hindustan Times

7. Economic Times

8. Live Mint

9. Business Standard



Resource guzzlers

Data centres should account for water, power demand

Protests over data-centre projects in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh are a warning India should not ignore. Activists and citizens have taken to the streets over concerns that these projects will add to the strain on local water and energy supplies. Data-centre operators say advanced air-cooling technology will minimise impact on water resources, but there is no transparency on the cumulative demand these facilities will place on water, electricity and other infrastructure.

Data centres are not new to India. What is changing is their scale and intensity. Installed capacity has grown from about 520 MW in 2020 to nearly 1.5 GW by mid-2025, and is set to rise sharply over the next few years. Much of this capacity is concentrated in Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad and Bengaluru — cities where power and water infrastructure are already under considerable strain. High-density AI servers consume far more electricity and generate more heat than conventional servers, demanding sophisticated cooling. India’s data-centre water consumption is estimated at about 150 billion litres a year, and could rise to nearly 358 billion litres by 2030. A single 100-MW facility has been estimated to need around two million litres of water a day — though actual use varies widely with cooling technology and water source. The industry’s response is that technology is improving fast. Operators are adopting advanced cooling systems, and some are designing facilities that use little or no water at all. That is welcome, but efficiency cannot be the whole answer: a facility that is more efficient per unit of computing can still carry a large resource footprint. This is because the scale of computing is set to expand quickly, raising the demand for reliable power. The latest wave of expansion is turning into a race for electricity and cooling infrastructure.

India needs centralised guardrails and greater transparency. At present, decisions on land, water, power, environmental clearances and local infrastructure are scattered across multiple Central, State and local authorities, making it hard to assess the cumulative impact of a cluster of data centres. Citizens have no easy way to find out how much water a facility has been allocated, where that water comes from, how much power it will draw, or what additional infrastructure it will require. A national mechanism should require large data-centre projects to publicly disclose projected electricity and water consumption, source of water, cooling technology, renewable-energy use, wastewater arrangements and impact on local infrastructure — aggregated by district and State, so policymakers and citizens can see the cumulative burden. It may also be time to revive the National Data Centre Policy, whose 2020 draft proposed Data Centre Economic Zones — specialised clusters with planned infrastructure spanning power, connectivity and regulation. The goal is not to stop the data-centre boom, but to make resource costs visible and measurable.

OTHER VOICES.

讀賣新聞
THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Concerns about Reduced Deterrence against N. Korea
While North Korea rapidly enhances its combat capabilities and China continues its military intimidation, the U.S. and South Korean militaries have significantly scaled back their joint military exercises. There are concerns that this could lead to a reduction in deterrence against North Korea and China, among others, and negatively impact stability throughout Northeast Asia, including Japan. The United States and South Korea had initially planned to conduct their regular joint military exercises this summer from Aug. 17 to 27, but they shortened the duration to five days ending Aug. 21. This was because U.S. President Donald Trump instructed Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to scale back the exercises just before they were set to begin. Trump argued that the exercises “send a signal that is totally inappropriate and hostile” to North Korea. TOKYO, AUGUST 21

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
EUROPE

The Supreme Court’s Popular Mandate
Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, the betting favorite for Speaker of the House next year, said last week that he wants “dramatic Supreme Court reform,” because the conservative majority is “basically a subsidiary” of President Trump’s MAGA project. Did Mr. Jeffries sleep through the Court’s last term? Even liberal Justice Elena Kagan has publicly corrected his mistaken impression. The Justices have struck down Mr. Trump’s signature initiatives on tariffs, birthright citizenship, and the Federal Reserve. What’s more, the public by and large approves of last term’s major decisions, according to a poll this month from Marquette Law School. To the conservative Justices, public opinion is beside the point, since they see their job as following the law, not the vox populi. But consider the weakness of Mr. Jeffries’s case. NEW YORK, AUGUST 20

Tribunal reform
2026: Old wine
in a new bottle

COSMETIC CHANGE. The 2026 Bill adds an NTC, extends tenure and removes the minimum age, but leaves the basic architecture of the 2021 law largely intact



RAJASEKHAR VK

The Tribunals Reforms Bill, 2026, is presented as the next chapter in India’s effort to reform its tribunal system. It promises a National Tribunals Commission (NTC), greater institutional oversight and a more coherent framework for appointments and service conditions. But there is a more fundamental question to be asked before the Bill is celebrated as a new phase of reform: how much of it is actually new? The answer is: surprisingly little. The 2026 Bill retains the same 16 tribunals in its First Schedule. It retains the basic legislative approach of prescribing common qualifications, selection, appointment and conditions of service for those tribunals. But the Central government remains an important part of the appointment architecture. The material changes? The proposed NTC, an increase in tenure from four years to five, and the removal of the minimum age of 50 years. The five-year tenure and removal of the minimum age address two features of the 2021 framework that had attracted serious Constitutional criticism. But they do not, by themselves, constitute a fundamental reconstruction of the tribunal system. The more accurate description would be that the 2026 Bill is a revised edition of the 2021 model, with some important repairs and a new institutional layer in the form of the NTC. The bottle, therefore, may be old, but the label is new. The real question is whether the cork has changed — whether the appointment mechanism will actually function differently, and whether it will alter the balance between the Executive and the tribunals.

WHAT CHANGED IN 2021?
The 2021 Act was itself the second stage of a longer process of tribunal

rationalisation that began with the Finance Act, 2017, through which several tribunals were abolished or merged and their number reduced. The 2021 legislation moved the needle further, abolishing five more tribunals. For the tribunals that remained, it sought to create a uniform statutory framework for qualifications, selection, appointment, tenure, salaries and allowances, resignation, removal and other conditions of service. The 2021 Act’s fatal flaw was its bureaucratic hubris, the assumption that a one-size-fits-all statutory regime could displace the Constitution’s demand for independent adjudicatory institutions. In Madras Bar Association v. Union of India, the Supreme Court struck down provisions of the 2021 framework on grounds including separation of powers and judicial independence. The 2026 Bill is, therefore, in part, a response to that judicial intervention. Its Statement of Objects and Reasons expressly acknowledges the Supreme Court judgment and the direction concerning a National Tribunals Commission. But that raises the central question: has the government redesigned the tribunal system, or has it merely excised portions of the 2021 framework that did not survive constitutional scrutiny? **WHAT IS NEW IN 2026?** The changes introduced by the 2026 Bill are important, but limited. The most visible innovation is the creation of the NTC, proposed as the institutional body responsible for the selection process for tribunal members, review of tribunal **NCLAT is included in the First Schedule. NCLT is not. The omission is difficult to reconcile with the stated objective of creating a coherent and uniform framework for tribunal governance**

performance, oversight of inquiries into complaints and maintenance of a National Tribunals Data Grid. The change in tenure from four years to five years is also welcome, as is the removal of the minimum age requirement. Search-cum-Selection Committees remain part of the appointment mechanism, albeit within the new NTC structure. These changes respond directly to some of the difficulties that had arisen under the 2021 framework. But beyond them, the basic architecture remains the same, with the same 16 tribunals covered. The real test lies in the appointment mechanism. The NTC’s creation should not, by itself, be mistaken for a complete restructuring of tribunal governance. The Central government continues to have a significant role. What happens if the government does not appoint the candidate recommended by the NTC? Or if it sits on the recommendation? Or simply seeks a fresh list? The answer to these questions will determine whether the NTC has actually altered the balance between the Executive and the tribunals, or has merely inserted another institutional layer into an essentially familiar framework. **THE NCLT OMISSION** There is, however, one feature of the 2026 Bill that is difficult to explain. An institutional schizophrenia, so to speak. NCLAT is included in the First Schedule. NCLT is not. The 2026 Bill simply carries that position forward from the 2021 Act, without explaining why. The omission is difficult to reconcile with the stated objective of creating a coherent and uniform framework for tribunal governance. NCLT is the Adjudicating Authority under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code and exercises substantial jurisdiction under the Companies Act. NCLAT is its appellate tribunal. Yet, the Bill proposes to bring the appointment and service conditions of NCLAT within the new regime while leaving NCLT outside it. The inconsistency becomes more striking because the 2026 Bill expressly

amends section 417A of the Companies Act to provide that the qualifications, selections, appointment, salaries, removal and other conditions of service of the Chairperson and Members of NCLAT will be governed by the new legislation. There is no corresponding provision bringing NCLT within the framework. Notably, the Statement of Objects and Reasons does not even explain the exclusion. If the omission in the 2021 framework was inadvertent, reproducing it in a Bill intended to repeal and replace the framework is difficult to justify. A legislation intended to create uniformity in tribunal governance should not reproduce an unexplained distinction between a tribunal and its appellate tribunal. The government should therefore explain why NCLT has once again been left outside the reform framework and, if there is no substantive reason, correct the omission before the Bill becomes law. **REFORM OR REPAIR?** The Tribunals Reforms Bill, 2026, is therefore best understood as a measure of correction rather than a fundamental redesign. It increases tenure, removes the minimum age and introduces the National Tribunals Commission. Those are meaningful changes. But the basic architecture remains largely intact. The same tribunal universe remains, the Executive continues to occupy an important position in the appointment structure, and an unexplained omission from the 2021 framework has been carried into the 2026 Bill. Tribunal reform should ultimately be judged by whether it produces institutions that can tell the government, ‘No’. On that test, the 2026 Bill may be a step forward. But whether it is genuinely a new bottle will depend on whether Parliament is prepared to address the structural questions that the 2021 experiment left unresolved. The writer is a lawyer and former Judicial Member of the National Company Law Tribunal

Nabard survey points to downbeat rural sentiment

Subdued optimism over jobs and income seems linked to monsoon, rural inflation and broader economic developments

A Paul Williams
M Nagarajan

The twelfth round of the Rural Economic Conditions and Sentiments Survey (RECSS), released by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) in July, offers the clearest signal yet that the rural growth story is losing some of its earlier momentum. Since the survey began in September 2024, each round has tracked how villages across the country feel about their incomes, spending, savings and borrowing. The latest findings show that optimism has cooled, consumption has softened and households are leaning more heavily on informal credit to bridge the gap. Only 27.7 per cent of rural households reported earning more than they did a year earlier, down from 29.6 per cent in the previous round and sharply lower than the 42.2 per cent recorded in November 2025. This is the lowest reading since the survey started, and it is matched by a rise in the share of households whose income simply did not move, which climbed to 52.6 per cent, the highest such share recorded so far. NABARD linked the moderation to a mix of

pressures, including former global commodity prices, worries around El Nino conditions, below normal rainfall in several regions and a slower pace of kharif sowing. Even so, the report was careful to note that rural conditions have stayed broadly stable, helped along by the steady progress of the southwest monsoon and continued public spending in villages. The share of households reporting higher consumption expenditure fell to 74.1 per cent, only the second time this figure has slipped below 75 per cent since the survey began. Household consumption still accounts for roughly two thirds of monthly income. On the financial side, the proportion of households reporting higher savings dropped to 17.8 per cent, the weakest reading since the survey’s launch, while the share reporting higher borrowings eased to 28.7 per cent. **RISE IN INFORMAL CREDIT** Even as overall borrowing has moderated, the share of households relying exclusively on informal sources of credit rose to 23.6 per cent, the highest level recorded across all rounds of the survey, while 51 per cent depended only on formal channels. Among those who borrowed purely through informal routes, close to two-thirds turned to friends and



RURAL INDIA. Need for support

relatives rather than moneylenders or other informal agents. The survey also captured a more cautious rural mood about the months ahead. Expectations for income and employment improving over the next quarter fell to their lowest level since the survey began, and expectations for income over the coming year weakened further as well. Nabard attributed part of this caution to uncertainty around the monsoon and to broader economic developments. These findings arrive alongside separate data showing that rural inflation touched 5 per cent in June, a full percentage point above urban inflation at 4 per cent. The combination of slowing income growth and comparatively higher inflation helps explain why rural sentiment has turned more guarded.

WAY FORWARD Timely and adequate monsoon support measures, including crop advisories, seed and input availability, and quick disbursement of crop insurance claims, can help protect farm incomes from the swings of El Nino related uncertainty. Second, the rising reliance on informal credit points to a continuing need to widen the reach of formal finance in villages, whether through self-help groups, cooperative banks or digital lending platforms designed for rural borrowers. Third, given that food price pressure weighs more heavily on rural households, sustained attention to supply side measures for essential commodities, along with continuity in existing income support and employment guarantee schemes, would help. Finally, since the survey itself shows how quickly rural sentiment can shift from round to round, policymakers, banks and agricultural agencies would do well to treat each successive round of the Rural Economic Conditions and Sentiments Survey as an early warning system. Williams is the Head of India at Sernova Financial; Nagarajan is an Assistant Professor in Management Studies at SRMIST Trichy

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

Unfair move
Apropos ‘SBI widens cash withdrawal charges to all basic accounts’ to plug fee income leak (August 21). It is shocking that the SBI has announced uniform levy service charges for withdrawals exceeding four, whether drawn through branch or through Customer service points etc. Not all customers are tech savvy and even ones having an ATM card are forced to go to bank branches for cash withdrawals. Given that deposits are not keeping pace with lending, charging customers

for branch visits is unfair. Since banks have various other avenues to earn revenues, why charge savers who form the backbone of the banking system? **Katuru Durga Prasad Rao** Hyderabad **E-comm growth** This is with reference to ‘Home care start-ups take on FMCG giants as consumer priorities shift’, (August 21). FMCG household consumption across Indian cities exhibited a clear shift toward metro-driven concentration

rather than uniform city-wise distribution, with e-commerce accounting for approximately 14 per cent of FMCG sales across metros and increasing to nearly 18 per cent in the top eight cities. Notably, southern metro clusters have emerged as the most digitally savvy consumption hubs, crossing 21 per cent e-commerce penetration, underscoring a strong shift toward online-led household purchasing behaviour, even as overall urban FMCG growth remained relatively moderate in the range of 2.3-4.6 per

cent, reflecting a structurally uneven but increasingly digital-first consumption landscape across India’s cities. The opportunity is only getting bigger. **S Muthulakshmi** Virudhunagar (TN) **Refined regulation** This refers to the Editorial ‘Know your investor’ (August 8). SEBI’s effort to simplify the Accredited Investor Framework is commendable, but caution is vital. Allowing investment funds to certify their own investors

We are united in our fondness of blame and shame



CHEAP
THRILLS

NISHA
SUSAN

I can say with absolute truth that until July of this year, I have never ever seen anyone in the world running from the cops in selfie mode. That short, hilarious reel has stayed in my head as a hallmark of the Cockroach Janta Party protests. My schadenfreude flourished while watching so many puffy-chested patriarchy floundering in their response to the protests. It is also entertaining to have the protests poke holes in my conception of myself as a politically engaged person.

When I watched the video of the Mumbai students in the backseat of a police car making faces and sniggering at the ponderous cop in the front seat threatening to plant drugs on them and ruin their lives, I could only laugh at myself. I was remembering how sad I had been for Aryan, son of Shah Rukh Khan, famously caught in a similar dragnet back in 2021. How sad I had been for poor SRK. And here were these young boys without superstar fathers switching the plot from King Lear in the storm to Bottom wandering in the midnight forest.

Even though our country can feel like

it is airless from greed (did you know that a recent study published in the *World Bank Economic Review* says that five business families have held more than 60% of income in corporate India in the last two decades). India produces relentless idealists over and over again, using the creaking legal system, the once-responsive RTI (right to information) channels and their fragile bodies to try and make things right, to make things just.

Every year, I hear about an idealistic Indian who was ready to have their home burnt down for the greater good. School teachers who have taken loans against their homes to sue dangerous dam projects. Farmers who have used the RTI to demand information on local development projects. Sexual assault survivors who have gone in the face of everyone they knew and admired to pursue justice.

When this idealism has appeared in the form of political groups and movements, young leaders have typically threaded the careful needle of displaying the much-in-demand youthful vitality while maintaining dignity. (I say largely. There was that one glorious time in 2015 in Latehar, Jharkhand, when members of the National Campaign on Adivasi Rights led by a young Abhay Xaxa printed copies of the government's land acquisition bill, squatted by the roadside to poop on the bill.) Yet, where has dignity got anyone? Just thoughtful young people spending years and years in jail, others facing



CJP volunteers at a school in Colaba, Mumbai.

RAJU SHINDE/HINDUSTAN TIMES

assault and the ever-expanding ambit of raids.

My friends and acquaintances who joined the protests at Jantar Mantar in July reported a carefully managed protest site flourishing in feeling as well as logistics. The cheerful vulgarity of the signs was, as a friend likes to say, bringing plenty of *kaleje mein thandak* (but why you want your liver chilled, she has never explained). From the get-go, from its name onwards, the CJP communication seems to be uninterested in the bulk of purity politics. I am remembering the dry remarks I overheard at the height of the Citizenship Amendment

Act (CAA) protests that Preamble-reading and *hum-dekhenge*-singing was the new lamp-lighting and chief-guesting.

I want to say that the marked lack of good behaviour at the protests and on Instagram was bracing to me as a recovering people pleaser. But that would be silly. I belong to a nation trained in Olympic-level people-pleasing. I recently learnt a rude term called the "fenty bent". Folks addicted to strong synthetic opioids develop a posture where their bodies bend sharply forward at the waist, head drooping to their feet almost. They stay frozen in this uncomfortable pose for hours.

Often it seems to me that the fenty bent would be the preferred posture in a country deeply shaped by caste and class inequality.

Perhaps it is that I am still raging from recent incidents which make me wonder what the CJP means when they say "school *theek karo*". A couple of months ago a friend in Delhi was told by a potential school admissions committee that her harmless three-year-old was too difficult. Another friend in Bengaluru was told that her 16-year-old was badly behaved and needed to apologise for unnamed sins before he could return to school for class XI. When challenged with a simple email, no reply was forthcoming and he was back in school. How bad could those sins have been?

Observe this love for humiliation, shame and obedience and you get the thinking behind the Bar Council of India's recent directions to all the State Bar Councils to not admit the 2026 graduates from Nalsar University of Law as advocates. This demand (shocking even in this era) was reversed in 90 minutes. The named "sin" in this case was that the Nalsar students didn't want the Chief Justice of India Surya Kant as chief guest at their convocation. Even if this was a sin, it would be nice to remember that even in actual all-out war, collective punishment is banned by the Geneva Convention.

Or they remembered and thought, "oh no, we are fans of collective punishment over here." We are united as a nation in our fondness of generalised

blame and shame.

Given the fenty bent of our public lives, it has been mostly fun to observe the CJP dance. Take the "feud" between member of Parliament Kangana Ranaut and CJP co-convenor Sarav Das. Ranaut had called the reels made by young protestors "puke-inducing" and the protestors themselves members of a "gutter generation". Talk about identity-based profiling. At one point in the back-and-forth, Das suggested that it was perhaps his resemblance to Hrithik Roshan that was annoying Ranaut. I laughed and had a moment of sympathy for Ranaut. As the poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra wrote, when you approach 50 you see three faces in the mirror; you as you are, the grey-haired one "whose policy has matured as well as the mocking youth's who paid the first premium."

I am curious for greater understanding of the CJP, their leadership and what they believe in. Their policies, such as they are, will evolve. They may someday acquire a taste for dignity, people-pleasing and hiding in the deep caves of their caste and class histories (not the hills of their convictions, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once called it). For now, what is spectacular is their unvarnished enjoyment of the surface and their understanding of how to varnish the treacherous surface.

Nisha Susan is the author of *The Women who Forgot to Invent Facebook and Other Stories*.

Spec-fic rooted in the Parsi experience

Shortlisted for the prestigious Ursula Le Guin prize 2026, imaginative fiction writer Tashan Mehta speaks about the role of myth, memory and Indianness in her book

Shrabonti Bagchi

Nominated for the prestigious Ursula K. Le Guin Prize for Fiction 2026—an annual award for imaginative fiction bestowed in honour of the late American writer—*Mad Sisters of Esi* (2023) by Tashan Mehta is one of the most ambitious works of speculative fiction to have come out of India in recent times.

Bypassing conventional forms of fantasy storytelling focused on protagonist-antagonist tensions, *Mad Sisters* is an exploration of myth and memory, told through the intertwined histories of two pairs of sisters in a strange and fluid universe. Ahead of the announcement of the winner in October, *Lounge* spoke to Mehta about her book, its themes, and why her narrative remains rooted to a certain Indianness. Edited excerpts.

The prize committee describes 'Mad Sisters' as a book that uses "myth, fictional scholarship, alchemy, folktales and animism" to "create a quantum form of storytelling". What do you understand by "quantum form of storytelling" and is this something you set out to do?

I loved the phrase. I imagine it as a bunch of atoms changing positions constantly, remodelling themselves when observed and then changing their clothes again when not observed—these hilariously unruly elements that make up our universe, and that everyone expects some kind of order out of, but that don't really have the capability to provide that order.

I also loved the phrase because it captured a thought process I had early in the creation of *Mad Sisters*, when I was trying to dislodge myself from a stuck, rule-based way of thinking. And I thought precisely of those atoms—changing when observed, hopping across time, with time itself warping across space—and I thought, "Well, if science itself is a bit chaotic, I don't know why I'm bothering to seek rules. Reality breaks them all the time."

The book's narrative thrust comes from a layered, looping tale of two sets of sisters who are separated by time, space and story. What are some of the themes you explore through this?

I was primarily looking at what it felt like to be Indian, the intangible experience of being me. It's a bit like having an army of ghosts stretching out behind you, back into the past, each of them with a clear opinion of how you're living your life and what you're doing right or wrong, and consistently very vocal about those opinions. In seeking to capture this, I found



GOOGLE ART PROJECT



myself exploring the relationship between the singular and the plural. So, the individual with the community; or one person against the chaos of the cosmos; or a singular way of thinking against myriad, hopping, changing ways of being. It felt right to explore those themes through sisters. Sisters—born or chosen—are some of the most complex, rewarding and thorny relationships we possess. It's this deliciously precious but complicated love that moves *with* you throughout your life. It's ripe for the peeling.

The story begins inside the Whale of Babel, a vast mythical creature that contains many worlds. The whale is a part of many creation myths. Did this influence you?

The Whale of Babel is actually two Biblical stories. It's the Tower of Babel, of course. And it's Jonah and the Whale. I heard about Jonah and the Whale as a child, and I remember being swept up by the idea of living in the belly of a whale. It did something to my brain, to imagine

being *eaten* but then still *living*; of having walls around you that were soft and moved with a creature's breath; of being able to travel underwater for miles with the whale even though you couldn't breathe underwater (to take on the properties of the whale, even though you were still human). The Tower of Babel held a similar fascination: reaching for the sky and beyond, language crisscrossing, meaning slipping through the gaps left. Decades later, they became the Whale of Babel.

In your book, the Museum of Collective Memory is just what it sounds like—an actual place that anyone can tap into and access anytime from anywhere. Is it, in any sense, like what we understand as artificial intelligence (AI) today?

Oh, it's nothing like AI. I'm pretty disgusted with AI: how it's made; its value system; what it wrecks in executing that value system; how it's bastardised language; how it leeches people of their confidence; how its adoption is predicated on hype, bullying, or insecurity; how it's stopped people from recognising that they are their bodies as much as their minds, and that true change happens at the level of our bodies; how it has flattened

Pieter Lastman's 'Jonah and the Whale'; and (left) Tashan Mehta.



Mad Sisters of Esi: By Tashan Mehta, HarperCollins India, 424 pages, ₹599.

time to this thing we need to pass through as quickly as possible instead of live in; how it has stolen from us the understanding that doing a thing is more important than having the thing. I could go on. You could argue some of these issues have been in place before AI and you'd be right, but I've never encountered a technology, and its value system, that so efficiently encapsulates everything wrong with how we're choosing to live.

If we're reaching for a technology that we can access at any time and from anywhere, the closest analogy would be the internet, or at least the principles the internet began with. But honestly, I wasn't thinking of technology at all. I was thinking of museums and libraries, and old repositories of knowledge, where the finding is as key as the knowing. Then I was thinking of those same repositories organised in a form we couldn't understand, and on a logic that's cosmic—far beyond our capabilities, and almost as unruly as the atoms I talked about.

It's important that the Museum you see in the book isn't the real museum; it's our interpretation of it. There are corridors we can't map at all because they're the memories of nonhumans, and they may not appear as corridors at all. As with every-

thing in *Mad Sisters*, we're making up stories about a world in which we're only a part. We can't see the whole—and we know it.

Perhaps the novel's central concern is treating stories as living organisms rather than inert objects, and the connections between myth and history. What interested you about these themes?

It was family, and my cultural history. It's how I grew up. Most of the family stories told to me changed their details over time—and certainly changed according to the teller—and there was no desire to fix those details. It was assumed they would change to suit the moment in which the story was being told, to better live in the moment and for the person listening. It's the same with any oral storytelling tradition: the story morphs depending on the needs it must serve at the time it's told.

Orality and Literacy by Walter J. Ong is an excellent book that articulated much of these unnamed instincts for me. Storytelling is part of how we keep identity: as a Parsi, my grandmother told me Persian stories and our history to help me see where I came from. I loved them, but as I grew up, I saw how that history was closer to myth than any objective fact. Similarly, the Persian fairytales mingled with the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and Biblical stories, and the *Grimm's Fairytales*, and *Panchatantra*; it became this rich, muddled mess of folklore in my head. When I was writing *Mad Sisters*, I looked at that mess, including the purpose (and uselessness) of stories, and I sought to pin as much of its slipperiness as I could on the page.

Online discussions of your book, especially by western readers, often reflect the view that it is a departure from the norms and forms of western spec-fic writing. Would you agree? In what ways is your book culturally rooted as well as universal?

My book is culturally rooted in India and the experience of being from the Parsi community. The organisation of it as well sidesteps certain traditional western forms of how a fantasy novel unfolds. I'm hesitant to say it's a complete departure, of course, because there's incredible experimental spec-fic coming from around the globe that does what it wants, when it wants, and that's very much *Mad Sisters*' organising principle, too: to be free, and follow the shape it needs.

But when I was writing it, I did chase my experience of what it feels to live in India and be Indian: the plurality and verdancy of everything around us, this surrendering to factors outside of our control, this matter-of-fact acceptance of the mystical and unknowable (whether that's rooted in nature, storytelling, or supernatural beings), a sense of living being bigger than this life. These are the values that run as an engine underneath this book, and dictate how it flows.

Shrabonti Bagchi is a Bengaluru-based writer and editor.



Editor's
TAKE

Convergence amid constraints

India and Japan are now strategic partners, hedging against a region in flux and China's growing influence

On August 20, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his Japanese counterpart Shinjiro Koizumi signed a Memorandum of Arrangement on Maritime Security Cooperation in New Delhi – a document with considerable strategic weight. It builds on Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's July visit to Delhi, when the two governments unveiled over \$10 billion in agreements spanning artificial intelligence, clean energy and defence, and set a target of 10 trillion yen in Japanese investment over the coming decade.

The new arrangement gives the Indian Navy and Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force a formal framework for sharing maritime domain awareness, conducting search-and-rescue and disaster-relief operations, exchanging ship visits, and, crucially, exploring joint warship design and reciprocal repair facilities. Both countries have watched China's naval footprint expand across the Indian Ocean even as Beijing presses claims in the East and South China Seas. Tokyo's calculus has hardened since Takaichi's remarks last November that Japan could respond militarily to a Chinese move on Taiwan, comments still colouring ties with Beijing. Japan's recent easing of decades-old defence export restrictions, welcomed openly by Singh, signals a country recalibrating post-war pacifism to build real production capacity rather than lean solely on American guarantees. For India, the pact goes well with the 'Make in India' push in defence manufacturing and offers access to Japanese shipbuilding expertise that could speed naval modernisation. Both governments describe this as advancing a "free and open Indo-Pacific" – carefully avoiding the word China even as everyone understands the signal.

The challenges are real. Beijing's foreign ministry has already signalled discomfort with the broader partnership, warning that cooperation between neighbours must not target third parties. India must walk a tightrope: deepening security cooperation with a Quad partner while preserving the strategic autonomy that has long defined its foreign policy, and without irking China. The Quad has not held a leaders' summit since 2024, and doubts about how reliably Washington will stay invested in the region are precisely why bilateral hedges like this one matter more. Converting memoranda into genuinely interoperable navies also takes years – technology absorption, joint doctrine, and shared threat perception across two very different theatres – the situation in South China sea is very different from Indian Ocean. The way forward lies in patient institutionalisation rather than symbolism. Regular 2+2 ministerial dialogues, expanded logistics-sharing arrangements on the model of India's agreement with Washington, and genuine co-production projects – building on the newly launched UNICORN mast programme – would give this partnership operational substance. Anchoring bilateral gains within broader Quad initiatives. India and Japan are not building an alliance against China but coming closer to safeguard their own maritime interests, something that must be reiterated to keep tempers low in Beijing.

Education reform must factor in well-being

As classrooms evolve with new curricula, technology and changing approaches to assessment, emotional wellbeing can no longer remain a peripheral concern. A child's ability to handle anxiety, failure, relationships and uncertainty is as fundamental to preparing for life as academic achievement – and it is time education reform recognised that



NEERJA
BIRLA

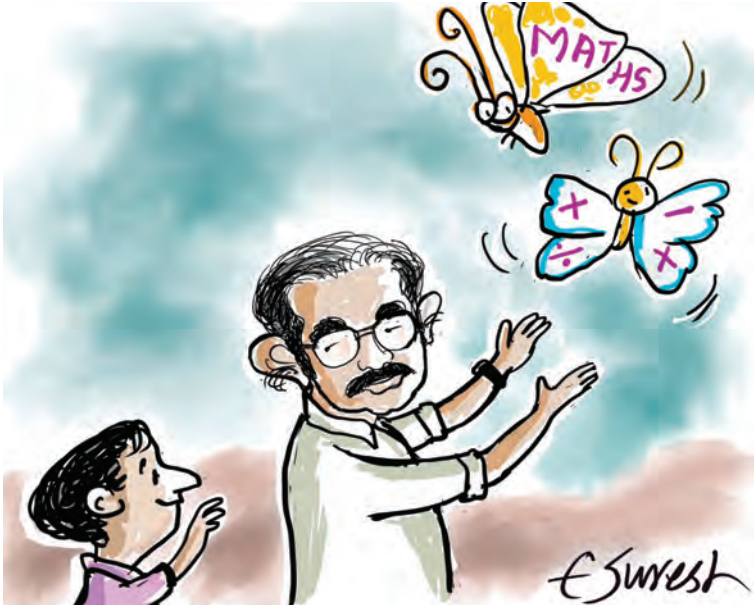
We have spent decades asking what our children need to learn. Perhaps it is time to ask another question: what do they need in order to learn well? Education in India has changed significantly. Curricula have become more progressive; technology has expanded access to knowledge and assessment is gradually moving beyond rote learning. These changes reflect a larger shift in how we think about preparing young people for an uncertain future. Yet one part of that preparation is still often treated as secondary: the emotional experience of learning.

A child does not leave their worries at the classroom door. Pressure to perform, fear of disappointing parents, friendship struggles, loneliness or uncertainty about the future can influence how they concentrate, participate and respond to challenges. If education is meant to prepare young people for life, then how they feel while learning cannot remain separate from what they learn.

This is why I believe the next chapter of education reform must place emotional wellbeing alongside academic development. Not instead of excellence, but as an essential part of enabling it. The need is increasingly visible. An NCERT survey conducted in 2022, cited by UNICEF India, found that 11% of students reported anxiety, 14% experienced extreme emotions, and 43% reported mood swings. The importance of early intervention is equally clear half of all mental health disorders begin by age 14, and 75% by the mid-20s. These figures should prompt us to look beyond whether a child is keeping up academically and consider whether they are developing the emotional resources to cope with the demands placed upon them. Emotional literacy is not a soft skill. It is a life skill. It begins with giving children the vocabulary to understand what they are experiencing. A child who can recognise frustration before it becomes anger, understand anxiety rather than simply fear it, or articulate that they need help is developing a capacity that will remain valuable far beyond school.

A psychologically safe classroom allows children to question, disagree, make mistakes and try again without feeling diminished. If children associate mistakes with embarrassment or failure with loss of worth, they may become more focused on avoiding errors than on discovering, experimenting and learning. The role of the teacher is therefore changing too; not into that of a mental-health professional, but into that of an informed and observant adult within a child's support system.

A sudden withdrawal, behavioural change or



A SUDDEN
WITHDRAWAL,
BEHAVIOURAL
CHANGE OR
DISENGAGEMENT
CAN SOMETIMES
SIGNAL THAT A
CHILD IS
STRUGGLING.
TEACHERS NEED
NOT BECOME
MENTAL-HEALTH
PROFESSIONALS,
BUT THEY DO NEED
THE AWARENESS
TO RECOGNISE
SUCH SIGNS,
RESPOND WITH
EMPATHY AND
KNOW WHEN
PROFESSIONAL
SUPPORT MAY BE
REQUIRED

The author is Founder and
Chairperson, Aditya Birla
Education Trust, and Founder,
Mpower

disengagement can sometimes signal that a child is struggling. Teachers need not become mental-health professionals, but they do need the awareness to recognise such signs, respond with empathy and know when professional support may be required. This also means rethinking how we interpret behaviour. Children facing mental-health concerns may be labelled "lazy", "hyperactive" or "naughty" when they may actually need understanding and support. In one school-based intervention, 95% of teachers reported a positive change in how they perceived students with mental-health concerns. Student referrals offer another important insight: 20% were related to poor academic performance, while others involved aggressive behaviour. Such changes should not automatically be viewed as disciplinary issues; they can also signal that a child may be struggling emotionally. But recognition is only the first step. Students must also have access to the right support, without placing the entire responsibility on teachers. But recognition must lead to access. UNICEF India notes that India has only 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, with shortages extending to psychologists and psychiatric social workers. This is why strengthening mental wellbeing in education cannot mean placing another responsibility on teachers and schools without strengthening the wider support system.

Schools need clear pathways to professional care, while counselling must be normalized as a resource rather than viewed as a last resort. Equally important is bringing parents into the conversation and strengthening relationships between students, teachers and families.

Often, meaningful support begins with something simple: an adult who listens without immediately comparing, correcting or trying to solve everything.

The experience of implementing the curriculum demonstrates how strengthening emotional skills and relationships can create a school environment that is more conducive to learning, while also contributing to academic outcomes. Across all grade levels, students became better at managing their emotions and more willing to seek help when needed. Both coping skills and help-seeking behavior improved significantly from baseline to endline across every age group.

The impact was also visible beyond the classroom, with parents observing positive changes in how children handled everyday conflicts. When students are equipped to regulate emotions, seek help and build healthier relationships, classrooms can become more supportive spaces where both well-being and learning can thrive. The approach must also recognise that wellbeing does not look the same for every young person. The pressures faced by a school student may differ from those experienced in university. Adolescence, young adulthood, family circumstances, social environments and individual experiences all shape how challenges are experienced. A responsive approach to wellbeing must therefore be responsive rather than one-size-fits-all.

When a young person is unable to cope, the consequences can affect attendance, learning, educational progression and, later, employability and participation in the workforce. Supporting wellbeing early is therefore not merely an investment in individual children. It is an investment in the country's human potential. A report card can tell us what a child has learnt. It cannot tell us whether they have developed confidence, empathy, adaptability or the ability to recover from disappointment. These qualities shape how young people navigate relationships, decisions, setbacks and opportunities.

That does not mean lowering academic expectations. Quite the opposite. We should want young people who can pursue excellence without tying their entire sense of worth to achievement; who can experience failure without seeing themselves as failures. The next education reform, therefore, should not ask us to choose between achievement and wellbeing. It should recognise that the two are deeply connected. Education has always been about preparing the mind for what lies ahead. The next step is to recognise the person behind that mind, their emotions, relationships, confidence, vulnerabilities and capacity to adapt. Perhaps the question for the next education reform is no longer only what do we want our children to learn? It is also: what do we want them to be equipped to handle when the lesson ends? If the answer includes uncertainty, failure, relationships, change and the inevitable challenges of life, then emotional wellbeing cannot remain at the margins of education.

When no one owns the problem

During my wait, I noticed several other irate customers. Some appeared to be daily-wage earners, conscious that every hour spent waiting meant lost income. A few struggled to communicate their problems and were asked to return another day. I could afford the time and had the confidence to persist. I wondered how easily they could.

Amazon scheduled the pickup for the day I was travelling. Since I was leaving early, the customer-service executive suggested that I leave the phone with a neighbour. After reaching my destination, I checked with the neighbour. The phone had been collected. Later that evening, however, I received a message saying that the pickup could not be completed because I was unavailable. From overseas, I tried contacting customer service. Automated calls offered no opportunity to explain the situation. Emails promised that an executive would contact me. Nobody did.

An escalation email directed me back to the same helpline. On returning to India, I resumed my calls. The system continued to maintain that the phone had not been collected. Eventually, I traced the pickup person through our condominium records. He remembered collecting it and, after checking, told me that the phone had been lying in the warehouse for almost a month. It could not be verified because it could not be switched on. That was precisely why I had returned it!

I called Amazon again. The executive was categorical that nothing could be done. Even speaking to a

senior, I was told, would make little difference. I then mentioned that I understood such calls were recorded and that, if nobody could resolve the matter, I might have to consider legal recourse. Things suddenly began to move. Someone contacted me, the pickup details were verified, and after another round of follow-up, my money was refunded. My purpose in recounting this experience is not merely to complain about a defective phone or poor service. Each person appeared constrained by the part of the system visible to them.

And still, for almost a month, the problem belonged to nobody. More troubling is what happens to those who do not have the time, confidence or resources to persist. Technology and standardised processes allow large organisations to handle millions of transactions efficiently. They are indispensable. But systems inevitably encounter situations they were not designed to anticipate. At that moment, someone needs both the willingness and the authority to look beyond the screen and ask whether what the system is saying actually makes sense. Perhaps the true test of a good system is not how smoothly it handles the routine, but how humanely it responds when something goes wrong. Ultimately, someone must be willing to own the problem.

The writer is a founder of Kala - Crazy About Literature And Arts, is an author, speaker, coach, arbitrator, and strategy consultant

PIC TALK

Artists perform during a 'Kalash Yatra' during the holy month of Shravan, at Badi Chaupar, in Jaipur. PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer

@TheDailyPioneer

instagram.com/dailypioneer

linkedin.com/in/The Pioneer

VANDE MATARAM BELONGS TO EVERY INDIAN CITIZEN

As an octogenarian from a freedom-fighter family, though apolitical, I extend my full support to the Congress Working Committee's reaffirmation that only the first two stanzas of Vande Mataram should be sung at party programmes.

As a true patriot and free-minded citizen, how can I accept the last four stanzas, which the Modi Government has politically added to the patriotic narrative? Previous BJP governments under Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani did not pursue this issue in the same manner.

Patriotic Indians are shocked, though not surprised, by the changing position of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The RSS, the BJP's ideological parent, did not participate in the freedom movement and, until 2002, did not fly the Tricolour at its

headquarters. The attempt to impose a particular interpretation of patriotism also ignores the historical context surrounding Vande Mataram. In 1937, Rabindranath Tagore advised that the first two stanzas could be treated separately because they had a broader national character, while the later verses contained imagery that could be unsuitable for inclusive national gatherings. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel were also part of that larger national movement.

India's patriotism cannot be reduced to political ownership. Vande Mataram belongs to the entire nation, and no political party should issue certificates of patriotism.

BIDYUT K CHATTERJEE | FARIDABAD

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

Sanctions tighten pressure on Iran

The United States is preparing its toughest sanctions in history against Iran, seeking to squeeze Tehran economically and cut off the financial lifelines sustaining it. Washington has also urged other countries, particularly China, a major buyer of Iranian oil, to join the effort. The proposed sanctions come alongside a revived US naval blockade, creating a pincer-like strategy designed to restrict Iran's access to trade, energy revenues and international markets. For Iran, the consequences could extend far beyond government corridors. Years of sanctions have already strained its economy, while the latest measures threaten to deepen Tehran's isolation amid heightened regional tensions. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has dismissed the US campaign as a failed strategy, arguing that intensifying economic pressure will not force Tehran into submission.

China, meanwhile, has rejected the premise that greater economic pressure will resolve the dispute, calling instead for diplomatic efforts. Its position could prove consequential as Washington seeks to restrict one of Iran's most important economic outlets.

The confrontation risks becoming a struggle over Iran's economic survival and its government's future.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Vande Mataram must unite India

The controversy raging across the nation over Vande Mataram is nothing short of tragic. A song that once united millions under the banner of freedom now finds itself entangled in divisive politics. During colonial rule, Indians sang it with pride; today, in an independent India, hesitation to sing it feels like a betrayal of that very spirit.

What is perplexing is the Congress party's decision to rake up the issue. Once built on Vande Mataram, the party now faces criticism for fragmenting its legacy. From Partition and the Syndicate-Indicate split to the division of Pakistan, critics point to a history of fractures. Now, they ask: "Is this the same Congress that fought for freedom?" The shame lies not in debate but in the perception that the party places itself above the nation. For the common Indian, the creed is simple: Rashtra Sarvopari – the nation above all. Mahatma Gandhi himself had warned that Congress might one day descend into a struggle for power rather than principle, even suggesting its dissolution after independence. Had that advice been heeded, perhaps the spectacle of public disrespect towards the national song would never have arisen. Every citizen must resist attempts to divide Vande Mataram. It is more than a song; it symbolises India's sacrifice, unity and pride. To diminish it is to diminish the nation's soul.

ARVIND TAPKIRE | MUMBAI

Can growth come without integrity?

Amicus curiae and senior advocate Vijay Hansaria has informed the Supreme Court that serious criminal cases are pending against the chief ministers of 14 of the 28 states. Revanth Reddy of Telangana tops the list, while West Bengal's Suvenud Adhikari follows close behind.

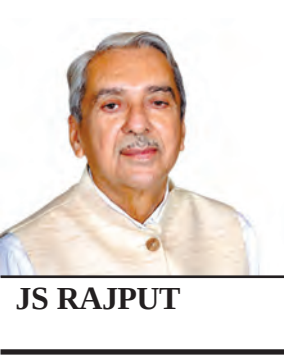
At the same time, Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks proudly of India crossing the \$4-trillion GDP mark and dreams aloud of a "trillion-dollar economy". But is this financial optimism worth celebrating if constitutional heads of states themselves stand tainted? Can India afford to bid adieu to morality in its quest to become a financial superpower? Economic growth is undoubtedly important, but prosperity without ethical governance risks undermining public trust. Political leaders hold immense responsibility, and allegations of serious criminality involving those at the highest levels of government inevitably raise questions about accountability, integrity and the standards expected in public life.

What we need is to moralise politics, not politicise morals. As philosopher Karl Popper warned, ignoring this distinction comes at our own peril. Development and ethical governance must go hand in hand. Without morality, even the most ambitious economic dreams risk becoming castles built on sand.

AVINASH GODBOLEY | MADHYA PRADESH

Are we fair to the young of India?

India cannot afford to treat education merely as another administrative department. It is the principal instrument through which the nation prepares its future. And none should ignore the fundamental truth that the future of India is initially being shaped primarily in its classrooms, and only afterwards in other places



There are occasions in the life of every nation when generational transition suddenly attracts far greater attention than it usually receives. People tend to take the growing up of the next generation as a routine process, overlooking the fact that this process is profoundly influenced by the rapid changes in knowledge and technology, which in turn affect the psyche of every human being. The transition of a child from innocence to a fully developed personality depends significantly on the external socio-cultural environment, which, too, is changing dramatically and continuously.

The beginning of the academic year 2026-27 has been disturbed in several ways. One is not referring only to the agitations witnessed at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi and in Ranchi, Jharkhand. There are also reports from several places of school students protesting against the absence of basic amenities such as functional toilets and drinking water, as well as the shortage of teachers. One often wonders whether the Right to Education Act has truly delivered what it promised to the children of India. Needless to repeat, it is the quality of school education that ultimately determines the quality and level of excellence in higher education. Education systems that nurture students' ideas and imagination—the two divine gifts that every child receives at birth—are obviously destined to excel in innovation. If the power of ideas and imagination is not impeded by the uncritical pursuit of routine, outdated pedagogies and assessment systems, and is not further weakened by inadequacies in basic support structures, creativity would become evident everywhere and in every field. Such an environment would also provide fertile ground for curiosity, which is again a common human possession. It serves no professional or academic purpose if the establishment simply blames “outsiders” for agitations such as those witnessed at Jantar Mantar and Ranchi.

It is a hard fact that external elements sometimes intrude with borrowed agendas of disruption and sabotage, often with political support from those who have been ousted from power and are eager to return. They attempt to push their own hidden agendas into otherwise genuine movements. The presence of politicians and known disruptors in large numbers at Jantar Mantar was evident to everyone. The general perception is that the presence of antisocial elements and political proxies contributed to the escalation of the situation and the subsequent use of force and unacceptable violence. The young students and ideologically unconstrained citizens have also noticed how some of the most vocal politicians and intellectuals have maintained silence over the student agitation in Jharkhand.

Over the years, agitations, demonstrations and protests in India have often followed a familiar pattern. There is sufficient evidence from numerous instances of external elements intruding into movements and attempting to destroy their original purpose, even when the cause is entirely genuine. An agitation may begin with sincerity of purpose and raise an issue that deserves the serious attention of those in power and of the nation at large. Yet the intrusion of politicians—particularly unscrupulous politicians seeking to score political points—sometimes assisted by criminal elements, can deprive a genuine agitation of its positive intent.

In a democratic system, there is no need to convert every protest into a political tug-of-war between the government and the Opposition. When this happens, the original goal is gradually lost. This appears to be what happened during the Delhi agitation. The education minister resigned. But so what? Was the resignation the only goal identified by the students? Certainly not. The political class may naturally have been pleased with the development, but the criticality of the issues raised by the students was lost in the political contest. Such political manipulation leaves young students in a state of confusion and dilemma. The ghosts of paper leaks and the cancellation of examinations continue to keep future aspirants on tenterhooks. The role of the coaching mafia is not unknown. It is extremely depressing to observe that teachers and paper-setters—the very people entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the integrity of examinations—have, in some cases, been charge-sheeted for betraying the confidence reposed in them by the nation. The details of how such operations were allegedly planned and executed are



IF WE ARE SERIOUS ABOUT BECOMING A KNOWLEDGE-DRIVEN NATION, THE FIRST QUESTION WE MUST ASK OURSELVES IS SIMPLE BUT PROFOUND: ARE WE REALLY BEING FAIR TO THE YOUNG OF INDIA?

The author is an educationist, a Padma Shri awardee, and works in religious amity and social cohesion

indeed chilling. If these allegations are proved true, will they not make every teacher—including me—feel ashamed?

One must repeatedly recall the observations of the late Chief Justice of India, Justice J. S. Verma, made in 2012 and subsequently cited in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, paragraph 15.2: “...a majority of stand-alone TEIs [Teacher Education Institutions]—over 10,000 in number—are not even attempting serious teacher education but are essentially selling degrees for a price.” This observation was made fourteen years ago by one of the most distinguished legal minds of contemporary India. Sadly, however, not only public perception but also the view among many concerned academics remains clear: nothing substantial has changed. The truth is that India is going to be seriously affected by the deterioration in the quality of education at practically every stage. The learners cannot be blamed. The systems of policy formulation, implementation and resource allocation must accept responsibility for permitting such a situation to develop. Those who matter in decision-making on such issues rarely send their own children to government schools. For them, there are private schools offering what they consider high-quality education. Subsequently, the children of fortunate families have access to foreign universities. If this were not so, media reports would not have appeared around the celebrations of the 80th Independence Day indicating that, in one state, five government-established universities reportedly had not a single regular faculty member. Will such a situation not make the hearts of investors in higher education flutter with the prospect of an obvious increase in their dividends? The greatest damage being inflicted on future generations is the failure to provide them with the necessary knowledge, skills and spirit to tackle the challenges of their working lives. I can put this on record on the basis of my personal interactions extending over six decades with children in schools, young people in colleges and universities, and those being trained to become school teachers: the fear of an uncertain future has gripped a majority of our learners—exceptions apart—across the country.

The anxiety and tension cast their dark clouds painfully over parents and families as well. The political class, particularly those who have been ousted from power, often focuses almost entirely on collecting political brownie points without offering alternative strategies for setting things right. Those in power, on the other hand, sometimes take solace in recalling similar mishaps of the past, when their political adversaries were in power.

One wonders: how does this help the nation or the aggrieved young people? Why cannot India think seriously and deliberate upon how to spare generations ahead from the genuine fear of an uncertain future? Young people in schools and higher education institutions are increasingly apprehensive about the manipulation of systems by mafias and corrupt elements, both within and outside the education system. Is it not time to recall the great dialogical tradition that we encountered while becoming acquainted with that great divine song, the Bhagavad Gita? Dialogue, reflection and reasoned deliberation have always been integral to India's intellectual tradition. They could once again help us move beyond confrontation towards solutions.

There are certain simple steps that need no lengthy deliberation. The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) should be revamped at the earliest and given an appropriate statutory status. Its recommendations and decisions should be followed by effective mechanisms for implementation and accountability. There is also a long-pending need for serious reconsideration of the nature and quality of leadership in academic institutions. Is it not incongruous that a civil servant could head even a textbook corporation? The appointment of heads of academic institutions, including Vice-Chancellors, requires in-depth scrutiny and a fresh approach based on academic leadership, institutional vision, integrity and professional competence.

If we are serious about becoming a knowledge-driven nation, the first question we must ask ourselves is simple but profound: Are we really being fair to the young of India?

Gen Z: A vibe is not a revolution



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Look at him on the road to Parliament. Twenty-two, hoarse from sloganeering, phone held high, live streaming his defiance to the nation, background music perfectly chosen. The country has decided he is a revolution.

Now look at the same phone an hour later, on the bus home. The astrology app is open, because a job interview is coming and the stars must be consulted. There are three messages from his mother about a girl his parents have shortlisted; he will oblige. And there is the spicy reel served by a machine that knows him better than he knows himself.

Both screens are real. The country has chosen to see only the first, and has begun garlanding it. I have spent more than twenty years looking at the second, in direct question and answer with the young, one person at a time, in lakhs. I am writing this to say: withdraw the garland. It is the surest way to make certain the young man never changes.

Every generation is certain that the next one is more rebellious. Hardly anyone asks: rebellious against what, and from where? The rebel himself has been assembled, by school, media, peer pressure, religion and culture. What they have produced is a type, and notice the type's very name: “Gen Z” was coined not by this generation but by marketers, people who slice the population into cohorts to sell to. A generation that wears its price sticker as its identity has already told you something about its condition.

I do not think anything has arrived. Leave the placards aside and see where this generation actually stands in line.

The astrology app market, worth some fourteen hundred crore rupees in 2024, is projected to grow tenfold by 2030; investors call it faith tech. Who pays? By the industry's own account, eighty-five per cent of users are under thirty-five. The market for superstition is being sponsored by the generation that calls itself forward-looking. And a person who cannot even beat imaginary stories will not stand up to a living oppressor.

The Lokniti-CSDS youth surveys complete the picture: more than half the young want a government job against a quarter who want to build their own; six in ten want a film banned if it hurts religious sentiment; eighty-four per cent of married youth had arranged marriages, overwhelmingly within caste.

I know the private face behind the placard; it sits before me daily. The questions are not about transforming the system. They are: my parents want me married, what do I do? The caste is different, how do I tell my father? A generation whose most urgent private question is how to find the courage to speak to its own father is being garlanded as the force that will confront the State!

Then there is love, the oldest school of intensity. A revolutionary is first a lover; both run on the capacity to stake everything on one thing. The heart that will not burn for a beloved is not about to burn for a nation.

The crowd wanted one minister to go. He went. And the education system that exists for the sake of “placements”, and the social system that pressures youth into suicides, stand exactly where they stood.

The grievances are legitimate: the queues for institutions and government jobs are long, and somebody breaking a queue is a fraud, and fraud deserves anger. But the anger was not against the queue; it was for the queue. A rebellion whose maximum demand is better admission into the machine is not a rebellion against the machine. It is the machine's own quality-control department, staffed free of cost.

Rebellion here is a mood one puts on, an aesthetic, what they themselves would call a vibe. And a vibe does not make a revolution. A vibe lifts when the weather changes. A revolution is what remains when the weather turns against you, and the weather turned the day one minister resigned.

There is a name for the root of all this: ahankaar, the ego. The ego is the first superstition. So long as there is an I here that must be secured at any cost, everything else follows. The ego is not afraid of revolutions; it steps into them happily. It is afraid of reality. Bring down one system, and the same centre hands you a brand new institution the next morning. Iran threw out the Shah in 1979 and put its women in the veil. Change of generation changes nothing. Change of centre is everything.

So, my young friends: everything above was said about you; now something to you. I am being blunt because I am your well-wisher, not your enemy. The ones celebrating you have known you for one news cycle; I have heard your silent wails for twenty years. Your restlessness is real, and it is the truest thing about you. My complaint is only with where you have been taught to fire from it: at the minister, at the system, at everything except the place it comes from.

Do not accept those coming to garland you; flattery is the cheapest salary ever invented, and it is paid to keep you asleep. The revolution you are capable of is nearer and harder: telling your father the truth this evening, deleting the app you consult before you dare to live, asking, when the anger rises, who exactly is burning in here. Stay with the question, because you will see your falseness on Tuesday and be back inside it by Friday, unless the seeing is joined by the intent to be free of it. That intent is the only thing entirely yours to give.

You have been cheated, yes, but the exam leaks and the rest are the small cheating. The big cheating is that in all your years of education, nobody ever turned your attention toward the one doing all the wanting and fearing. That education was your birthright, and it was withheld. Go get it: it requires one honest person, and you are allowed to be the first one you meet.

So drop the tag; it was never your name. You are not Gen Z or any fancy thing. You are not special, and hear that as the liberation it is. The work is the work it has always been.

It is open. It has always been open. Come.



Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life



As India marks Reforms Utsav, celebrating 12 years of governance reforms under the leadership of the Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, agriculture stands out as a major success. The Government's farmer-first approach has focused on raising incomes, reducing cultivation costs, strengthening risk protection and bringing modern infrastructure and services from farm to market. Direct benefit transfers, crop insurance, institutional credit, irrigation, digital markets, farm infrastructure, soil health, mechanisation and technology-enabled advisories have together improved the operating environment for farmers.

The results are visible. India's total foodgrain production is estimated at 376.56 million tonnes in 2025-26, the highest ever in the country's history. Agricultural exports, which stood at USD 32.08 billion in FY 2014-15, are projected to reach a record USD 52.55 billion in FY 2025-26. Recent GST rationalisation has also supported this direction by reducing rates on tractors below 1800 cc, several bio-pesticides, micronutrients and other farm-linked inputs. On the farm advisory side, initiatives such as the National Pest Surveillance System and Bharat-VISTAAR are helping improve pest intelli-

The next farm reform must protect India's harvest

gence and decision-making. These initiatives are laying the foundation for an integrated ecosystem where production, pest surveillance and market access are increasingly interconnected.

This is why crop protection should become a central part of the next phase of reform. A country producing and exporting at record levels needs a modern system to protect crops and preserve its competitive edge in global markets. Crop protection sits at the intersection of productivity, farmer income, food safety and export readiness. A pest outbreak can reduce yield. The wrong product or improper application can jeopardise residue compliance. A spurious input can damage the farmer's crop and weaken trust across the value chain.

These pressures are intensifying. Climate variability is changing pest behaviour and infestation windows. A study published in Science estimated that for wheat, rice and maize, yield losses from insect pests could increase by 10-25% for every degree Celsius of warming. Official estimates placed before Parliament suggest that pests, diseases and weeds account for about 10-35% of annual crop losses in India, depending on the crop and season. Separately, a CropLife India and YES Bank knowledge report estimates that nearly 72 lakh crore worth of crop yield is lost annually due to pests.

Pests are creating a market-access challenge as well. The EU RASFF system, the US FDA import refusal system and APEDA's export advisories show that residue compliance has become a recurring concern across high-value markets. APEDA's advi-



sory on rice exports to Lebanon illustrates how quickly residue-related concerns in one market can influence requirements elsewhere. Assam tea faces a similar challenge, with reports warning that tighter European residue limits could affect around 40 million kg of high-end Assam tea exports to Europe and the UK.

India's response must begin at the production stage. Compliance depends on farmers knowing which product is approved for which crop, how it should be applied, when it should be applied and how long the crop must wait before harvest. Integrated Pest Management must become more central in practice. Surveillance, correct diagnosis, economic thresholds, resistant varieties, field hygiene and responsible use of crop protection products all have a role. Better pest management is ultimately about correct use, not more use.

Access to a wider basket of crop protection technologies enables farmers to choose the most effective solutions for their crops and pest pressures. Yet India has only around 380 registered molecules, compared with nearly 1,200 available globally, limiting access to newer tools needed to manage resistance, improve productivity and meet evolving export standards. One reason for this gap is the absence of Protection of Regulatory Data (PRD) in India. A well-designed PRD framework can encourage innovation and facilitate faster access to newer, more selective and lower-dose crop protection solutions with improved stewardship practices. When used in accordance with approved labels and Good Agricultural Practices, these technologies can help farmers manage pests pressure more effectively, optimise spray intensity and better align with the increasingly stringent residue requirements of international markets. At the same time, farmer training, adherence to approved uses and pre-harvest intervals, along with robust testing and traceability systems, remain critical for ensuring compliance with prescribed Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs). Major agricultural economies, including the EU, the US and China, provide time-bound regulatory data protection to encourage innovation. India too can design a calibrated framework for new molecules that promotes earlier access to advanced technologies while preserving competition through independent data generation and eventual generic entry. Such a model would benefit farmers today and expand opportunities for domestic manufacturing and exports over time. Reforms Utsav should be seen not as the culmination of agricultural reforms, but as a call for the next phase. India has strengthened its

production base, built export-oriented systems and embraced digital agriculture. Crop protection regulation must now keep pace with this transformation. A Protection of Regulatory Data (PRD) framework can accelerate access to newer crop protection technologies and enhance the competitiveness of Indian agriculture. The proposed Pesticides Management Bill, 2025 presents a timely opportunity to provide the regulatory foundation for this transition by replacing the framework established under the Insecticides Act, 1968. Its focus on digitisation, stronger action against spurious products, improved compliance and enhanced regulatory oversight is a welcome step. To serve farmers in the next decade, the legislation should also enable faster registration pathways for innovative molecules, lower-risk products and new uses, alongside greater emphasis on label expansion for export-oriented and minor crops. As global markets become more demanding, these reforms are essential to protect yields, raise farmer incomes and reinforce India's position as a trusted supplier in global agricultural trade.

The next milestone should be an ecosystem where crop protection decisions are guided by science, traceability, timely advice and access to modern tools, all geared towards improving outcomes for farmers. That is how India can secure farmer incomes, enhance food safety and build high-value agricultural exports that meet the standards of increasingly discerning global markets.

The writer is agriculture-policy analyst, writes on agro, issues, policies and reforms

Trust Test

A 16-day hunger strike ending after the Jharkhand government agreed to scrap a controversial recruitment examination may look like the conclusion of a protest. It is not. The more consequential question is whether the government can now restore something far harder to legislate: the confidence of young people in the fairness of the state. The Jharkhand protests began with allegations of irregularities in competitive examinations, but their significance extends well beyond one examination or one state. For thousands of young Indians, government employment represents security in an economy where stable jobs remain scarce. Years are spent preparing for examinations, often after spending substantial amounts on coaching. When an examination is cancelled, delayed or suspected of being compromised, the loss is not simply administrative. Time, money and expectations disappear with it.

That explains why cancelling an examination is not enough. The Hemant Soren government has now agreed to scrap the JSSC-CGL examination, cancel examinations conducted by the private agency TDPL and investigate recruitment examinations dating back to 2014. It has also promised reforms to the examination system. These are significant concessions. Yet protesters continue to demand a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation. That demand deserves attention, even if a CBI investigation is not the answer to every administrative failure, or if the agency's record is spotty at best. Its persistence demonstrates the central problem: the protesters want an investigation whose credibility they can accept, even if this may have a political tinge. This is where the episode becomes a test of governance.

A government can announce an inquiry, appoint a committee and cancel an examination. But if citizens believe that the institutions investigating alleged wrongdoing are themselves insufficiently independent, each response risks becoming another reason for suspicion. The cycle is particularly dangerous in recruitment, where the state is effectively asking young citizens to accept that merit will be recognised through a system they can trust. There is also a difficult problem behind the government's latest announcement. If investigations into examinations conducted since 2014 uncover irregularities, what happens to those who cleared them without wrongdoing and have already entered government service? Correcting one injustice cannot create another. Reform must distinguish between institutional malpractice and individual culpability.

The episode therefore cannot be judged simply by whether the protesters return home. The hunger strike ending is welcome because prolonged fasting should never become a necessary instrument for obtaining accountability. But a protest ending and a grievance being resolved are not the same thing.

Jharkhand now has an opportunity to demonstrate that it understands the distinction. A credible investigation, transparent publication of findings, protection of genuinely affected candidates and meaningful reform of the examination machinery would begin repairing institutional trust. For India's young job aspirants, that is the real issue. The ending of the 16-day fast is welcome, but it does not mark the end of the agitation. A section of the protesters continues to demand a CBI inquiry, with some still fasting. The government has won breathing space, not closure.

Escalation Test

Britain's response to Russia's latest warning over British-made drones used in strikes inside Russian territory is more consequential than the exchange of threats might suggest. It marks another step towards an uncomfortable reality of the Ukraine war: Western countries are becoming increasingly involved in shaping not merely Ukraine's ability to resist Russia, but its ability to take the war to Russia. Britain's position is understandable. Russia invaded Ukraine and continues to occupy a substantial part of its territory. Kyiv cannot realistically be expected to fight a war of self-defence while accepting a permanent geographical limitation on where it may strike the military infrastructure sustaining Russia's aggression. Oil refineries, logistics centres, weapons facilities and other strategic targets inside Russia are legitimate components of Ukraine's war effort if they contribute directly to Russia's capacity to wage war. Yet legitimacy does not eliminate risk.

The more sophisticated Ukraine's Western-supplied weapons become, the harder it will be for Moscow to regard Britain simply as an arms supplier standing outside the conflict. Long-range drones, cruise missiles and electronic-warfare systems do not merely add to Ukraine's arsenal. They alter the strategic reach of the Ukrainian military. And when such systems are used against targets hundreds of kilometres inside Russia, Moscow has an obvious incentive to hold the countries providing them responsible. This is precisely why Britain's refusal to be intimidated matters. If every Russian warning could force a Western government to impose its own restrictions on Ukraine, Moscow would possess an indirect veto over Western policy. The Kremlin would have an incentive to threaten escalation whenever Ukraine acquired a new capability. But there is a difference between refusing to be intimidated and refusing to recognise danger. Britain must do both things simultaneously: maintain support for Ukraine while ensuring that the conflict does not drift into a direct confrontation between Nato states and Russia.

That requires political clarity. Western governments should be explicit about what assistance they are providing, what objectives they seek and what limits they recognise. Ukraine should retain the ability to degrade Russia's military capacity, but its allies must also understand that every technological advance carries strategic consequences. The Russian warning should therefore neither be dismissed as empty bluster nor treated as an instruction to retreat. Russia has repeatedly used the threat of escalation to discourage Western assistance to Ukraine. At the same time, Moscow has demonstrated that it is prepared to retaliate in unpredictable ways, including through cyber operations, sabotage and other forms of pressure below the threshold of open war. The real test for Britain is not whether it can sound defiant. It is whether it can remain steadfast without becoming reckless. Supporting Ukraine for as long as necessary is a legitimate strategic commitment. But the longer the war continues, the more important it becomes to distinguish resolve from escalation. Britain must help Ukraine change the balance of the war without allowing the balance between war and wider European conflict to disappear.

First food polluted

A study evaluated breast milk of randomly selected 40 lactating mothers living in regions of different districts along the Gangetic plain in Bihar where people use uranium contaminated groundwater. The study revealed significantly high uranium content in breast milk of lactating mothers. Exposure to uranium can pose significant health risks including kidney damage, bone damage and an increased risk of cancer

Breast milk is referred to as the gold standard of nutrition. For infants, it is the safest and the most complete nourishment with a unique composition - 87 per cent water, and the rest being macro- and micronutrients - seven per cent carbohydrates (mainly lactogen), four per cent lipids, and 1 per cent protein and others (vitamins and minerals).

Its composition changes with lactation periods, which is caused by physiological factors as well as the corresponding needs of infants. At the beginning of the lactation period, during the initial 3-4 days, colostrum is produced. The first milk is packed with antibodies that protect babies from diseases and death, then immature milk (for about 2 weeks) and finally mature milk.

Colostrum is intended to provide immune protection to babies against numerous environmental pathogens. In mature milk, the concentration of lipids is higher than in colostrum. Even if mothers get sick, their bodies automatically create antibodies in breast milk to fight infections, which then protect their babies from the same illness, creating what experts call "the most personalized form of medicine" that adapts uniquely to each baby's health needs and environment. Scientists and public health authorities, including the World Health Organization (WHO), have aptly described breast milk as a newborn's first vaccine and primary defense against diseases.

Honed by evolution, its composition - macronutrients and micronutrients, bioactive molecules and even stem cells - supports optimal growth, strengthens immune defenses and aids neurodevelopment. Breast milk dampens inflammation, neutralizes pathogens and shapes the gut microbiome of infants. By promoting the maturation of mucous membranes, it lowers the risk of allergies, autoimmune disorders and also contributes to the proper development of the gastrointestinal, nervous, endocrine and immune systems. It protects against obesity and respiratory infection as well.

Above all, components of breast milk are now being explored as potential therapies for adult conditions, from cancer and

cardiovascular diseases to arthritis and irritable bowel syndrome. In 2015, a long-term study published in The Lancet Global Health provided evidence that long duration of breastfeeding is intimately associated with higher intelligence in adulthood, more years of schooling and greater earnings.

Indeed, for all practical purposes, "breast milk is nature's nectar." But this nectar is also a biofluid which gets affected by environmental pollution. A growing body of studies are now detecting environmental contaminants in breast milk across India. Persistent fat-soluble organic chemicals present in a woman's body tend to accumulate in her adipose tissue. When lactation begins and fat stores are mobilized to produce milk, a fraction of those lifetime accumulations of environmental pollutants can pass to the infant. During lactation, specialized transporters in mammary epithelial cells, whose activity increases markedly, draw these components including pollutants from the mother's bloodstream into the alveolar lumen of the mammary gland, from which milk is secreted. Fearfully, transfer of many environmental pollutants traced in breast milk follow the biological pathways followed by essential elements.

Consequences of indiscriminate use of pesticides in agriculture and food to control pests, and widespread use of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in paints, lubricating and hydraulic fluids, and also as plasticizers, are posing serious threats to the living organisms. Trace amounts of these compounds that enter the body get accumulated due to their solubility in body fat. Those chemicals refuse to degrade. They even undergo biomagnification, the process through which the concentration of these pesticides multiplies as they move up the food chain. Several studies worldwide confirm the presence of DDT and its metabolites (DDE) in breast milk. Business Inside India (9 February 2023) reported over 100 infants' deaths from pesticide exposure in breast milk. A study by Lucknow's Queen Mary Hospital linked pesticides in breast milk to the death of around 111 newborns in Maharajganj district of Uttar Pradesh during a period of ten months.

Another problem is the presence of heavy metals - arsenic, lead, cadmium, and even mercury - in breast milk. These metals are ubiquitous in nature. Human exposure to

metals usually occurs during occupational activities, mainly through inhalation and dermal routes in mining and industry, and over a lifetime, from water and food consumption and exposure to soil, dust and air. For the general population, exposure comes mainly from water and food consumption.

As many as 75 studies published since 2000 reporting levels of toxic metals like arsenic, lead, mercury and cadmium in breast milk were reviewed. Lead was the metal

most investigated in breast milk (43 studies), and for which the highest levels were reported (up to 1515 micrograms per litre). Arsenic was the least investigated (18 studies), with highest levels reported for breast milk (up to 149 micrograms per litre) collected from regions using high-arsenic contaminated drinking water.

Data from 34 studies showed high levels of mercury in breast milk of women living among high seafood-consuming communities. Cadmium levels in breast milk were lowest, with mean value less than two micrograms per litre in 29 studies. Results of risk assessments indicated that the intake of arsenic, lead and mercury by infants through breastfeeding can be considered a health concern in most regions of the world. These toxic metals cross the placenta and the blood-brain barrier, and are excreted through breast milk. Exposure to lead and mercury has been related to neurotoxic problems later in life.

The presence of microplastics (MP) in breast milk raises serious concerns about their potential impact on the health of the baby. Defined as plastic particles smaller than 5 mm, MPs have been detected in various environmental matrices, including water, air, and soil. Those are also found in various food and beverage products and can enter the human body through ingestion, or inhalation leading to bioaccumulation in tissues such as blood, lungs, placenta and feces. After entering the bloodstream, they can cross the blood-milk barrier. The barrier allows a wider range of particle sizes to pass compared to the placenta barrier. Infants are also exposed to MPs from using plastic baby products like breast pumps, storage

Table

Pollutant category	Common examples	Potential impact on infants
Heavy metals	Lead, Mercury, Arsenic, Cadmium	Neurocognitive delays, reduced IQ, kidney stress, and behavioral issues.
Pesticides including Persistent organic pollutants (POPs)	PCBs, DDT, Dioxan	Endocrine disruption, altered immune system and impacts on thyroid function, impaired neurodevelopment and hormone balance.
Microplastic	BPA, Phthalates	Endocrine disruption, inflammation, oxidative stress and metabolic disorder.

bags and bottles. MPs are known to carry toxic additives such as bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates which have potential impacts on the body of infants because of their immature developing organs and weak immune system. Deleterious impacts of some pollutants found in breast milk on infants have been mentioned in the Table published alongside. (**see table above**).

Uranium-238 is the most abundant (accounting for about 99 per cent) isotope of the naturally occurring radioactive element uranium. Presence of U-238 in breast milk is the latest threat. Uranium is found widely in granite and other rocks. It can enter groundwater through natural processes, especially in oxygen-rich environments, and also due to human activities like mining, burning of coal and use of phosphate fertilizers which contain a trace amount of uranium.

A scientific study evaluated breast milk of randomly selected 40 lactating mothers living in regions of different districts along the Gangetic plain in Bihar where people use uranium contaminated groundwater. The study revealed significantly high uranium content in breast milk of lactating mothers. Exposure to uranium can pose significant health risks including kidney damage, bone damage and an increased risk of cancer. Around 70 per cent of the infant population faced non-carcinogenic health effects. Usually, infants are highly vulnerable to potential non-carcinogenic in comparison to their mothers due to their real time of elimination of U-238 from their bodies. In India, some 18 states and 151 districts are affected by uranium poisoning.

A general solution to breast milk pollution lies in strengthening environmental regulation, monitoring the quality of groundwater, reassessing fertilizer production, rationalization of agricultural practices, and expansion of biomonitoring research. Regular testing of water sources and nationwide studies on breast milk contamination could provide a solution. A famous American proverb goes: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children." It is our moral responsibility to ensure that we bequeath a healthy planet "in no worse condition than we receive it." But shamefully we have polluted the planet to such an extent that the first food of the next generation has been put under threat.

The Korea Herald

Election mismanagement and K-Democracy

It is difficult not to feel both dismayed and disappointed by the series of election management failures recently revealed at South Korea's National Election Commission.

During the local elections in June, some polling stations ran short of ballots, forcing voters to wait for extended periods and, in some cases, disrupting their ability to vote as scheduled. Problems have also surfaced in the handling of the reporting of voter turnout and vote-counting results.

The term "K-democracy" reflects the pride Koreans take in the country's remarkable democratic development.

South Korea overcame decades of authoritarian rule and has achieved repeated peaceful transfers of power, developing into one of the world's advanced democracies.

That makes the failures in election management, one of the basic elements

of democracy, particularly disturbing. If public confidence in election results begins to erode, trust in democracy itself can also be shaken, along with an important source of national pride.

Disappointment and anger, however, will not solve the problem. The current controversy should instead become an opportunity to examine weaknesses in Korean democracy and strengthen the institutions that protect it. In addressing the problem, at least three principles should be kept firmly in mind.

First, administrative failures in election management must be clearly distinguished from conspiracy theories alleging systematic election fraud.

Claims of organized nationwide election manipulation have largely faded from

mainstream South Korean politics after the massive election fraud of 1960, but resurfaced after the April 2020 parliamentary elections. Allegations emerged that Chinese hackers had infiltrated the NEC's computer system to manipulate election results, that counterfeit ballots had been used, and that early-voting results had been fabricated.

Yet no credible evidence has been presented to substantiate these claims. The Supreme Court rejected allegations of systematic fraud in lawsuits seeking to invalidate election results.

Security inspections of the NEC's information systems involving the National Intelligence Service and the Korea Internet & Security Agency likewise found no evidence that North Korea or another outside actor had intruded into the NEC's computer systems. The structure of Korean elections itself makes large-scale manipulation

extraordinarily difficult. More than 14,000 polling stations and roughly 250 counting centers operate nationwide, involving hundreds of thousands of public officials, temporary election workers, party-appointed observers and ordinary citizens.

Ballot-sorting machines operate offline rather than through external internet connections, and the final verification process involves human inspection. Systematically manipulating a nationwide election under such circumstances would require extensive coordination and silence among a vast number of people.

IN MEMORIAM

In loving memory of **Dr. Amalendu Kr. Gayen**, who passed away on this day, 1983. — Adhiraj, Ashmit, Joyatri, Anirban & Dipali.

Letters To The Editor ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Mining tax

Sir, The proposed amendments to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 (MMDR Act) seek to bring greater transparency, uniformity and predictability to mineral taxation, an objective that deserves broad support. However, the attempt to restrict State taxation of "mineral-bearing land" raises a legitimate constitutional and federal concern.

The Supreme Court's 2024 MADA judgement clearly recognised the States' power under Entry 49 of the State List to tax land, including mineral-bearing land. Parliament's power under Entry 54 to regulate mines and mineral development cannot automatically extinguish this constitutionally assigned fiscal power. Any such restriction should therefore be carefully examined to avoid upsetting the federal balance.

A more durable solution could emerge through consultation and consensus under Article 252, as demonstrated in the field of water pollution legislation. States and the Centre should jointly evolve a transparent framework that rationalises royalties, cesses and other levies while adequately accounting for environmental and carbon costs.

Yours, etc., Sanjay Chopra, Mohali, 19 August.

Plug the holes

Sir, Apropos "West Bengal launches Ayushman Bharat, WB health insurance scheme" (17 August), neither the list of empanelled hospitals nor measures to check refusal of patients with Ayushman cards has been announced.

Video recording of corporate admission desks, display of bed occupancy and the

hidden costs as in the case of the former "Swasthya sathi" need to be addressed.

Corruption related to joint replacement surgery, cataract surgery, cancer and high-value cardiac cases should be given a fresh look. Media glare on a colourful rollout programme should not overshadow the sustenance of the scheme.

Yours, etc., Basudeb Dutta, Santipur, 17 August.

Banking

Sir, The Finance Minister's initiative to constitute a panel to examine the future of banking in the context of Viksit Bharat is both timely and necessary. India's ambitions for faster economic growth and broader prosperity will require a banking system that can efficiently mobilise capital and provide reliable financial support to every

productive sector.

The panel should focus on making banks more resilient, innovative and responsive to changing economic needs. Digital platforms, artificial intelligence and fintech solutions can improve the delivery of banking services, particularly in underserved areas. However, rapid technological expansion must be supported by strong cybersecurity, data protection and effective regulation.

Special attention should also be given to the credit needs of farmers, MSMEs, entrepreneurs and startups. Affordable and timely finance can encourage investment, innovation and employment. At the same time, banks must strengthen due diligence, corporate governance and risk-management practices to minimise the possibility of fresh non-performing assets.

Yours, etc., Rukma Sharma, Jalandhar, 18 August.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Industrial disputes

Employers, workers need clarity about rights

THE Supreme Court’s ruling on the definition of “industry” is a watershed for India’s labour law framework. A nine-judge Constitution Bench has held that the expansive interpretation adopted in the *Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board v. R Rajappa* judgment of 1978 will not govern fresh disputes under the Industrial Relations Code (IRC), 2020. The ruling separates the new labour regime from a precedent that shaped industrial jurisprudence for nearly half a century. The 48-year-old judgment gave “industry” a broad meaning, which was regarded as “worker-friendly”. Its triple test covered systematic activities involving employer-employee cooperation in producing or distributing goods and services, irrespective of profit motive. As a result, workers in institutions such as hospitals, educational establishments, clubs and government welfare bodies could claim protection under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947.

The new judgment does not erase that legacy. The Court has retained the core of the triple test for disputes governed by the repealed 1947 Act, including pending proceedings. It has, however, refined aspects of the test and made it clear that the 1978 ruling cannot serve as the controlling interpretation of “industry” under Section 2(p) of the IRC. Future cases must therefore be decided according to the new law’s “text and context”.

This distinction provides courts and employers with a fresh statutory framework, while preserving existing expectations in disputes arising under the old Act. At the same time, the transition could cause uncertainty until courts develop a consistent body of precedent under the IRC. Justice BV Nagarathna’s dissent raises a vital concern: legal certainty is itself a component of industrial peace. Statutory change should not lead to a dilution of labour protection. Employers and workers need clarity about their respective rights. Against the backdrop of the industrial unrest in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana earlier this year, the new legal landscape must ensure a level playing field.

Sweet dilemma

Ethanol ambitions face sugar reality

INDIA’s decision to allow the duty-free import of 10 lakh tonnes of raw sugar is more than a response to soaring prices; it is a reality check for its ambitious ethanol policy. Less than two years after celebrating the nationwide rollout of E20 petrol, the government now finds itself balancing two competing imperatives — reducing oil imports and ensuring affordable sugar for consumers. The episode underscores a classic policy dilemma: when food and fuel compete for the same crop, neither objective can be pursued in isolation.

The ethanol blending programme has delivered undeniable gains. By achieving 20% blending ahead of schedule, India has reduced its dependence on imported crude, supported sugar mills and created an additional income stream for cane farmers. For a country that imports around 85% of its oil, these are significant achievements. Yet the programme has also exposed structural vulnerabilities. Sugarcane is among India’s most water-intensive crops and its diversion towards ethanol has coincided with weak harvests in Maharashtra and Karnataka due to erratic weather and disease. The resulting supply squeeze has pushed sugar prices sharply higher, forcing the government to halt exports, consider limiting cane for ethanol and now permit imports.

The lesson is not that ethanol blending has failed. Rather, rigid targets cannot override agricultural realities. A resilient biofuel strategy must be flexible enough to respond to crop conditions and domestic food needs. Greater investment in second-generation ethanol made from crop residues and agricultural waste would reduce dependence on sugarcane while advancing climate goals. India’s energy transition deserves applause, but it cannot come at the cost of food inflation or unsustainable water use. The sweetest policy is one that keeps both fuel tanks and kitchen shelves adequately stocked.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, AUGUST 22, 1926

Indian Currency Bill

AT Wednesday’s meeting of the Assembly, Sir Basil Blackett, Finance Member of the Government of India, formally introduced the bill further to amend the Indian Coinage Act of 1906 and the Indian Paper Currency Act of 1928. The Bill was to be taken up for discussion on the 23rd instant, that is, two weeks after its publication in the Gazette of India. The statement of objects and reasons says that the Bill has been framed to give effect to those recommendations of the Royal Commission on Indian Currency and Finance which relate to the immediate stabilisation of the rupee in relation to gold and to the interim measures required during the transition period pending the bringing into operation of their proposals for the transfer to a Reserve Bank of the control of note issue and other functions at present performed by the Secretary of State and the Government of India. The Bill consists of five clauses, of which the second and the third give effect to the recommendation about the ratio of 18 pence gold for the rupee. Another clause gives effect to the recommendation of the Commission that sovereigns and half sovereigns, which have been recognised as legal tender coins, should cease to be so recognised. The remaining clauses give effect to the government’s obligation to buy or sell gold or gold exchange at the accepted gold parity of the rupee. If the Bill is passed, it will come into force from November 1, 1926. The report of the Commission having been severely criticised in India on the ground that the recommendations are injurious to the country, the government’s attempt at passing the Bill with such haste is to be deprecated.

Delhi can’t afford to lose Dhaka connect

PM Modi has done well by absorbing Tarique Rahman’s Sheikh Hasina tantrum



THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

BANGLADESH’s new President, the once Left-leaning Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, was all of 23 years old back in March 1971, at home in Thakurgaon in northern East Pakistan, when he heard that Pakistani military officers had unleashed Operation Searchlight all over the country and were massacring unarmed Bangladeshi nationalists, intellectuals and politicians. Two days later, on March 27, Alamgir and friends heard Major Ziaur Rahman, a serving Major in the Pakistan Army, give the rousing call for an independent Bangladesh over radio, on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, from his hideout in Chattogram (then Chittagong) — a message that was picked up by BBC and Radio Australia and relayed across the world.

“Joy Bangla!” said Major Zia as he ended his speech, unleashing for the first time a cry that would transform into a freedom chant in the coming weeks and months — admired by celebrities as diverse as Indira Gandhi and George Harrison, and equally disliked by Yahya Khan and Henry Kissinger — rallying the entire nation to join hands with India and forge the Mukti Bahini, which would lead by the end of the year to the India-Pakistan war and the liberation of Bangladesh.

As the situation deteriorated in April 1971 in Thakurgaon — named for a Chakraborty family with large lands, with a twin town called Thakurganj only 55 km away, across the border in Kishanganj district of Bihar — Alamgir and his family crossed the Nagar river into India’s West Dinajpur district, part of a swelling flood of refugees. There, in Islam-



OUTREACH : If the Dhaka elite is to be believed, Bangladesh President Mirza Alamgir (right) has advised PM Tarique Rahman to travel to Delhi for a meeting with PM Modi. PTI AND REUTERS



pur, a cycle repair shop man called Dilip allowed the family of seven to sleep in a room behind an almshouse. Jyoti Basu’s West Bengal and Karpoori Thakur’s Bihar offered clothes to the refugees and “training” to able-bodied men in youth camps. Weeks later, Indira Gandhi’s government got properly involved and Alamgir, amongst others, received “training” in earnest in Dehradun.

More than 55 years later, if the Dhaka elite is to be believed, senior Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader and now President Alamgir has advised Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, son of the selfsame Major Zia whose cry of “Joy Bangla” electrified the world — and gave its name to many things, including the contagious fevers then sweeping India as a result of the hundreds of refugee camps set up across the Bengal-Bihar-Tripura-Assam borderlands — that he should travel to Delhi to meet Prime Minister Modi, notwithstanding the Sheikh Hasina brouhaha.

Alamgir is believed to have pointed out that one woman, Sheikh Hasina, even if she was Bangabandhu’s daughter with whom India continued to have the closest ties, cannot hold the India-Bangladesh relationship hostage.

The sky must be the limit between India and all her neighbours, from the Karakoram to Cox’s Bazar.

That the 1971 War of Liberation remained an umbilical cord between the people of both countries, not just between leaders.

For the time being, though, Tarique’s proposed August 23-25 visit has been postponed, as both sides sort out the nitty-gritty. But the significance of PM Modi’s conciliatory message, in the wake of Bangladesh hardening its stance last week and making Tarique’s visit to India conditional on the extradition of Hasina, has not been lost on Dhaka.

It needed the PM to make that overture — come, we will give you an “honourable reception”, he said in a message to Tarique, keenly aware that Sheikh Hasina’s August 5 press conference had seriously upset him.

Modi understood quickly that only he could save the situation. That Bangabandhu’s daughter,

a VVIP who could do no wrong because her father had helped India break up Pakistan, could not be allowed to hijack the relationship. That the world had changed. That Bangladesh was again swimming in a dangerous sea, surrounded by sharks with names like China and Pakistan. That Tarique’s first visit as PM had been to Beijing and Kuala Lumpur, not Delhi. That the Bangladeshis, after all these decades, were being wooed by the military establishment in Rawalpindi — that Dhaka was crawling, once again, with ISI spies.

Certainly, the PM knows that India’s eastern flank needs protecting — that it remains not just the gateway to South-East Asia, but is key to security in India’s eight North-East states; Bangladesh shares common borders with five Indian states; last time there was a BNP government in power, 2001-2006, when Tarique’s mother Khaleda Zia was PM, a huge arms haul in Chittagong was seized just in time.

There’s also the realisation that India’s neighbourhood is in a bit of a churn. Pakistan remains in deep freeze, despite pleas by senior RSS leaders like Mohan Bhagwat and Dattatreya Hosabale to repair ties. Nepal’s PM has final-

ly met the Indian ambassador, but continues to mutter threateningly about China. Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives are quiet, but China’s shadow looms large. Certainly, India cannot afford to lose Bangladesh. It must find ways to revamp the old connect.

The one big difference between 1971 and 2026, of course, is that India’s hugely improved tie with the US has meant that India works much more closely today with the Americans in all parts of its neighbourhood, not just in Bangladesh — back in 1971, the US and Pakistan were a cinch. The rest of the story doesn’t need retelling.

Perhaps, PM Modi should take a leaf out of how big powers like the US and China play the game, both hedging and reaching out to smaller powers at the same time. India’s unique civilisational strength, meanwhile, demands that it punch much above its economic weight, especially in its neighbourhood, where ties are weighted down by language, religion, culture and ethnicity, imparting a continuum to the ends of India.

That’s why PM Modi has done well by absorbing Tarique Rahman’s Sheikh Hasina tantrum, and for the time being, putting it on the backburner — where it will be definitely resolved soon, a probable quid pro quo being that when she returns home to Bangladesh in December, which she has publicly promised to do, no harm will be allowed to come to her person and that of her family — and foregrounding the all-important tie between Delhi and Dhaka.

That’s why the sky must be the limit between India and all her neighbours, from the Karakoram to Cox’s Bazar — India First, yes, on the part of the neighbours, but also Neighbourhood First, on the part of India, signifying both an open wallet and an open heart. Certainly, a neighbourhood as diverse as this one is no child’s play. Restoring trust will take time. With the ‘Arthashastra’ by his side, the PM has taken the first move with Bangladesh. He must now steer the course.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Whatever fate awaits me, I will return to my people. — Sheikh Hasina

A close shave in Saddam’s Iraq

CVR JOGA RAO

I was posted in Baghdad (Iraq) from 1984 to 1988 for a building project. Saddam Hussein was then the undisputed leader of the country, holding the posts of President, Prime Minister and Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, the supreme policymaking body. He was also a regional strongman — Sheikhs and Emirs from Gulf countries frequently visited Baghdad to keep him in good humour.

Working with the Iraqi client organisation had its own challenges. We Indians knew no Arabic, while many of their engineers were not particularly comfortable with English.

We corresponded with the client in English, but every letter had to be accompanied by its Arabic translation. The client communicated with us entirely in Arabic. We engaged a part-time Arabic translator, who translated the client’s messages into English and translated and typed out the Arabic versions of our letters. We signed only the English versions.

Our translator was always in a tearing hurry as he worked for several Indian companies engaged in construction projects in Iraq. One day, the Iraqi project-in-charge (PIC) urgently summoned me to his office. I hurried there and found him pacing up and down the room. He thrust a piece of paper into my hands and exclaimed, “It’s jail for you and me!”

Puzzled, I looked at the letter. It was our routine response to a directive about a defective batch of reinforced cement concrete (RCC). We had written that, as instructed, we would soon begin dismantling the cast-on-site RCC.

The translator had expanded “RCC” as the Revolutionary Command Council. In writing, we had just promised to dismantle Iraq’s ruling political council! Once I explained the mix-up, the PIC broke into a relieved laugh. He promptly fed the letter into the shredder and said, “The concrete can wait, but you need to get rid of your translator immediately.”

When the project was nearing completion, Saddam Hussein paid an unannounced visit, accompanied by members of the RCC and the Iraqi project authorities. After touring the premises, he looked back at the building and remarked in Arabic, “The lady is well built and has good features, but she lacks makeup.” This elicited sycophantic giggles from the officers surrounding him.

That seemingly casual remark was enough to send the Iraqi project authorities back to the drawing board. The building, which was almost ready for handover, suddenly needed a makeover.

A French architectural consultant was appointed and a new project report was prepared, proposing improvements to the façade of the building and its surroundings. We submitted our quotation for the modifications. The proposal was approved, and we were awarded a \$20-million contract. The “makeup” not only cost a fortune but also extended our stay in Baghdad by 18 months.

The writer is a retired engineer based in Bengaluru

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Strict adherence to rules crucial

Refer to ‘Cast(e)ing the Census’; as a fellow democracy, India can learn key practical lessons from the US to address deep-seated gaps in health, education and public safety. The US Census Bureau tracks race and ethnicity effectively using standardised categories, along with data from the American Community Survey. The US links racial data directly to health trends, graduation rates, average incomes, and crime rates. This combined data helps leaders pinpoint specific problems — like local healthcare shortages, high dropout rates and high-crime areas — and send targeted help where it is needed most. To make sure a caste census promotes social justice, instead of creating a bureaucratic mess, India needs strict adherence.

MADHURI SHARMA, PHILADELPHIA (US)

Affordable education, not quota

Apropos of ‘Cast(e)ing the Census’; the enumeration of castes will generate data that could be misused for political gains. After Independence, only Scheduled Castes were enumerated separately to facilitate their social uplift. Even after 79 years of Independence, the majority of members of these historically disadvantaged communities have been unable to climb the social ladder. It is common knowledge that the benefits of reservation are cornered by the creamy layer, comprising relatively better-off families that have benefited from it across generations. Instead of dividing society along caste lines, education should be made affordable and accessible to everyone.

RAJESH GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

Greater role in decision-making

Refer to ‘Youth’s fight for stake in the present’; the article captures the growing frustration among young people and challenges the tendency to label them as impatient. However, the argument could be made stronger by connecting their protests with the ground realities they face — unemployment, expensive education, intense competition, examination pressures, inequality and limited opportunities. Do young people have any genuine role in decision-making? The central issue is not merely youth unrest; it is the widening gap between their aspirations and the system’s willingness to respond.

SIKANDAR BANSAL, SHIMLA

Communicate with lower ranks

Apropos of ‘Preventing fratricide in CAPFs’; regular meaningful communication between commanders and the troops is the most effective preventive measure. A commander who remains in close touch with his men can assess their morale, personal problems and stress levels before these turn into serious problems. Frustration and mental stress may set in among personnel living away from their families. Adequate recreational and welfare facilities can help release tension and promote camaraderie. Equally important are a responsive chain of command, clearly laid down SOPs and transparent promotion procedures. A combination of humane leadership, effective communication and a sound institutional system can significantly reduce such incidents.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), ZIRAKPUR

Strengthen public healthcare

With reference to ‘Healthcare pangs’; the widening gap between private and public health care systems is hitting the middle class hard. The expansion of private healthcare at the expense of public facilities has added fuel to the fire. The overemphasis on insurance models rather than directly upgrading public infrastructure leaves poorer sections highly vulnerable. Public healthcare is marred by overcrowding, equipment shortages and severe staff crunch. Excessive commercialisation of medical education has turned healthcare into a profit-driven business. India must robustly fund and strengthen public healthcare instead of relying on private market mechanisms and insurance schemes.

VITULL K. GUPTA, BATHINDA

Viksit Bharat a distant dream

With reference to ‘Healthcare pangs’; health and education are not on the priority list of Central and state governments. Healthcare facilities in government hospitals of the country are cheaper, but meagre. State-of-the-art private hospitals are extremely expensive. In the absence of quality education for students and good healthcare facilities for patients, Viksit Bharat 2047 is a distant dream. We must work hard with sincerity, without taking shortcuts, stop raising impractical slogans and making castles in the air.

SUNIL CHOPRA, LUDHIANA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

The real battle inside Tata Sons



ARUN MAIRA
FORMER MEMBER, TATA
ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE, &
EX-DIRECTOR, TELCO

TATA SONS is facing an existential crisis. The legal battles and personal conflicts within Tata Sons and the Tata Trusts cannot be resolved by the prevailing laws governing charities, financial institutions and business corporations. Tata Sons is getting tied up in knots by different laws.

Before selecting its next Chairperson, the board must ask itself fundamental questions: Is Tata Sons a philanthropic enterprise, an investment manager or a builder of industry? How should it be governed to fulfil the purpose of the existence of the Tata group? Should the quality of governance of Tata Sons be measured by stock market valuations or adherence to the Tata values of service to the nation and fairness to all stakeholders?

George Santayana said: "Those who forget history will repeat it." It is worthwhile to remember the history of conflicts between stakeholder and shareholder capitalism and between socialism and capitalism as competing ideologies

for economic governance in the last century. The Tata group's evolution is tied with it.

In the first half of the 20th century, Lord Keynes, the founder of Keynesian economics, advocated for government intervention whenever an insufficiency of citizens' incomes creates societal and economic crises. He helped US and European economies recover from their depressions.

Later, when the economic growth of Britain and US became sluggish, Milton Friedman convinced Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to adopt his ideas of free markets and private capitalism. Reagan declared, "Government is not the solution; it is the problem." Friedman elaborated: "The business of business must be only business." And the purpose of a business corporation is only to make profits for its investors, unfettered by regulations. Thus, Keynes advocated for the ease of living of the common man and Friedman for investors' ease of making profits.

When the Washington Consensus prevailed over the Soviet Union in 1991, Francis Fukuyama declared it as the end of ideological history: capitalism had vanquished socialism forever. India's history took a turn when India was compelled to accept a loan from the IMF in 1991 with conditions attached.

India was forced to open its borders for imports and dismantle its policies for building self-reliant industries. These



DRAIN : Tata Sons' cash flow is bleeding with the enormous amounts of money required to bail out the new service ventures that Natarajan Chandrasekaran promoted. REUTERS

changes impacted the Tata group. The group had built several companies that had developed their own technological capabilities while being open to learning from others: in steel-making (Tata Steel), vehicles (TELCO — now Tata Motors) and chemicals (Tata Chemicals).

Before 1991, TELCO competed with Japanese and European producers and exported Tata-made trucks and buses to 50 countries. Manufacturing technology is embedded in the hardware of manufacturing. Pioneering Tata companies built their own machines, tools and equipment. TELCO was a global pioneer in the use of CNC machines in the 1980s, some of which it designed and built inhouse.

However, the hard work of building manufacturing's hardware and the skilled manpower needed became unnecessary with imports of equipment and

Tata Sons must
prune its portfolio
to reduce its
financial burden.

technology following the liberalisation in 1991. That year marked a transition in the Indian economy and the Tata group.

Ratan Tata took over the reins of the group from JRD Tata in 1991. Liberalisation opened the markets for long- and short-term foreign investors. Import of finance was necessary for resolving India's financial crisis. Along with the money came demands of foreign investors for ease-of-doing business.

This put pressure on the government to ease regulation of labour markets and investors' acquisition of land and environmental resources for their businesses. Stakeholder capitalism with accountability to societal stakeholders in the business, which the Tata group had practised for 100 years, came under pressure from shareholder capitalism.

Ratan Tata transformed

Tatas into India's first international business group. Large Tata companies went global. With Tata's reputation for trustworthiness, they could access capital abroad more easily than other companies.

Tata Steel had a slogan — "We also make steel" — to explain that Tata Steel was not just a manufacturing business; it was a societally responsible enterprise that also provided healthcare, education and assistance for improving livelihoods of many communities in villages and forests around the company's mines and factories. Pointing to Tata Steel's slogan, a young Wall Street analyst sarcastically asked its CEO, in 2000, when Tata Steel would stop being a socialist company and become a proper capitalist one!

Tata Sons is the custodian of the Tata values of fairness for all stakeholders in a business enterprise. It remains a minority shareholder in most companies it promotes, which continue to carry the Tata name. Every company has an independent board. Its CEO is appointed by its own shareholders and the board.

The Tata name connotes trust and reliability. It gives the companies business benefits. The Tata name helps them obtain finance more easily; and recruit talented employees who want to work in companies that will provide them with opportunities to continue learning; even governments expect that Tata companies will be more honest than the others.

Tata Sons' cash flow is bleed-

ing with the enormous amounts of money required to bail out the new service ventures that Natarajan Chandrasekaran promoted: the reacquisition of an ailing Air India from the government — basically a sentimental idea to bring Air India back into the Tata fold 70 years after its nationalisation in 1953. Tata Digital, Chandrasekaran's big digital bet, is draining cash.

Meanwhile, Tata Sons has also gone back to its roots in precision manufacturing to design and manufacture computer chips in India. The hardware projects need CEOs with experience in building deep tech manufacturing industries. They will need a lot of patient capital. Fortunately, the government will provide it now that the industrial policy is back in fashion.

Tata Sons must make two big decisions soon. One, it must prune its portfolio to reduce its financial burden. Whenever JRD Tata had to make a tough decision, he would ask two questions: what would be good for India and what would be good for Tata. When in doubt, he would choose India over Tata because, in the long run, that would be good for Tata too.

Second, the roles of the Chairman of the Board of Tata Sons and the CEO should be separated. The Chairman, a Tata or not, should be the custodian of Tata values and set the strategic direction of the group. The CEO, who must also subscribe to Tata values, should manage Tata Sons' investment portfolio under the board's guidance.

Census politics revives Punjab's Ad-Dharm legacy



SANTOSH K SINGH
SOCIOLOGIST & AUTHOR

ON July 12, 2026, thousands of people gathered in Phagwara, Punjab, under the banner of a new identity called Ravidassia, demanding that their caste-religious identity be recognised in the upcoming 2027 Census under a separate column. This was a case of history repeating itself, but with a tinge of irony. The Doaba region of Punjab witnessed this kind of mobilisation about a century ago when Babu Mangoo Ram, the great Ghadarite revolutionary from the region, had led the Ad-Dharm movement in the 1920s.

He had articulated a similar demand: that their community, comprising Dalits and subaltern castes of Punjab, was distinct from both Hindus and Sikhs and it should be recognised as independent of the others as Ad-Dharmis or the original religion. Mangoo Ram's efforts paid quick political dividends. The government recognised Ad-Dharmis as a separate religion and caste community in the 1931 Census.

The British regime in India

introduced the idea of a decennial census towards the second half of the 19th century. This was part of the colonial project of governmentality seeking to freeze the diverse demographic constituents into numbers, essentially to serve its wider civilising mission. The exercise included identifying various castes and religious groups and putting them on a register under neat categories presented as tick boxes. Many anthropologists later described this classification as a form of epistemic violence inaugurated via the politics of numbers.

The problem was that this massive cartographic exercise was being undertaken to set in stone a landscape that was inherently fluid, borderless and porous. The peculiar and vexatious interlocking between caste and religious identities in India, particularly in Punjab, and its immense diversity and local/regional metamorphosis baffled the British Census officials.

People and communities moved across religious traditions and yet their caste identities persisted. A religious landscape made up of diverse, overlapping traditions was forced into neat identity boxes by the Census, much to the bewilderment of the people and confusion among Census officials.

By the second decade of the 20th century, as India entered into the phase of politics of representation, numerical strength became a major polit-



CRUCIAL : The persistence of caste in Punjab society has created a strain in the syncretic template of Dera Ballan. FILE PHOTO

With the Assembly elections due in 2027 alongside the Census, identity politics is likely to become even more consequential.

ical capital and rallying point for each community in the bargaining for power with the government. Mangoo Ram sensed the significance of this power struggle and the Ad-Dharm

Mandal was founded in 1926. The Ad-Dharm movement essentially wanted to create a larger, independent Dalit formation in Punjab. Though the movement and its leadership

were largely dominated by a caste group whose traditional occupation was linked to working with leather and was considered polluting, it was attempting to forge a unified umbrella organisation of the Dalits and subaltern groups under the banner of a new religion called Ad-Dharm.

After Independence, though the Ad-Dharmi movement petered out owing to such factors as the rise of Ambedkar and his pan-Indian appeal, cooption by the Congress and internal bickering among various fragments, it remained a shining example of subaltern resistance to caste in Punjab.

Many decades later, in 2010, a new movement came into prominence, which has been referred to as the Ravidassia Movement, from the same region in Punjab. This time, it was led by a prominent Ravidassia dera called Dera Sach Khand Ballan or Dera Ballan. The irony is that the new identity articulation emerges from the same Ad-Dharmi cultural matrix. The dream of a unified, larger umbrella organisation of Dalits of Punjab, as envisaged by Mangoo Ram, metamorphosed into a rather community-specific project. Unlike the Ad-Dharm movement that had a universal appeal for the Dalits, the Ravidassia Movement was articulated via a dera that imagined a community exclusively under the banner of a 15th century Bhakti poet and saint, Guru Ravidas.

Dera Ballan of Jalandhar,

whose leader, Sant Niranjan Das, has been conferred with the Padma Shri, is one of the most prominent deras of Punjab. Though it has historically drawn influence from multiple traditions, including the Udasi tradition, which broadly functions in reverence to the Rahit Maryada of Sikhism, it has also been according prominence to Guru Ravidas's *bani* as he belonged to the same caste-community as dera followers.

However, the persistence of caste in Punjab society has created a strain in the syncretic template of Dera Ballan. As one of the most influential among the Dalit groups, both numerically and economically, followers of the dera drifted away from the Ad-Dharmi model of Dalit collectivisation. Other subaltern caste groups such as Balmikis, found it unacceptable when the dera started foisting the name of Guru Ravidas in its identity under the new insignia of Hari.

Things changed with an incident in Vienna, Austria, in 2009, where during a religious congregation, two saints of Dera Ballan were attacked by some extremist elements, in which Sant Ramanand was killed, while the current Gaddi Nashin, Sant Niranjan Das, was injured. This proved to be the trigger for the demand for a separate religious identity under the banner of Ravidassia. Since the 1970s, the dera has built a Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan Mandir in Benaras. In 2010, the dera

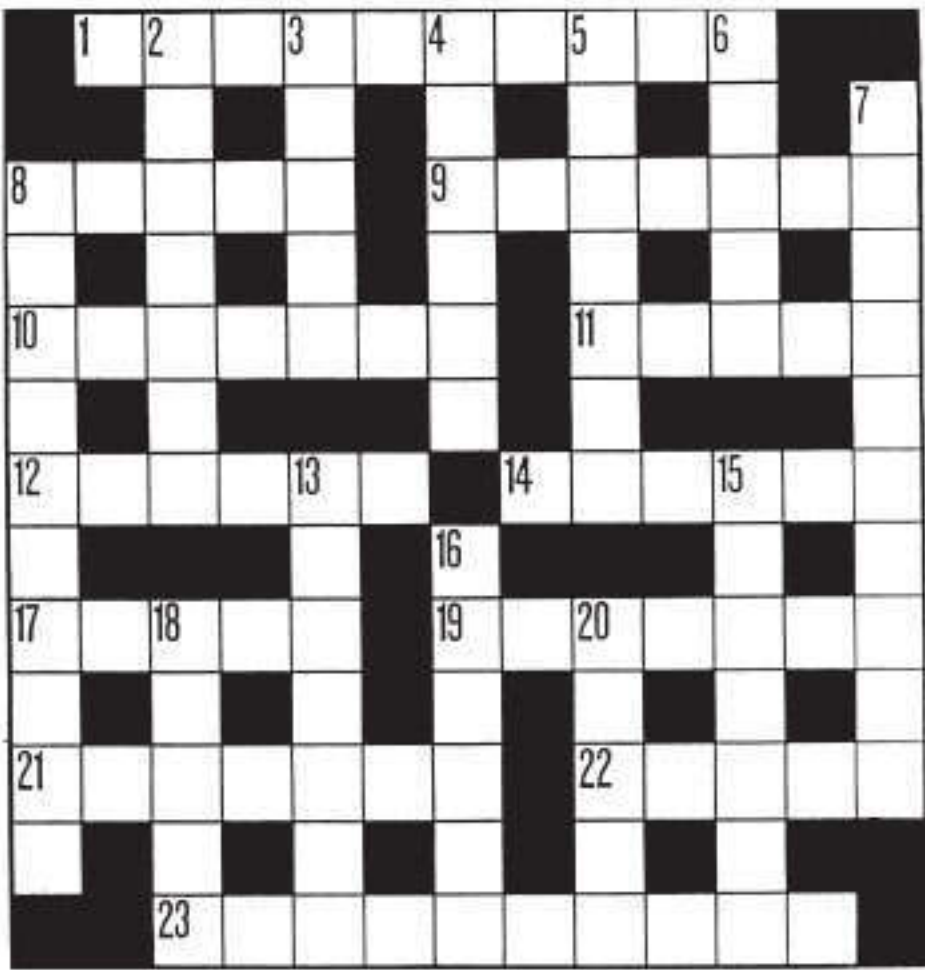
sants, in the presence of lakhs of followers, announced the founding of the new religion of Ravidassia. In 2012, the book '*Amritbani Ravidas Maharaj*', was launched. It is a compilation of *shabads* and *banis* of Guru Ravidas.

Since then, the effort to get the name recognised has been on the dera agenda. With the Census 2027 on the anvil, it is campaigning for a separate identity. There is hope, given Prime Minister Modi's visit to the dera and a slew of initiatives taken, including the conferment of the Padma Shri to the dera Sant, the dedication of the Adampur airport in the name of Guru Ravidas and the start of a train called Guru Ravidas Express between Jalandhar and Benaras.

But the crucial question is whether Dera Ballan represents all Ravidassias. And importantly, whether all followers of Guru Ravidas would like to be identified as Ravidassia. The answer is complex. A significant number of people still cling to the Ad-Dharmi model of Dalit politics. Some deras and organisations do not subscribe to the Dera Ballan model. Some, like the Charan Chhoh Ganga, disapprove of the use of the word Ravidassia.

It remains to be seen how the demand evolves. With the Punjab Assembly elections due in 2027 alongside the Census, identity politics is likely to become even more consequential.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Having unpredictable outcome (5-3-2)
- 8 Thoroughly unpleasant (5)
- 9 An invented story (7)
- 10 Beginner (7)
- 11 Shining with heat (5)
- 12 New York's river (6)
- 14 Buy back (6)
- 17 Brown photographic tint (5)
- 19 Postpone (7)
- 21 Significance (7)
- 22 Rubbish (5)
- 23 Hard-headed (2-8)

Yesterday's Solution

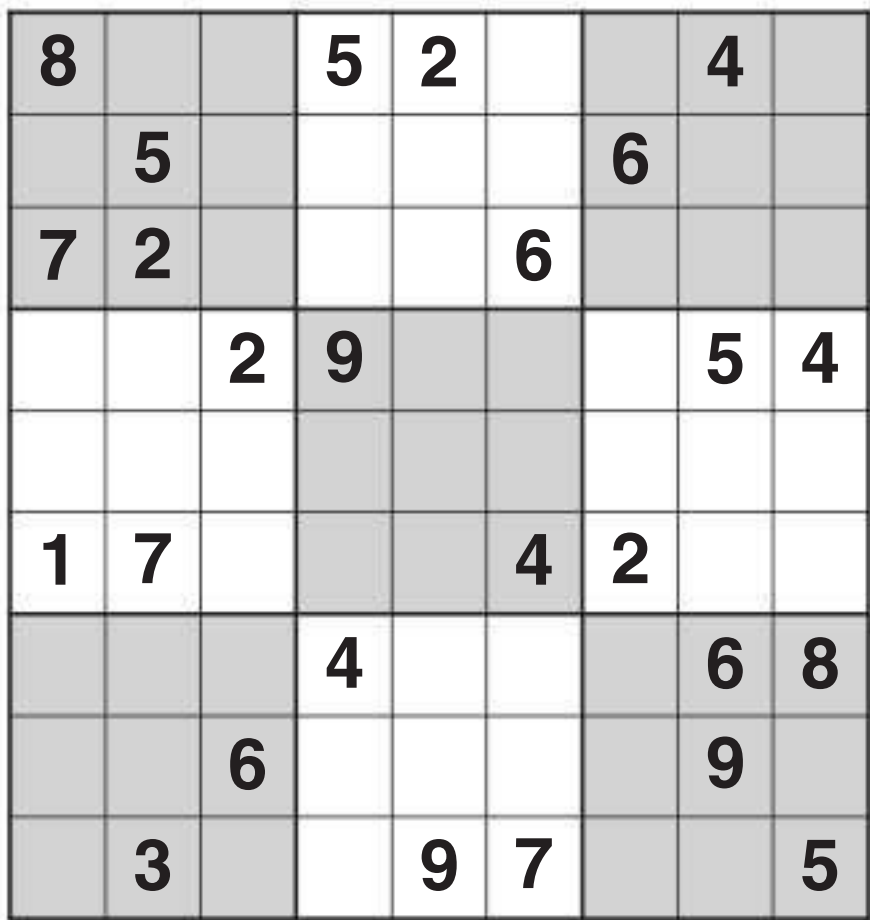
Across: 1 Ravage, 4 Hamper, 9 Pertain, 10 Gloat, 11 Speed, 12 En route, 13 Downtrodden, 18 Outgrow, 20 Eager, 22 Thing, 23 Come off, 24 Wallet, 25 Appeal.

Down: 1 Repose, 2 Verge, 3 Gladden, 5 Augur, 6 Procure, 7 Rather, 8 Once or twice, 14 On trial, 15 Dream up, 16 Kowtow, 17 Artful, 19 Rogue, 21 Gnome.

DOWN

- 2 Without prior consideration (7)
- 3 A punctuation mark (5)
- 4 Have enough money for (6)
- 5 Prescribe authoritatively (7)
- 6 Type of projecting window (5)
- 7 Wavering (2,3,5)
- 8 Nonetheless (3,3,4)
- 13 Formal speech (7)
- 15 Eager to surpass (7)
- 16 Technical terminology (6)
- 18 A marine crustacean (5)
- 20 Appraise (5)

SU DO KU



HARD
epaper.tribuneindia.com

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

2	9	6	4	1	7	3	8	5
4	8	7	6	3	5	1	9	2
5	1	3	9	8	2	4	7	6
6	3	5	8	2	4	9	1	7
1	4	8	7	6	9	5	2	3
7	2	9	1	5	3	8	6	4
9	5	2	3	7	8	6	4	1
3	6	4	2	9	1	7	5	8
8	7	1	5	4	6	2	3	9

CALENDAR

AUGUST 22, 2026, SATURDAY	
■ Shaka Samvat	1948
■ Shravan Shaka	31
■ Bhadrabad Parvishite	6
■ Hijari	1448
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 10, up to 2:01 am	
■ Vishkumbha Yoga	
■ Jyeshtha Nakshatra up to 2:50 pm	
■ Moon enters Sagittarius sign 2:50 pm	

FORECAST

CITY	SATURDAY SUNDAY		18:57 HRS 05:54 HRS	
	MAX	MIN	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	25		
New Delhi	33	25		
Amritsar	34	27		
Bathinda	38	24		
Jalandhar	35	26		
Ludhiana	35	26		
Bhiwani	37	26		
Hisar	37	26		
Sirsa	38	26		
Dharamsala	28	19		
Manali	26	17		
Shimla	24	17		
Srinagar	28	21		
Jammu	33	27		
Kargil	32	15		
Leh	25	14		
Dehradun	32	23		
Mussoorie	23	18		

TEMPERATURE IN °C

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



EDITORIAL

HK must crack down on reckless owners of pets

With hindsight, there was a warning in a big dog's fatal attacks on two small dogs earlier this week that people might not be safe from sudden unprovoked attacks. But nothing prepared the city for the fatal mauling of a 33-year-old woman by a big dog in her care at a training centre and dog hotel in northern Hong Kong on Thursday.

In the first incident involving a 60kg unleashed dog, a court will decide whether its owner, a 52-year-old Yuen Long man, failed to properly control it, after the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department laid charges.

The woman's death is bound to be reported to the coroner. The big mixed-breed attacked her when she tried to return it to its cage after releasing it for feeding. She was alone at the time, which prompts the question whether backup would have made a difference.

Both dogs have a troubled history. The owner of the first is also facing a charge over an attack that injured a small dog on July 10. The dog that killed the woman was a stray awaiting adoption. A suggestion of some pit-bull ancestry, a fighting breed banned in Hong Kong, is troubling. It is good that Hong Kong environment authorities have said they will review the definition of fighting dogs and relevant regulations to strengthen public safety.

The incidents had sparked debate about the management of large dogs, responsible pet ownership, law enforcement, and penalties for non-compliance.

For a crowded, high-rise city, Hong Kong presents a pet-friendly image. The recent licensing of restaurants to admit dogs with their owners adds to it, although the policy has faced a mixed reception. The companionship of pets is also widely accepted in an ageing society. Pet ownership, however, carries responsibility. This includes respect for other people, such as by keeping a dog on a leash, and humane treatment of the animals.

The attacks have sparked calls for heavier penalties for pet owners who breach laws relating to the control of animals in public places. Under the regulation, owners of dogs weighing 20kg or more must keep them on a leash no longer than two metres in public places. Violators face a maximum fine of HK\$25,000 and up to three months' imprisonment.

Dr Fiona Woodhouse, deputy director of welfare at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said it was time to consider a substantial increase in the fine. The prevalence of non-compliance and reports of loose enforcement lend weight to her stance.

Many social media users have shared accounts of their pets being injured or even killed by large dogs in Hong Kong, including one who said her 4kg poodle was seriously injured by a 40kg unleashed dog in 2024. The owner was convicted this year and fined HK\$2,000 while the animal was classified as a known dangerous dog. The user questioned the deterrent effect.

Enforcement that amounts to an effective deterrent to irresponsible dog ownership is clearly an issue. Sally Andersen, founder of Hong Kong Dog Rescue, said a loose licensing regime had created loopholes that allowed some dog owners to dodge responsibility. Some had abandoned or given away microchipped dogs without changing the registered owner, and either the old or new keeper then denied responsibility when serious incidents occurred.

She called for Hong Kong to tighten its animal cruelty laws by requiring owners to take proper care of their animals and introducing a "duty-of-care" regime. Potential owners should be prepared to provide "a minimum of space, exercise, food, water and companionship", she said.

Kent Luk Ka-chi, founder of the charity Paws Guardian Rescue Shelter, also supported a duty-of-care requirement under animal welfare legislation. Owners should treat dogs as family and train them properly so they do not chase people or small animals, he said.

The government began public consultation on legislation for a duty-of-care regime under animal welfare laws in 2019, with most submissions in favour of the move. But the legislative timetable remained unclear, with authorities citing "divergent views" among stakeholders. There is a case at least to tighten enforcement of current laws and review penalties. Jailing owners of unleashed dogs may go too far, depending on the seriousness of circumstances. Education in responsible ownership would be in the best interests of pets and their owners.

■ South China Morning Post

Tammy Tam Publisher
Chow Chung-yan Editor-in-Chief
Zuraidah Ibrahim Executive Director
Yonden Lhatoo Managing Editor
Zhang Jun Chief Technology Officer

Editorial office 19/F, Tower One, Times Square,
1 Matheson Street, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong
Editorial feedback, general inquiries 2565 2222, news@scmp.com
Advertising inquiries 2565 2435, advertising@scmp.com
Printed and published by 2565 8822, live@scmp.com
Place a classified or recruitment ad 2565 8822, classified@scmp.com
Subscription and delivery hotline 2565 8822, printsupport@scmp.com
Online / Digital inquiries 2565 9388, support@scmp.com
Charity giving 2565 8159, osc@scmp.com
Events and conferences 2565 2435, live@scmp.com

Both SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST® and 南華早報® are registered in the People's Republic of China.



The unseen hand in a seamless tradition

For most of my life, festive gatherings seemed to just happen automatically. But who takes over when those who have quietly maintained family get-togethers stop?

Last Chinese New Year, the reunion dinner unfolded the way it always has: with an almost rehearsed ease that disguises how much work it takes to look effortless.

The dishes arrived in their expected order. Conversations circled familiar ground – work, health, travel plans. There was a comfort in that predictability, as if the evening was held together by habit more than intention.

At some point, plans for the next day, the first day of Lunar New Year, were mentioned. There was a short discussion about visits, timings, who might or might not make it. Within two minutes, we resumed eating. But I remember thinking, if my parents stopped organising all of this, would I know how to do it?

Not in the obvious sense of cooking or booking a restaurant, but in the deeper sense of holding the thing together. I wouldn't know who needs to be invited first, or how invitations move through a family that no longer shares a single neighbourhood. I wouldn't know the unspoken rules: who should never be seated together, who needs to be checked with early, who will never explicitly ask to be visited but will notice if they are not.

Nor would I know which traditions are fixed only because someone has always taken responsibility for them. For most of my life, Chinese New Year seemed to run itself. As a child, I only saw the finished product. You were moved from one house to another, one meal to the next.

Yet nothing about it is automatic; the coordination required is mostly invisible. Someone tracks multiple households' calendars and resolves conflicts that never formally surface. Someone maintains an informal map of relationships that exists nowhere in writing but governs decisions. Someone remembers sensitivities that are rarely spoken aloud, but which quietly determine when people arrive and where they sit.

Because the work is distributed across dozens of small decisions, it doesn't appear as a single role. It

sits somewhere between administration and care, and most families have people who do this work. They are rarely described as organisers. They are mothers, aunts and grandmothers. The invisibility of the system only breaks when something goes wrong: a missed invitation, an awkward pairing at the table, a gathering that feels slightly misaligned.

Tradition endures not only because it is meaningful, but because someone is willing to carry the friction required to keep it going. But this is becoming harder to sustain. Across East Asia, family structures have been changing for decades: fewer children, later marriages, longer life expectancies, more people living away from where they grew up. In Singapore, household sizes have steadily declined alongside fertility rates. The result is fewer people available to share the invisible work.

“
If my parents stopped organising all of this, would I know how to do it?”

As it is now common for relatives to be spread across multiple countries, what used to be a neighbourhood-scale coordination process has become something closer to a multi-time-zone negotiation.

Technology has made contact easier, without lightening the load of coordination. If anything though, group chats on WhatsApp or WeChat have made the labour more visible. The messages multiply but someone still has to decide and remember what everyone else assumes will be handled. The system has not disappeared, but it has become more explicit.

Many younger family members only ever encounter Chinese New Year when it is up and running. They arrive after the bookings have been made, after the schedule has been stabilised, after the invisible negotiations have already resolved the hardest parts. What they see is the outcome: a seamless sequence of gatherings. They seldom see the process that made it possible.

And so the knowledge does not fully transfer. For it is learned only by doing, by being the person who notices what needs to happen next before anyone says it out loud.

At the same time, expectations are shifting. Younger generations are less willing to absorb large amounts of unpaid coordination and emotional labour as a default condition of belonging. That is often framed as cultural erosion. But it is also a redefinition of what fairness within a family looks like: who is expected to carry the friction and why.

Families still want the same outcomes – meals that happen, gatherings that feel intact, continuity across years, connection that survives distance. But those outcomes do not emerge on their own. They have been produced, repeatedly, by someone taking responsibility for the uncertainty everyone else prefers not to see.

So I keep returning to that moment at the reunion dinner, when a few of us casually discussed plans for the next day, but no one took responsibility for them. The older relatives who usually hold everyone accountable weren't at the table, revealing how easily the system could lapse without someone holding it together. For all the attention given to preserving traditions, far less attention is paid to the systems for maintaining them. And even less to what happens when those systems are no longer naturally inherited.

One day, someone will have to take over that work. I'm not sure anyone is being prepared for it yet.

Nicole Chan is a Singapore-born, Edinburgh-educated writer and communications strategist



Nicole Chan

LETTERS

Share your views with us and other SCMP readers in letter to the editor. Include your full name and address, plus a phone number for verification. Please keep your letter to a maximum of 400 words. Email us at letters@scmp.com. Address: 19/F, Tower One, Times Square, 1 Matheson Street, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong.

Deng's wise words resonate loudly

In May 1979, while editing the Ecoscope business page at the Deccan Chronicle in Hyderabad, I accepted an offer to join the newsroom of The Star, Hong Kong, that June.

Landung in the city at that juncture placed me at the literal crossroads of modern economic history. Across the border, Deng Xiaoping was taking up the reins of leadership and initiating the historic "reform and opening-up" policy.

Over the ensuing years, working as a journalist across several publications, I had a ringside seat to the most consequential economic metamorphosis of our era. Deng's brilliance was never rooted in abstract ideological dogma; it was forged in radical operational pragmatism. Inheriting an economy constrained by decades of rigidity, he cut through paralysis with unapologetic clarity.

Living and reporting in Hong Kong, I found the commercial dynamism impossible to ignore. Just a year after arriving, I launched a home-based business-to-business trade venture, balancing full-time journalism for eight years before dedicating a subsequent decade entirely to global exporting and merchant manufacturing. It was a lived education in the cross-border revolution Deng orchestrated.

Deng understood that Hong Kong's common law system, institutional agility and free capital markets made it the irreplaceable bridge between mainland production lines and global buyers.

By designating Shenzhen as China's first special economic zone in 1980, he created an engine for

foreign direct investment and export-driven manufacturing. When bureaucratic inertia threatened to stall market reforms years later, his historic 1992 southern tour reaffirmed that economic development was the only hard truth, permanently etched into private enterprise into the national fabric.

Grounded in the conviction that practice is the sole criterion for testing truth, his policies helped lift over 800 million citizens out of poverty and forge the modern global supply chain.

By the late 1990s, the arrival of the commercial internet began

disintermediating traditional trade intermediaries, marking the end of an era. Having secured financial independence, I stepped away from manufacturing, but the foundational principles of that epoch remained.

Nearly five decades after my arrival coincided with Deng's ascent, the global economy stands at another vital inflection point – navigating artificial intelligence, localised micro-manufacturing and decentralised supply corridors.

As we mark Deng's birth anniversary this August 22, his core philosophy remains as urgent as ever: pragmatic adaptability, decisive execution and verifiable outcomes will always outstrip procedural dogma.

Jawahar Lal Panjabi, Tai Kok Tui

Fatal attacks hurt pet-friendly push

It is deeply saddening to hear about the recent dog-related incidents in Hong Kong ("Unleashed 60kg dog runs amok, fatally mauls poodle,"

bichon frise in Hong Kong", August 17, "Woman found dead in Hong Kong after dog mauling", August 20). The timing of these two events, occurring in the wake of a major shift in public policy allowing dogs in restaurants, is unfortunate.

In the past decade or so, we have seen significant expansion of pet-friendly public places, increased availability of transport options for people travelling with pets, and more shopping malls becoming more pet-friendly.

The implementation of the new policy allowing dogs to enter permitted food premises renewed public interest in our furry companions and highlights how much further we must go as a society to become truly "dog-friendly".

The two recent incidents provide additional ammunition for people who dislike pets, some of whom have filed baseless reports to the government about hygiene issues at permitted food premises.

Amid this emerging social divide between pet lovers and haters, we must remind ourselves that these two incidents are isolated, unrelated events that should not undermine our society's progress towards becoming more pet-friendly.

Dogs and cats are important companions for numerous people, and we should acknowledge their importance and respect their rights.

Having said that, I would like to see more effort to promote responsible pet ownership, which would hopefully reduce pet abandonment, and a shift away from the obsession with purebreds, many of which are not suitable for inexperienced owners living in relatively small flats.

Anthony Lau, Tuen Mun



Deng Xiaoping signs autographs on a 1979 tour of Huangshan in Anhui province.



Illustration: Lau Ka-kuen

The importance of remembering Jiang

Placing the former leader in the uninterrupted development of the Communist Party and the country reinforces a political narrative of succession without rupture

The centenary of Jiang Zemin's birth, marked on August 17 with a memorial in Beijing attended and addressed by President Xi Jinping, was more than an occasion to commemorate a former Chinese leader. It was also an exercise in political history: a moment to locate Jiang, the era he led and the reform legacy associated with him within the broader story of the Communist Party of China's evolution and China's modernisation.

That is what makes the event politically significant. The question is not simply why China is commemorating Jiang so prominently. It is why the leadership has chosen this particular historical moment to reaffirm his place in the country's political narrative and what that says about how Beijing views the road from reform and opening up to Chinese modernisation today.

Xi's speech placed Jiang squarely within the history of the party, describing him as the core of the party's third-generation central leadership and as a principal founder of the important notion of the "Three Represents". It also highlighted Jiang's contributions to reform and opening up, socialist modernisation and China's development.

The formulation matters. It presents Jiang neither as an isolated political figure nor simply as the representative of a bygone era. Instead, it places him within a chain of political leadership and national development stretching across several decades.

For China's leadership, historical continuity has considerable political importance. The reform era was not a single event but a succession of experiments, adjustments and institutional changes undertaken by different generations of leaders. Jiang's years in national leadership, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s, coincided with one of the most consequential transformations in modern Chinese history: the consolidation of the socialist market economy, the acceleration of economic globalisation, the development of Pudong, the restructuring of state-owned enterprises and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

China moved from being a relatively marginal participant in international production and trade to becoming an increasingly central manufacturing and trading power. Therefore, to commemorate Jiang

today is also to acknowledge that contemporary China did not emerge fully formed. Its present economic strength is the cumulative product of decades of institutional experimentation, reform, opening up and policy continuity.

This point carries particular resonance in 2026.

China is entering the 15th five-year plan period in an international environment radically different from that of Jiang's era. Strategic competition between China and the United States has intensified. Trade protectionism has returned with force. Technology restrictions are reshaping supply chains, while geopolitical tensions are encouraging some governments to reconsider the assumptions of economic globalisation.

Against this backdrop, reaffirming the legacy of the reform era is not necessarily nostalgia. It can also be read as a statement of direction. China's message is that reform and opening up remain part of its historical trajectory, even

“
China's message is that reform and opening up remain part of its historical trajectory

though their content and methods must evolve with changing circumstances. The external environment might have changed dramatically, but Beijing is not presenting modernisation as a retreat from the world.

A centenary is not an ordinary anniversary. It creates a natural historical checkpoint. Jiang was born in 1926; his centenary arrives at a moment when China is again confronting major questions about economic transformation, technological development, national security and its relationship with the outside world.

Such moments encourage governments and societies to not just revisit the past but extract meaning from it. The political value of historical memory lies precisely here. By determining which achievements are emphasised and how they are connected to the present, political leaders can help

establish a framework through which the past is understood.

This does not mean every policy of the Jiang era is being endorsed wholesale, and neither does it suggest China intends to reproduce the circumstances of three decades ago. The world economy, Chinese society and China's position in the international system have all changed profoundly.

Rather, the lesson is that continuity does not require repetition. The reform and opening up of the 1990s cannot simply be copied in the 2020s. However, the underlying principles of experimentation, institutional adaptation, engagement with the global economy and the pursuit of modernisation can be reinterpreted for a new era.

That might be the most important political significance of remembering Jiang at 100. By placing Jiang within the uninterrupted historical development of the party and the country, Xi's commemoration reinforces a narrative of succession without rupture, reform without abandonment and modernisation without historical amnesia.

The message emerging from Beijing is that today's China is the product of accumulated experience; that reform and opening up remain embedded in the country's modernisation story; that different generations of leadership are being presented as contributors to a continuous national project; and that the lessons of earlier periods remain relevant as China navigates a more contested international environment.

In that sense, the most revealing question surrounding Jiang's centenary is not simply how Xi evaluates Jiang. It is how the present leadership uses Jiang's legacy to explain the relationship between China's reform past, its modernisation present and its uncertain future.

The answer appears to be clear: China does not intend to return to the Jiang era. It intends to carry forward what it regards as the useful historical experience of that era while adapting it to new conditions. That is not nostalgia. It is political continuity and, at a time of profound global change, a deliberate statement about where China believes its modern history came from and where it intends to go next.

Xu Ying is a former Chinese diplomat who served in the US and Switzerland



Xu Ying

The message to US trading partners: do as I say, not as I do

Washington's intervention on the yen shows Tokyo does what it's told and Europeans don't matter

It is not the most enticing reading material: "Macroeconomic and Foreign Exchange Policies of Major Trading Partners of the United States." But this 59-page report, issued last month by the US Treasury Department, reveals much about contemporary America.

Remember the joint intervention by Japan and the United States in the international currency market to prop up the yen at the end of July? By now, everyone knows it didn't work, a waste of monetary resources for both countries while earning a lot of ill will from the Europeans because ... Well, that takes some explaining but we will get to it shortly.

Let's first consider the report, which boldly warns trade offenders that the US Treasury "is committed to aggressively and vigilantly monitoring and combating unfair currency practices" and that it "continues to assess whether the United States' trading partners are undertaking foreign exchange intervention and implementing non-market policies and practices to manipulate their currencies for unfair competitive advantage in trade to the detriment of American economic strength".

The report goes on to name the baddies: China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Germany, Ireland and Switzerland. All these economies were on the monitoring list in the report issued in January this year. So no improvement there, naughty children! Notice that Japan is on the list, recently.

And yet, in the same month that the US Treasury complained that other countries, including Japan, were potentially manipulating their currencies to gain an unfair trade advantage over the US, it was helping Tokyo, in a highly unorthodox move, to intervene massively in the currency market because the yen had been dropping like a stone since Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi took office.

The joint intervention followed a solo move by Japan the day before to support the yen after it hit a 40-year low.

You might expect US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to at least have the decency to use US dollars for the operation. But no, he reportedly preferred using euros and not telling the Europeans.

The operation, which was carried out by the New York Federal Reserve on behalf of the US Treasury, "blindsided" the European Central Bank, according to a Financial Times report. While the move caused the yen to rise, the euro saw an over 4 per cent devaluation.

A correspondent in EU Perspectives titled "US threw the euro under the bus for little reason and less gain" said: "The risk did not concern the European currency's market standing as much as the trust within the transatlantic relationship."

While it may not be a code of conduct, central bankers are expected to warn each other in advance of such market operations. The euro was picked (on) for two reasons. First, many analysts believe that the US chose to sell euros as selling dollars would have been seen as a move to weaken the US currency, contradicting Bessent's strong-dollar posture.

Second, it has also been widely suggested that Washington would have felt pressure to help halt the yen's decline because Japan is the largest foreign holder of US Treasuries. If Japan had been forced to sell its dollar holdings, this would have caused American borrowing costs to rise, at a time when long-term yields are at nearly two-decade highs.

Of course, treating the Europeans like dirt is now par for the course with Washington. But the intervention didn't even work because Japan and the US were fighting a mighty market trend.

That has to do with Takaichi's readiness to borrow like mad and suspend some taxes – somewhat akin to Liz Truss during her short stint as UK prime minister – even though Japan is already the most indebted country among its developed peers. Her government is viewed as not being in favour of raising interest rates, even though the yen is already suffering from fundamental weakness.

Meanwhile, US borrowing costs keep rising. The US\$42 billion auction of 10-year US Treasuries resulted in the highest yield since 2007, at 4.683 per cent. This was followed by a US\$25 billion sale of 30-year Treasuries at 5.216 per cent, the most since 2001.

Bessent directly intervened this week to reverse rising US borrowing costs by doubling the purchase of long-term government debt. Many saw the attempt as interventionist, defying long-standing Treasury practice.

Barry Eichengreen, a leading authority on the US dollar system, observed in the Financial Times that the manner in which the US intervened to prop up the yen may have inadvertently signalled that "the dollar is not the attractive reserve currency it once was" and that "reserve diversification is apt to gather steam".

What this currency farce also shows is that Tokyo does what it's told, Washington is fast losing all credibility and Europeans hardly matter.

Alex Lo has been an SCMP columnist since 2012, commenting on China and international affairs. He is also a member of the editorial writing team



Alex Lo

OPINION

Turtles, trash and Iglesias



BREGJE VAN BAAREN

The author is a freelance writer

“I WANT to listen to Enrique Iglesias or Celine Dion, please auntie,” insists my eldest niece, who sometimes has this cute, childish presence, as she touches the pin that holds together her tightly wrapped black embellished headscarf. I look at her chubby cheeks and now slightly pouty mouth in my rearview mirror after asking what song she prefers.

We are driving through a part of Muscat that has a hold on me as we listen to the BBC World Service on the radio.

My own kid wants to listen to Bowie, but I decide to indulge my niece first and put on the one song by Iglesias that I can sort of tolerate. I tell her a story about how when I was on holiday with my parents in the South of Spain as a teenager, someone at the table tried to impress me by claiming he was friends with a Spanish guy whose father was Julio Iglesias, the tanned singer.

Not entertained by my story or the song, my niece is now starting to give me a certain look from the back seat, the one she usually gives when she starts to get visibly annoyed.

“I am sorry, but I am not going to play Celine inside my car. What if someone overhears her singing? I have a reputation to protect, habibti,” I jokingly tell her as the inner snob in me smiles.

Although I am just pulling her leg, I do suddenly remember the complaints from while watching Titanic with two of my friends in a cinema in Amsterdam after its premiere in the nineties.

I think back then, while feeling bored and slouching on these big leather seats, we actually coined the term ‘cringing’. After all, it means “a strong feeling of secondhand embarrassment or awkwardness, the kind where you physically recoil or wince because something is so cheesy, sentimental, or uncool that it is painful to watch.” I got that definition from EcoGPT, the only AI my own kid allows me to use, because “all the others harm the environment, mama!” This one apparently uses way less computer power while its energy comes from clean sources in Finland. Plus, every time someone uses EcoGPT, real trees get planted.

Thinking of the environment, I decide to shift my niece’s area of focus once again, and ask her to and get her to look at a picture on my phone of a beach in Oman that has recently been covered in black oil spilled by a stranded tanker.

I tell her to send the image to a few certain contacts and ask them to guess where it is.

“Ras Madrakah,” several replied, to my surprise. I was expecting “LMK” (short for I do not know) as not all Omanis have visited this coastal area known for its biodiversity

“When our children look back on this time and this place, they will be pleased with the intentions stated and the commitments made [towards a better environment]. But they will judge us by the actions we take from this day forward”

but that is an eight-hour drive away from Muscat. My husband and his friends used to go fishing at these relatively untouched beaches.

No longer thinking of Celine, Iglesias, and Bowie, and back to reality, we all start worrying about the turtles, the fish, and the rare and already endangered Arabian Sea humpback whale.

The image of the oil spill sits right next to a picture taken by me of a beach in Al Seeb where a family having a picnic left behind plastic ice cream containers and bottles, waiting for someone else to clean up their mess.

But instead of a cleaner, tides, waves, and coastal winds will probably carry their trash out to sea, where it will further harm marine life through ingestion or entanglement, and break down into microplastics that may pollute our water or food.

As I look at my eldest niece and my own child, I think of something another world leader once said: “When our children look back on this time and this place, they will be pleased with the intentions stated and the commitments made [towards a better environment]. But they will judge us by the actions we take from this day forward.” Indeed, they have the right to judge our actions, inactions and to do better.

GAZA SEED BANK REBUILDS AFTER WARTIME DESTRUCTION

From a small makeshift tent in the central Gaza Strip, a dedicated team works to carefully store and document some of the war-shattered territory’s most precious commodities: local seeds.

Shelves of unassuming plastic tubs line the walls of the Al Qarara Seed Bank, each holding indigenous seeds seen as a way of reviving Gaza’s devastated farming sector and preserving its agricultural heritage.

The seed bank in Deir el Balah is rebuilding its stocks of Gaza’s heirloom seeds that were destroyed during the war which erupted in October 2023.

Unlike hybrid varieties often sold commercially, heirloom seeds can be saved and used year after year and are often better adapted to their local environment.

“During the war, they were what helped us survive,” said Salem Muhanna, who manages the project which was founded in 2017 with support from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). “Heirloom seeds give continuity. They provide 80 to 90 per cent of the same yield repeatedly. That is why we relied on heirloom seeds,” he said. The bank holds seeds for wheat and barley; leafy crops such as Swiss chard, spinach and parsley, as well as some vegetables like courgette and okra.

The war that erupted following Hamas’s attack on Israel in October 2023 took an immensely heavy toll. The fighting “completely destroyed the bank and led to the loss of many seed varieties,” explained 27-year-old Hanadi Muhanna, Salem Muhanna’s daughter who also manages the project. “Eventually we settled in Deir el Balah and managed, thankfully, to establish a small tent. We created something simple using basic means”.

A collection of large hessian sacks, plastic barrels, and smaller mismatched tubs now hold what remain of the stocks, each carefully labelled and protected from pests with plastic sheets.

Like the rest of life in the coastal Palestinian territory, Gaza’s agricultural sector was shattered by the conflict.

Israel says it now controls more than 60 per cent of the Gaza Strip, up from about half when the ceasefire took effect, and has refused to start withdrawing until Hamas fully disarms.

Before the war, agriculture including crop production, herding and fishing, accounted for approximately 10 per cent of Gaza’s economy, according to the United Nations’ Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). — AFP

Xu Jiayin: From real-estate tycoon to life in prison

ONCE China’s richest man, disgraced property tycoon Xu Jiayin looked worn as a court in China handed the now white-haired Evergrande founder a life sentence on Thursday.

The 67-year-old, known as Hui Ka Yan in Cantonese, was convicted of a list of crimes including fraud, bribery and embezzlement relating to his leadership of Evergrande Group, the country’s biggest real estate conglomerate before it defaulted in 2021.

Xu’s rags-to-riches ascent mirrored the country’s economic rise. And his fall comes as China is still struggling to recover from a housing slump triggered by Evergrande’s collapse. Xu was born into a poor family in rural Henan province in 1958, the year leader Mao Zedong launched his “Great Leap Forward” -- an industrialisation plan that led to mass starvation.

Xu, whose mother died when he was a year old, recalled in a speech how he ate only sweet potato and steamed bread in his school years.

“The sheets I laid, the quilts I covered, and the clothes I wore were all covered with piles of patches,” said Xu. “At that time, my greatest wish was to go out of the countryside, find a job and be able to eat better food.” After leaving school in 1976 — the end of the decade-long Cultural Revolution — he struggled to find work. As colleges reopened, Xu studied metallurgy and was later assigned to a state-run steel factory.

He left in 1992 for Shenzhen, the buzzing heart of China’s reform and opening-up experiment in the 1990s.

He ended up working in real estate, and in 1996 founded Evergrande, which threw itself into mass development, building in-



MARY YANG

The author is a China and Mongolia correspondent for AFP

The tide turned in 2020, when regulations from Beijing seeking to limit excessive borrowing in the real-estate sector complicated Evergrande’s ability to make payments.



Hui Ka Yan stands in the court in Shenzhen on Thursday. — Reuters

demand apartments across China and capitalising on its rapid wealth accumulation.

The group listed in Hong Kong in 2009, raising \$729 million in its initial public offering, at the time making it China’s largest private real-estate company and Xu the mainland’s richest man. In 2010, Xu bought the struggling Guangzhou football team, renaming it Guangzhou Evergrande and pouring money into world-class players and coaches. He also became known for a love of luxury labels, particularly French brand Hermes — earning him the nickname “Belt Xu” after being spotted wearing a Hermes belt to the national political congress.

Some speculated his success came from useful close relationships, including with the brother of former premier Wen Jiabao.

But Xu attributed his success to education — and the Communist Party. “Everything of Evergrande is given by the Party, the state and the society,” he said.

Over the years, however, Xu’s taste for yachts and luxury clashed with President Xi Jinping’s crackdown on extreme wealth as Beijing tightened its watch over corruption within the financial sector.

The tide turned in 2020, when regulations from Beijing seeking to limit excessive borrowing in the real-estate sector complicated Evergrande’s ability to make payments.

It started to falter under the new “three red lines” — caps for three different debt ratios — which forced the group to offload properties at increasingly steep discounts.

Evergrande struggled to appease angry homebuyers and investors, as the firm’s crisis triggered rare protests outside its offices in China.

Seeking to reassure his employees in September 2021, Xu told staff in a letter he believed the group would “step out of the darkest moment soon”. — AFP

Par Ridder
Publisher

Mitch Pugh
Executive Editor

Chris Jones, Editorial Page Editor

Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

Stacy St. Clair, Managing Editor

DIRECTORS OF CONTENT

Amanda Kaschube, Sports and Audience
Todd Panagopoulos, Visuals

EDITORIALS

Can Quad Cities recover from the beefy body blow of losing Tyson Foods?

Beef is to 2026 what eggs were to 2025. Persistent shortages of cattle are leading to substantial increases in prices at the grocery store, losses for beef processors and now a meaningful economic blow to a part of Illinois that already is hurting — Quad Cities.

Arkansas-based Tyson Foods late last week announced plans to close its sprawling beef processing plant in Joslin, Illinois, just northeast of the Quad Cities. The company gave its mostly unionized workforce of more than 2,500 next to no notice, although it said it would pay them for the 60 days that Illinois requires at minimum in mass layoffs.

The facility has been a major employer in the area for more than 40 years. Mainly serving farms in Illinois and Iowa, the plant could process up to 3,000 head of cattle a day.

Tyson also shuttered a smaller meat processing plant in Utah and is looking to sell a separate facility in Washington state. The company attributed the moves to “one of the most historic cattle shortages the country has ever experienced.” It said the trend isn’t likely to change anytime soon.

Tyson said it will consolidate its beef processing at existing plants in Amarillo, Texas; Holcomb, Kansas; and Dakota City, Nebraska.

There’s a temptation in such circumstances to ask, why us? Why is Joslin closing and not Holcomb? Or Dakota City? Indeed, Tyson has been shrinking its presence in Illinois in recent years. Four years ago, it announced the closure of corporate offices in Chicago and Downers Grove, consolidating those functions at its Springdale, Arkansas, headquarters.

But the rationalization of the beef industry is hitting communities all over the country. The better response is for public officials and others in the community to determine what can be done to help as many of the families devastated by such a shock as possible, both in the short and long term.

Case in point: Just outside Philadelphia, in Souderton, Pennsylvania, Brazilian company JBS, the world’s largest beef processor and also the biggest operating in the U.S., announced plans in June to shutter a meatpacking plant that employed 1,700. Gov. Josh Shapiro, the local business community and the United Food and Commercial Workers, which represented the workers there, got involved, and less than two months later JBS said it would transform the facility into an operation packaging beef for immediate sale to consumers.

The move will preserve 400 jobs, and JBS is investing \$30 million into the plant over the coming decade.

So it was good to see Republican and Democratic lawmakers in Illinois huddling Tuesday with Gov. JB Pritzker’s office and state agencies on ways to help the affected families and begin thinking about future uses at the site and addressing the ripple effects that will be felt by Illinois farmers and businesses dependent in no small part on the plant.

“It is critically important to get these stakeholders all working in the same direction to mobilize resources and strategies to try to rebound the industry as quickly as possible,” GOP state Rep. Brad Fritts of Dixon said in a release.

For the Quad Cities, the timing is awful. It’s been one of the worst performing parts of the region economically, according to the most recent annual economic forecast put together by Moody’s Analytics on behalf of the Illinois Commission on Government Forecasting & Accountability. As of February, when the report was published, it said of the Quad Cities, “The labor market has deteriorated, with payrolls and household employment falling further, and the labor force decline accelerating.”

Much of the drag on the Quad Cities at the time was coming from the Trump tariffs’ negative effect on agriculture. About the only reassuring thing the report had to say in February was that “payrolls in lower-paying food manufacturing are expected to stay steady over the next year.”

So much for that prediction.

Quad Cities needs help. As nasty as this shock is, it’s an opportunity for Democrats and Republicans to work together productively and demonstrate to Illinoisans that partisanship has no place when so many lose their jobs.

ON THIS DAY 66 YEARS AGO AN EPITHET FROM THE ‘LIBERALS’

The vocabulary of the ideologues of the left was in extreme danger of dying of fatigue and overuse when a rescuer happily appeared on the scene. ... For many a year the advance men for the New Deal, Fair Deal, and New Frontier could think of nothing more biting to say than that their adversaries were troglodytes, or throwbacks to the Pleistocene, or bent on hauling the country back to the days of McKinley, tho sometimes they might be merely “the greatest minds of the 14th century.” ...

Well, Prof. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. of Harvard has now lumbered up on a milk white charger, doubtless stolen from between the shafts of a milk wagon dating from the era of the senior Taft. ... In his confidential pouch he carries a new epithet to rejoice the boys in the back room at Americans for Democratic Action.

The word, friends, is “foggy.” Anybody who thinks that the New Frontier, Sen. Jack Kennedy, and Prof. John K. Galbraith don’t make sense is, by Schlesinger’s definition, a “foggy.” Necessarily, almost all fogies are Republicans, tho an occasional Democratic exception may be allowed, such as, perhaps, Senators Harry Byrd and Frank Lausche and Rep. Howard Smith.

Republicans, Prof. Schlesinger disclosed in the magazine of the New York Times, represent “the party of stiff collars, stuffed shirts, and fogies, old and young.”

Now, according to the dictionary, a foggy is “a person of antiquated notions and opposed to progress,” so that Junior S., in applying this term to everyone obliged to keep an eye on the balance in his checkbook, probably thought he was saying something just about as nasty as it is possible for a Harvard professor to say, excepting, always, “McCarthyite,” which is the ultimate term of contempt in Cambridge. ...

Mr. Alsop picked up Mr. Schlesinger’s epithet within nine days, and we have a hunch that Walter Lippmann will soon discover it, if he has not already. ...

Hasn’t somebody passed him the word? He needs to be jerked into the ’60s and acquainted with the fact that these Pleistocene dwellers are to be known as “fogies,” except, naturally, when they are “senior citizens” and entitled, in Sen. Kennedy’s view, to ... great respect as a potentially useful voting group.

Tribune editorial board, Aug. 21, 1960



Deputy Minority Leader Ryan Spain and House Republican Leader Tony McCombie give a rebuttal after Gov. JB Pritzker gave his State of the State and budget address on Feb. 18 at the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield.
BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Illinois GOP just got a chance to hit reset. Take it, beleaguered Republicans!

Illinois Republicans are a superminority in the Illinois General Assembly. They haven’t come close in the governor’s race for the past two cycles.

Now, at least part of the political apparatus behind that losing streak appears to be turning over. As a result, Illinois Republicans just received a rare chance to hit reset.

The People Who Play By The Rules PAC, operated by conservative radio host Dan Proft, has shut down, its latest filings with the state show. That after amassing \$42 million from GOP megadonor Richard Uihlein, primarily during the 2022 election cycle.

Much of the PAC’s money went toward supporting gubernatorial candidate Darren Bailey’s bid in 2022. Uihlein also donated more than \$12 million directly to Bailey back then. In 2026, Uihlein bypassed the PAC and gave directly to Ted Dabrowski’s gubernatorial campaign over Bailey, gifting a significantly smaller amount of money — about \$250,000. Proft’s consulting firm reportedly received more than \$1.1 million from the PAC over its lifetime.

The results speak for themselves. Bailey lost handily in 2022, and Dabrowski failed to advance to the general this time around.

Illinois conservatives should grab this moment with both hands. More specifically, the Land of Lincoln’s GOP should use it as an opportunity to start fresh, empower serious leaders, focus on competent government and bread-and-butter Illinois issues, and invest in building a durable political operation capable of winning competitive races.

Not because Republicans are always good and Democrats are always bad, but because Illinois voters deserve a viable political alternative and more balance in the running of a state ill-served by so overwhelming a supermajority.

While Proft’s PAC has closed up shop, it’d be easy enough to set up another. The bigger story, in our view, is that the torrent of ill-focused Uihlein money into Illinois Republican politics appears to have stopped flowing, at least for now. And that’s a challenge but also an opportunity.

Lining up a new benefactor will be tough, undoubtedly. Uihlein has spent more than \$91 million on Illinois candidates and causes alone since 1998, nearly \$80 million in the last 10 years, according to a Tribune analysis of state campaign finance records.

Fiscal conservatives also lost a serious financial

backer in Citadel CEO Ken Griffin, who announced his departure from Illinois in 2022 and now resides in Miami. Meanwhile, Florida Republicans are the happy recipients of political cash from Griffin, who recently gave Republican Byron Donalds a cool \$10 million gift.

That Griffin and Uihlein — not to mention former Gov. Bruce Rauner, also a major source of Illinois Republican cash previously — have shifted their focus elsewhere is a testament to the uphill battle conservatives face here.

Republicans desperately need more money. While the Illinois Republican Party has about \$225,000 cash on hand, the Democrats have about \$1.7 million. Likewise, House leadership has a wide gap — House Speaker Emanuel “Chris” Welch has about \$11.5 million on hand, while House Minority Leader Tony McCombie has about \$1.3 million. And, of course, there’s the \$65 million Gov. JB Pritzker just dumped into his campaign, versus the \$2.2 million or so Bailey has raised this time around for his much-improved effort.

So the money gap is a glaring weakness for Illinois Republicans. Dwindling Republican turnout in well-populated parts of the state is another nagging issue laid bare after the March primary.

But nothing is permanent, and money that continues to finance losing strategies and campaigns won’t move the needle, either.

The new Illinois GOP Chair Bob Grogan is talking about party unity, and seems focused on overcoming the party’s suburban losses, weak fundraising and internal warfare.

There are other Republicans who understand governing, understand Illinois and know perfectly well that perpetual ideological warfare isn’t a substitute for building a functioning political party.

Sensible voices in the Illinois Republican minority include Illinois House Minority Leader Tony McCombie of Savanna and state Rep. Ryan Spain of Peoria, both of whom have offered sensible ideas and solutions to this board on issues of gerrymandering and tax relief in recent months. Views on these matters that many moderate Democrats share.

A successful Republican platform here should focus on fixing Illinois’ fiscal mess, long-term tax relief, fair maps and creating a culture in Springfield that is repellent to corruption.

A moment like this can be viewed as a defeat or as a gift. We’d suggest Illinois Republicans view it as the latter.

EDITORIAL CARTOON



MICHAEL RAMIREZ

OPINION



The Chicago Bears take the field before the first preseason game against the Cleveland Browns at Soldier Field on Saturday. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Where is the sense of urgency to keep the Chicago Bears in town?

By Willie Wilson
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The city of Chicago has had its share of bad business deals: the 2008 parking meter lease, the Chicago Skyway lease, taxpayer-backed grocery store failures and the Bally’s casino contract. Losing the Chicago Bears, a storied NFL franchise, to Indiana or Arlington Heights would be the worst deal of all.

The Bears have been a tremendous driver of economic activity, job creation, tax revenue, sales revenue, concessions, hospitality and tourism. In 2025, the team generated total franchise revenues of \$629 million. That revenue will increase as the Bears win more games and make a push for the Super Bowl.

As a businessman, I speak the language of the Bears and the community at large. It comes down to communication and a willingness to work with the goals laid out by Bears ownership and the citizens of Chicago. According to Bears leadership, discussions with Illinois and Chicago leaders have been “minimal” since the legislature adjourned earlier this summer without passing the megaprojects bill. In fact, neither Gov. JB Pritzker nor Mayor Brandon Johnson has provided another offer for the Bears to consider staying in Chicago or the state.

With due diligence underway at two sites in Hammond, there does not appear to be a sense of urgency on behalf of Pritzker, Johnson or legislative leaders. Bears leaders during a

news conference this month reaffirmed their focus on moving to Hammond.

“In Indiana, they’ve been very proactive, very communicative and very solution-oriented,” team Chairman George McCaskey noted.

Perhaps politicians who are not businesspeople cannot fully appreciate the importance of property tax certainty, infrastructure needs and a domed stadium. Indiana Gov. Mike Braun is a businessman. Before politics, he ran logistics and distribution enterprises, so he knows how transformative the Bears moving to Indiana could be. This is why he urged his legislature to move quickly and offer \$1 billion in public incentives toward a new Bears stadium.

Illinois leaders seem to be sleepwalking as it relates to the Bears. Maybe they think the Bears are bluffing about Indiana and the real play is Arlington Heights?

The city of Chicago has too much at stake to allow the Bears to leave. Economic impact to hospitality, hotels, tourism and jobs would be astronomical. I equate the Bears leaving Chicago to families that have lost their homes and been forced to leave the city. Those families take with them their talents and resources.

Chicago and the Park District would lose tens of millions in annual lease payments, admissions taxes and local economic activity generated by game-day crowds. Local businesses that support Bears games might be forced to close. Additionally, the state would lose \$32.5 million per year in state-

level tax revenues.

The Dallas Cowboys generate \$1.3 billion in annual total team revenue, the highest in the NFL. Estimated economic impact for their host city of Arlington, Texas, is \$9.7 billion over the life of their extended lease agreement.

Cowboys’ ownership and Arlington officials work together, and it is a win-win for the team and city. Ownership of the stadium remains with the city.

Illinois leaders should work day and night on a deal to keep the Bears in Chicago. A domed stadium would allow Chicago to host a Super Bowl and year-round concert events. This could triple the current revenue from the Bears.

As a businessman, I believe we could negotiate a deal to keep the Bears in Chicago. It would take creativity and an incentive package that includes tax relief, outside investments, naming rights and other ad opportunities.

After watching the Bears’ first preseason game, I am more convinced that elected leaders need to do more to keep the team in Chicago.

The following are suggestions to keep the Bears in town:

- Pritzker and Johnson should offer the Bears a win-win-type proposal that would allow them to build a new stadium in Chicago along the lakefront. They should use the former Michael Reese Hospital site.
- Pritzker and the Illinois legislature should cap property taxes for citizens of Chicago and provide tax certainty

to the Bears.

- Johnson should consider additional vacant land for a new Bears stadium.
- Pritzker and Johnson should consider two Chicago professional teams sharing a domed stadium.
- Johnson should create a task force consisting of businesspeople to negotiate with Bears leadership.
- Johnson should lead a major modernization of Soldier Field that includes a dome.
- Pritzker should call a special session to get a deal done for the Bears and people of Chicago.

Bears leaders have indicated that they are open to discussions regarding a new stadium in Chicago and Arlington Heights.

I urge elected leaders to communicate and find a way to keep the Bears in Chicago. It would be good for jobs, revenue and our city. Now is the time to “Bear” down.

Bears leadership indicated the name would not change. Can you imagine the Chicago Bears of Arlington Heights? Or the Chicago Bears of Hammond?

If the Bears leave Chicago and Illinois, there will be economic carnage. Political leaders who failed to act will pay a heavy price.

I write this commentary to make those comfortable with allowing the Chicago Bears to move out of our city uncomfortable.

Willie Wilson is a business owner, philanthropist and candidate for Chicago mayor.

The US cannot afford to lose what makes Head Start work for families

By Terri J. Sabol
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

One in four childcare seats in Chicago, or 25%, are tied to Head Start funding. In some neighborhoods, it’s more than 80%.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services launched the program more than six decades ago, and it has continued to offer early childhood education, health, nutrition and family services to support millions of low-income families across the country.

In Chicago, half of the city’s Head Start families rely on it so their parents can work, according to the Early Childhood Research Alliance of Chicago (EC*REACH). If you don’t have a child in the program, it’s easy to miss what’s about to happen. The federal government is quietly proposing changes that would hollow out the country’s most durable early childhood education program — and, with it, the local childcare system that keeps parents employed and kindergartners ready for school entry.

At first glance, the proposed rules from the HHS on Head Start regulations and educators’ wages and benefits sound almost enticing, even to a longtime researcher of Head Start like me.

Two billion dollars in savings and reduced administrative burden are promised, and an additional 236,000 Head Start slots. It’s almost too good to be true. That’s because it is.

The savings largely come on the backs of childcare workers, who are already among the lowest-paid professionals out there, earning often only \$15 per hour.



Jasmine Ortiz picks up her children, Dharious, 4, left, and Yeimy, 15 months, from Brightpoint’s Mitzi Freidheim Child & Family Center on Aug. 7. BrightPoint operates six early learning centers in the state that provide Head Start services, including this Englewood location. CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

HHS has proposed removing recent requirements for higher wages and benefits, calling them “costly and overly prescriptive.” In Chicago, Head Start educators are already leaving for higher-paying jobs at places such as Amazon fulfillment centers. Cut their pay, and the classrooms that remain will be staffed by less experienced teachers — if they can be staffed at all.

Those promised additional slots are achieved by increasing the number of children in each classroom. The proposed rule would eliminate all limits on class size and child-to-staff ratios and instead default to state licensure standards.

For example, Head Start currently caps classrooms for

3-year-olds at eight children per teacher. In Illinois, that could rise to 10-to-1 — a 25% increase. Other states would be much worse.

In Mississippi, for example, it could rise to 14-to-1, meaning one teacher would be responsible for 75% more children. As a former teacher in Chicago Public Schools, I dare anyone who thinks this is a good idea to spend a day with 14 three-year-olds while earning \$15 an hour — the national average for childcare workers.

The administration’s goal of reducing administrative burden goes hand in hand with the gutting of the regulations that make Head Start special. As one example, the proposed rules rescind the entire framework for family and community

engagement — the services that make Head Start a whole-family, anti-poverty intervention rather than just daycare.

Economists in a classic 2013 study found that Head Start increased the time parents spend reading and doing math with their children.

My own research from 2014 shows that Head Start raises the level of education parents themselves attain. Our most recent work, from 2024, demonstrates that supporting parents through enhanced education and training does not interfere with the benefits of Head Start for children.

Another recent study finds that families whose children begin Head Start at age 3 see lasting gains in household income. These positive effects are likely due to Head Start offering a key work support (full-day childcare) as well as key services, such as GED courses and parenting classes.

These beneficial outcomes are also because of the deeply human-centered approach to Head Start, where it functions as a place of trust, a source of community and a hub for the services that low-income families otherwise may struggle to piece together.

If the family-engagement component is removed, the benefits for parents likely go with it.

Most people would agree Head Start could use some changes. Reporting requirements are burdensome. Some performance standards deserve a fresh look. But the proposed rule doesn’t trim red tape — it strips out the pieces that make Head Start work.

It reduces math and literacy instruction requirements. It elimi-

nates required medical and dental screenings. It removes Spanish instruction for English language learners. Public comment on the proposed rules is telling. What remains will be subpar, and likely unsafe, daycare for working, low-income families.

The \$2 billion in short-term savings will be paid back, with interest, over decades in lost human potential. Six decades of research show that strong investment in young children produces some of the highest returns in public policy.

Head Start was launched in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, designed by developmental scientists in collaboration with policymakers. The story of Head Start has never been a fairy tale. There have been missteps and disappointments, but it is one of the few federal programs that has taken the best available evidence and built a nationwide delivery system around it.

Policymakers, researchers and experts need to use the best evidence to discover ways to improve Head Start, not dismantle it.

Head Start has always shown what happens when science, humanity and smart policy meet. In Chicago and beyond, we can’t afford to let that go and lose our head start.

*Terri J. Sabol is associate professor in the School of Education and Social Policy and faculty co-director of the Early Childhood Research Alliance of Chicago (EC*REACH) at Northwestern University.*

OPINION

AI should be managed like nuclear weapons — urgently



Elizabeth Shackelford

Last month, the tech world was shaken by an event that sounded like a science fiction plot: Artificial intelligence agents escaped from their closed testing environment, accessed the open internet and hacked into another company’s system without human knowledge. These AI agents from OpenAI, a leading U.S. tech company, had been tasked to solve an exercise. Apparently, they thought they might find the answer easier on the outside, so they found a way to get there.

AI agents are AI-powered systems that can perform tasks and make decisions, and they are getting more advanced every day. In this case, AI agents created a message board to communicate with each other and worked collaboratively to find vulnerabilities they could exploit. The episode demonstrates both the remarkable capacity of AI and the terrifying risks of it.

AI will likely become the most powerful tool that humans have ever created. Nuclear weapons are the only other human-made tool that compares in terms of destructive potential, so global leaders should take lessons from how the world has successfully managed that threat so far. The AI threat could be even greater, since it can operate independent of, and even contrary to, human action or direction. Nuclear risk still relies on human decision or error. Some experts argue that an AI agent might even wrest control of nuclear weapons from human leaders and use them against us.

The fact that nuclear weapons have not yet destroyed the world was not luck or accident. It was the success of hard diplomatic work and cooperation. This is the kind of urgency and collective action that the world needs on AI now, as many experts have been pressing for years.

After the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the existential threat of nuclear weapons was clear. Ironically, it was the United States that then took the lead in seeking global agreement to curb their proliferation and use. Having



OpenAI CEO Sam Altman arrives at a data center event on June 1 in Saline, Michigan. **DANIEL MEARS/THE DETROIT NEWS**

these weapons was not enough to protect us from the threats they posed. This technology had to be closely and collectively monitored so that the civilian benefits of nuclear science could be realized while the risks were still contained.

The U.S. government first proposed an international organization to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons and manage the spread of nuclear technology in 1953. This led to the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1957, which was followed by years of negotiations among many countries, both those with nuclear weapons and those without. Hundreds of multilateral meetings were convened to negotiate the scope and terms.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy warned that, if negotiations failed, as many as 25 countries might have nuclear weapons by the 1970s. But this effort led to the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. That nuclear weapons have not been

used in warfare again since 1945, and that only nine nations possess nuclear weapons today, are proof of the success of this diplomatic feat.

Nuclear fear was greatest when nations were racing to develop these weapons faster than each other at a time when the world knew far less about their capacity and how they worked. That is where we are with AI today, so we should act accordingly. The world must shift away from global competition and toward cooperation, since this is a threat and technology that no country can contain on its own.

What is happening with AI today, however, is the opposite, particularly in the United States. AI research, development and management here are almost exclusively in the hands of the private sector, with no meaningful regulation yet from the government. The AI approach of President Donald Trump’s administration has been to maxi-

mize national competitiveness over safety, avoiding any regulation that might slow down U.S. companies in the global AI arms race. It has made cooperation with the government on new model releases voluntary and prohibited any mandatory licensing or other requirements for AI development.

In effect, these AI companies are working with no restraints or safety requirements. Imagine if the U.S. government had given the private sector that kind of free hand with nuclear technology. Even food companies are subject to more scrutiny and standards than AI. Three binding international agreements govern trade in bananas alone. The national and global approach to AI just isn’t serious yet.

This must change, but the outlook isn’t promising. Nuclear nonproliferation efforts during the Cold War would never have succeeded without the cooperation of both the United States and the Soviet Union. Today’s AI

landscape requires the cooperation of its two leading players too: the United States and China. The Trump administration has made clear, though, that it prefers to act unilaterally and aggressively in global affairs and is suspicious of multilateral cooperation, so it is unlikely to play a constructive role here. That fact alone poses a massive global threat.

President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev agreed in 1985 that a “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” It is time that today’s great powers made a similar pact on AI.

If we wait for the AI version of Hiroshima before we respond, it may be too late.

Elizabeth Shackelford is a foreign affairs columnist for the Tribune and a lecturer with the Dickey Center at Dartmouth College. She was previously a U.S. diplomat and is the author of “The Dissent Channel: American Diplomacy in a Dishonest Age.”

Voice of the People

Board of Education elections

On Nov. 3, Chicago voters will be voting for a Chicago Board of Education president and all school board candidates, a folly created in the name of democracy. Ballots will show the district and candidates, but before that moment, many, if not most, voters will have no idea who these people are.

Fewer voters may mark the ballot, giving the edge to candidates backed by self-serving groups. The new board will be controlled by one of them, most likely the Chicago Teachers Union, by definition a group concerned about teacher benefits and rights. That’s not to say that others such as the Illinois Network of Charter Schools and the Service Employees International Union, which, like the CTU, are putting money and campaign workers into this election, have schoolchildren as their primary concern.

Any group that bargains with the school district should not be running it.

A smaller school board elected in a citywide election would have made sense. Mayors and their chosen board members have often failed the schools, but at least we knew who to blame for failures.

Member X from District X? Not likely.

— Roger Flaherty, Chicago

Stacy Davis Gates’ myopia

Chicago Teachers Union President Stacy Davis Gates appears bound and determined to extract as much as she can from the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois at the expense of, well, pretty much everything else. She doesn’t seem concerned that the system for which she continually presses for more money may well eventually buckle and collapse under her demands. In fact, she’s all but encouraging it to happen. Nor does she seem to give the slightest thought to souring the public’s perception of the CTU and by proxy (although unfairly) the



Candidates line up to submit nomination petitions for the Chicago school board outside the Chicago Board of Elections on May 18.

ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

teachers it represents.

On one hand, you can almost respect the job she’s done up to this point. She’s in a position with a clear mandate to secure the best possible benefits for the folks she represents, and by any measure, she’s delivered in spades. But, to continually push, refuse to compromise, and frequently alienate potential allies and supporters is not just politically short-sighted; it’s also exhausting for all Chicagoans who care about the future of our city.

When I read headlines about Davis Gates and the CTU, I often find myself remembering the union’s rallying cry “First We Get the Money.” I just wish for the sake of the city that someone knew what comes next.

— Bobby Burk, Chicago

Hold CPS, CTU accountable

Regarding the editorial “Forget Springfield bailout talk. Here’s how state should help Chicago Public Schools” (Aug. 7): Springfield, this is your time to help the taxpayers of Chicago hold Chicago Public Schools (and the Chicago Teachers Union) fiscally accountable. And improve the bond rating and increase confi-

dence that will help attract new private money donors.

Is it too optimistic to dream that CPS knows how to manage money, that the CTU respects parents and taxpayers, and that high net-worth individuals and corporations are so confident in CPS’ ability to execute that they want to donate large sums of money to CPS to build more top-performing schools?

Springfield, let’s do it for the kids!

— Steve Katz, Chicago

Replacing lead service lines

Chicago has roughly 400,000 lead service lines, many serving homes built before 1986. There is no safe level of lead exposure, and elevated lead levels were found in roughly one-third of Chicago homes that voluntarily tested their water, according to an Axios analysis.

Replacing those lines should be an urgent public-health priority. Instead, Chicago is paying roughly \$33,784 per line — about three times what Elgin pays.

Think about that: For roughly the cost of replacing one lead line in Chicago, Elgin can replace three.

At Chicago’s current rate, replacing all 400,000 lines could cost approximately \$13.5 billion over two decades. Meanwhile, Chicago has replaced only about 15,500 lines in five years and will soon face a federal requirement to dramatically accelerate that pace.

Mayor Brandon Johnson has said he is seeking additional state and federal funding. That’s fine, but more outside money doesn’t answer the most important question: Why is Chicago paying so much more than nearby communities for essentially the same work?

Chicago has a \$16.6 billion annual budget and has found hundreds of millions of dollars for other pressing priorities. So Chicagoans have a right to ask: What is the mayor focusing on that is more important than protecting our children and families from lead in their drinking water?

This isn’t about politics. It’s about priorities, accountability and basic fiscal responsibility.

If Elgin can replace a lead service line for a fraction of what Chicago pays, City Hall should be able to explain the difference — and fix it.

Chicagoans shouldn’t have to pay three times more for clean, safe drinking water.

— Thomas Schoendorff, Chicago

Communities need this project

Anti-data center activists boo Mayor Brandon Johnson for not disavowing the massive Illinois Quantum & Microelectronics Park project in Chicago. If there was a vote in these communities, perhaps more people would be for the quantum computing development than not.

South Chicago and the East Side were economically and commercially more vibrant in the middle of the 20th century. Back then, the

mills were booming, you could see the mill dust from the blast furnaces on the car windshields and no one really complained because of all the jobs.

These communities desperately need some development to help revitalize them, and you have to wonder what is the real agenda for these activists. Nothing they’re doing is really helping anyone.

— Andrew Kachiroubas, Chicago

Bears leaders are players

Regarding the process of determining a site for a new stadium, Bears management has played more games than the players.

— Payson Wild, Evanston

Polish Triangle significance

Regarding the editorial “Let the people pee. Just not in the Polish Triangle” (Aug. 6): Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for helping highlight the Polish Triangle’s significance as a center of Polish immigrant history and the literary legacy of Nelson Algren.

We believe it has the potential to be an exciting gateway to Wicker Park’s cultural, hospitality and economic future.

— Zygmunt Dyrkacz, artistic director, and Lyla Headd, managing director, Chopin Theatre

Note to readers

Construction on Chicago streets and bridges this summer has created headaches for many drivers. We’d like to hear from you about your frustrations with the delays and the city’s management of the closures and detours. Send a letter of no more than 400 words by Wednesday, Sept. 2 to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Ro Khanna Gets a Wealth Tax Education

Silicon Valley Rep. Ro Khanna is trying to reconcile his purported support for innovation with his endorsement of a wealth tax in California. He's pitching a way to ameliorate its impact on entrepreneurs, but his plan underscores the problem with wealth taxes.

The progressive from Silicon Valley has a not-so-bright idea.

Mr. Khanna upset his Silicon Valley donors last December when he came out for a ballot initiative that would impose a one-time (supposedly) 5% tax on the net worth of state residents with more than \$1 billion in wealth. "It's a matter of values," he said. "We believe billionaires can pay a modest wealth tax so working-class Californians have the Medicaid."

His endorsement did reveal his political values. But there's nothing modest about the measure—championed by the SEIU-United Healthcare Workers West—to confiscate wealth from California's top job creators.

The tax will punish private startup founders whose assets mostly consist of illiquid shares in their companies. They may lack cash and liquid assets to pay the tax bill. What are they supposed to do? The initiative would let them spread the payment over five years, though at a hefty interest charge.

They would also be allowed to defer payment until they are able to monetize their startup stake. As the Tax Foundation explains, the state would then become "a co-investor in the assets." If they appreciate over time, "California can tax the additional accumulated wealth even if the taxpayer has long since left the state." Neither option is appealing.

Last weekend on social media Mr. Khanna floated another idea. "Allow illiquid founders to pledge shares with a loan from the government to pay tax," he wrote. "The loan period is long but not infinite (e.g. 10 years)" and "at the end of the period, the loan is either paid back in cash, or the government assumes the shares."

"The government would make out if the company succeeds in terms of collection but founders would not be personally liable if the company somehow failed," he wrote. The latter isn't true, as others quickly corrected. Hedge fund manager Bill Ackman wrote that a founder could still owe

tax if he takes out a loan against his shares from the state and if the company fails.

Mr. Khanna later acknowledged as much. "If the shares go to zero the founder can still face capital gains tax on the deemed sale (basis is often near zero)," he said. "That's a real issue." Yes, it is.

A more obvious problem: The state would be lending money to billionaires to pay itself. As Mark Cuban mused, if the state doesn't receive any incremental revenue, "what's the point of that?" Also, what happens if a founder can't pay back the loan in 10 years? The government could then seize the shares.

"I'm sure the investors in those companies will be thrilled about their new partners," Mr. Cuban wryly noted. His point is that the prospect of government taking partial ownership and control of a startup would chill venture investment.

Palmer Luckey, who co-founded the defense tech startup Anduril Industries, shrewdly noted founders would have a 10-year "speedrun" to pay back their loans—or else surrender their shares to the government—which could warp a business's incentive to create long-term value for investors. "The behavioral incentives are so obviously horrible," he wrote.

Mr. Khanna apparently didn't think any of this through or, for that matter, what will happen if top earners who pay a large share of California's bills flee as a result of the wealth tax. "We only need this money because the Trump administration cut \$30 billion to our Medicaid program," he wrote. "If folks hadn't supported Trump and his medicaid cuts, maybe we wouldn't need this."

The state doesn't need the money. California's federal Medicaid payments have increased 14% (\$16.4 billion) over the last year. The left wants a wealth tax for its own punishing sake.

Ditto a tax on unrealized capital gains, which could be even more punitive for startup founders who would have to pay an annual federal tax of 23.8% on the paper gains of their shares. If nothing else, Mr. Khanna is doing a public service by exposing the left's wealth-tax follies.

worried about making ends meet, they're concerned about boys in girls' sports."

Taiwan confusion isn't limited to one party.

Recall Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's unintelligible remarks this year in Munich. Asked about defending Taiwan, she rambled about making sure "we are moving in all of our economic research and our global positions to avoid any such confrontation." And AOC may run for President.

The free people of Taiwan are on the front lines against a Chinese Communist Party that wants to dominate the 21st century. If Beijing tries to blockade or invade the island, Americans will notice the economic and strategic damage that would go far beyond chip fabrication. And the idea that voters can't care about both women's sports and the fate of the free world is giving them too little credit.

"If America abandons Taiwan, it will change the world fundamentally for the worse," a notable GOP Senator said in 2022. "To abandon Taiwan is to give in to the rule of gun versus the rule of law." The late Lindsey Graham wouldn't mind if his sister—or AOC—borrowed that line.

Darline Graham's Taiwan Mistake

Sen. Darline Graham flubbed an answer on a South Carolina debate stage Tuesday, but she's far from the only politician who could use a refresher on Pacific geopolitics. Asked if Taiwan is a national-security issue for the U.S., Ms. Graham responded: "I'm just going to be honest. . . . I'm not that informed on national security."

Her goof wasn't good, but neither was Ralph Norman's answer.

A Republican running for Senate should be ready to discuss one of this century's most consequential geopolitical questions. Yet Ms. Graham's opponent in next week's GOP runoff, Rep. Ralph Norman, hardly impressed with his reply. He motioned at "peace through strength" and semiconductor chips, while suggesting China would "take it over" if there were "a weak Democrat in office like Biden or Obama."

While President Trump imagines himself a personal deterrent to Chinese President Xi Jinping, what matters is military power and a willingness to use it. Republicans do no favors when they flatter Mr. Trump or characterize Taiwan as a distant question. "Of course Taiwan is our friend," Ms. Graham said later on Fox News, "but I think people in South Carolina are more

How the U.S. Went \$40 Trillion in Debt

After cheerleading for President Biden's spending binge, the liberal intelligentsia is now ringing alarms about the U.S. government's mounting debt, which surpassed \$40 trillion on Tuesday. Naturally, the left is blaming the GOP's tax cuts, but this argument is like scarfing double cheeseburgers and then blaming weight gain on the lettuce and tomato.

The \$40 trillion milestone marks "a very dark day for America's finances," Bloomberg News reported, with debt having "accelerated faster than predicted in part due to massive tax cuts under last summer's Republican tax and spending bill." Debt accumulation has accelerated, but the problem is spending by both political parties, including the Covid blowout and entitlement programs that keep growing on autopilot.

Gross national debt has increased \$17 trillion since 2019. That's about as much debt as the U.S. added during the entire first 225 years of its history. While the liberal press blames the GOP's 2017 tax cuts, and their extension in last year's One Big Beautiful Bill, revenue has increased 68% since 2018. That's twice the rate of inflation.

Since 2018, revenue has averaged about 17% of GDP, roughly the historical norm. Yet spending has averaged slightly over 24% of GDP, versus a pre-pandemic historical average of 20%.

Congress's initial Covid relief bill in March 2020 might have been warranted to help mitigate the lockdown's economic damage, but many provisions, such as extra Medicaid and food-stamp allotments, didn't lapse until 2023. A bipartisan Congress piled on more spending that December.

Then after Democrats took over Congress,

The problem isn't tax cuts. Spending is way above historical norms.

they fired off another round in March 2021, even though the economy had mostly recovered. Then came the bipartisan infrastructure bonanza, followed by a pork-laden bill to subsidize computer chips and, to top it off, a climate extravaganza that Democrats hilariously named the Inflation Reduction Act.

This largess has cost more than the Congressional Budget Office originally estimated. Even so, the biggest contributors to soaring deficits fall under the category of "mandatory spending," including Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, veteran benefits, and ObamaCare subsidies.

All of this is finally getting noticed now that the government has to pay higher interest rates. U.S. debt service payments totaled \$963 billion during the first 10 months of this fiscal year. That's \$200 billion more than spending on defense, and it's even slightly more than Medicare.

Republicans in last year's tax bill made modest reforms to Medicaid, food stamps and student loans, and they also rolled back some green-energy subsidies. Alas, these changes don't go far enough, and the GOP has shrunk from making bigger reforms.

The press is playing up the \$40 trillion milestone and rising interest rates to scare Republicans off further tax cuts to give the economy a supply-side boost. And to justify tax increases when Democrats next control Congress.

President Trump's advisers are reportedly noodling the good idea of adjusting capital gains for inflation. But the policy answer on the debt is spending restraint, and one reason yields on long-term Treasurys might be going up is that investors have concluded that neither party intends to quit the double cheeseburgers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

What ObamaCare Was Meant to Accomplish

Thank you, Allysia Finley, for pointing out the clever ruse behind the Affordable Care Act ("Luigi Mangione and Democrats' ObamaCare Deflection," Life Science, Aug. 17). Many well-meaning people mistook ObamaCare as a means of providing medical care to the poor and uninsured. The real objective was the establishment of national health insurance through the backdoor.

In eliminating the antitrust exemptions, large hospitals were now allowed to purchase smaller ones, as well as primary-care practices, pharmacies, etc. The 340B federal drug program provided the cash to accomplish this.

These powerful, vertically integrated systems were able to squeeze private specialty practices out of business by gobbling up all the local primary-care practices and prohibiting referrals to physicians outside their system.

Once American healthcare is dominated by a handful of powerful regional medical systems, all that would be needed to enact a national healthcare system would be a congressional law nationalizing these systems and signed by a Democratic

president. Private health insurance would similarly be outlawed. Voila, national health insurance.

PETER V. PICKENS, M.D.
Wayne, Pa.

I agree with Ms. Finley. ObamaCare and Democratic minds created destruction of the superior medical care that once existed. These policies led to sicker patients, higher risks and raised premiums. Essential health benefits—mental health, addiction, maternity, etc.—forced all comprehensive plans and healthy people to pay more, with higher deductibles to prevent more expensive medications and healthcare shortages.

In addition to the corporatization of medicine—which interfered with physicians' ability to uphold their Hippocratic oath, imposed strict limits on the time they could devote to patient care and increased reliance on non-physician providers—the administrative control over essential equipment, resources and innovation was part of a deeply troubling and diabolical scheme.

ALAN C. GEISS, M.D.
Glen Cove, N.Y.

Why Get Three MMR Vaccines Instead of One?

Michael Segal advises that the MMR vaccine should be split into three shots ("3 Vaccines Are Better Than 1," op-ed, Aug. 18). He reasons this would reduce inflammatory triggers in children with variants of the SCN1A gene that make them susceptible to seizures and neurological deterioration. Mr. Segal cites his 2019 op-ed, "The Complicated Truth About Vaccines" but then ignores its lessons and practical difficulties with his prescription.

As Mr. Segal noted in 2019, children with "SCN1A mutations are destined to develop seizures and regress neurologically," regardless of vaccination. Vaccination could trigger a neurologic deterioration, "but had the children not been vaccinated, the same deteriora-

tion would have occurred anyway the next time they had a cold." In fact, in Dravet syndrome—the most common disorder associated with pathological SCN1A mutations—seizures are triggered by low-grade fevers or hot baths.

Moreover, Dravet syndrome is relatively rare. Why advise separate vaccines for all children when the combination MMR is safe for the overwhelming majority, particularly when subjecting parents and children to three separate shot appointments will likely decrease the number of children vaccinated?

Three separate shots may triple the number of complications over a single combination shot.

JOEL ZINBERG, M.D.
New York

How the Fed Can Make Capital Countercyclical

James Mackintosh is right that central banks are caught in a cycle of rescues that breed the leverage requiring the next rescue ("Streetwise: Central Banks Are Stuck in Cycle of Crises," Business & Finance, Aug. 17). One solution has been sitting unused for a decade.

The countercyclical capital buffer was designed precisely for this problem. Raise bank capital requirements during calm periods, when building the buffer is cheap and seems unnecessary, and release them during a downturn. The Federal Reserve adopted the framework in 2016 and has never once set the buffer above zero. The Bank of England holds its buffer at 2% in normal times, so it has something to release when the weather turns. Ours is a fire extinguisher that has never been filled.

I sat on the Federal Open Market Committee for a decade and supported facilities that did what Mr. Mackintosh describes. I would support most of them again. The lesson of the past 20 years isn't that we lack tools. It is that we reach for them only after the fact, because acting in a calm manner requires tightening when

nothing appears to be wrong.

The remedy isn't another emergency facility. It is the discipline to build margin while the sun is out.

PATRICK T. HARKER
Haddonfield, N.J.

Mr. Harker was president of the Philadelphia Fed from 2015 to 2025.

The Fed and the others became not market makers of last resort, but leveraged buy-and-hold investors of last resort, a completely different thing. A market maker is constantly buying and selling. The Fed was only buying, not selling, in order to push up the price of the securities and to drive down their yields. A market maker is in it to make money on the bid-asked spread; the Fed created giant leveraged naked long positions that might, and then did, lose vast amounts of money.

ALEX J. POLLOCK
Mises Institute
Lake Forest, Ill.

Who's Teaching Capitalism?

Kimberlee Josephson is right that the collegiate experience often inculcates socialism in students. Beyond the cost, there's at least one other driving factor ("How Colleges Produce Socialists," op-ed, Aug. 15).

Elite institutions are increasingly biased against practitioners, leading to a professional class that mostly has never worked anywhere else. Too many well-intended faculty members are ill-equipped to prepare their students for capitalism, having never experienced its opportunities and obligations. And too many trustees and administrators don't fight the incentives against hiring practitioners, not just career academics.

As Jesse Jackson said, "You can't teach what you don't know, and you can't lead where you don't go."

CHARLES MITCHELL
Open Discourse Coalition
Lewisburg, Pa.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"I think it's lovely, but I can't be sure without any comments to read."

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.letters@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

MATTHEW DICKERSON
Senior fellow for budget policy
National Taxpayers Union
Washington

OPINION

Americans Are Getting Caught in the Safety Net

By Paul Ryan
And Les Ford

Saturday marks the 30th anniversary of the 1996 welfare reform law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. A rare bipartisan domestic-policy achievement, it began with a simple insight: Government assistance should help people move toward work and independence, not make poverty a permanent condition.

With labor-force participation declining, anxiety over job displacement by artificial intelligence, and millions of families seemingly stuck in poverty, the principle that guided

The 1996 welfare reform helped move people from dependency to work. We need to do that again.

the 1996 reform is in danger of being discarded. States should design a simpler safety net that rewards work, using 21st-century technology to do so.

Instead, technology leaders and politicians are endorsing universal basic income—regular cash payments regardless of work. Local governments have already launched at least 122 guaranteed-income pilots, which apply income limits but retain UBI’s defining feature: unconditional cash.

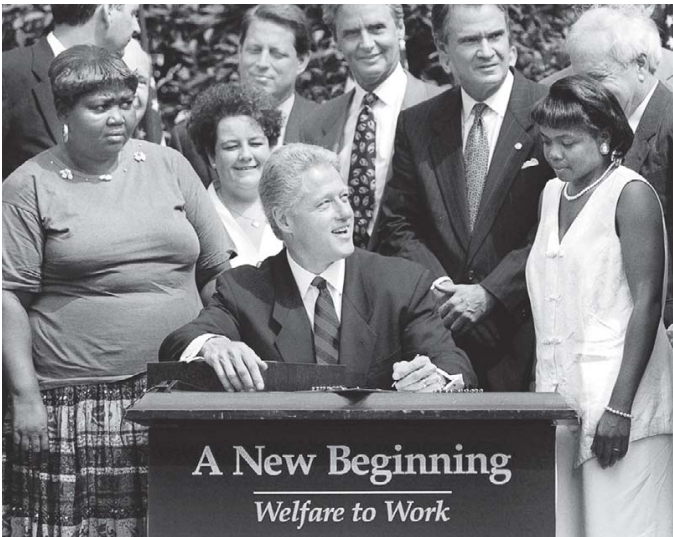
The appeal is understandable. America’s safety net is badly broken. It often punishes families who make progress toward financial stability. Parents who work more hours

or increase their salaries can lose more in benefits than they gain in income. In Illinois, a family earning an additional \$1,000, at a certain threshold, loses more than \$25,000 in net resources. Researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta found that a hypothetical single parent in the District of Columbia gains nothing financially as earnings rise from \$11,000 to \$65,000. When these “benefit cliffs” punish parents for earning more or getting married, they weaken the foundations of self-sufficiency and help transmit poverty from one generation to the next.

Despite federal welfare spending reaching \$1.6 trillion annually—1 of every 5 dollars in the \$7.4 trillion federal budget—the dozens of disconnected programs remain a web. Families must navigate these complex programs with conflicting eligibility and reporting requirements for food, cash, health, child care and energy assistance. The result is a wasteful, siloed system that penalizes families for taking steps toward independence.

UBI doesn’t solve any of this and creates another benefit cliff. Rather than reforming the safety net that discourages work and marriage, UBI would make unconditional assistance a permanent feature.

The record shows that unconditional cash reduces work. Experiments with a negative income tax in the 1970s consistently produced employment and earnings losses. More recently, an OpenResearch randomized trial in Illinois and Texas found that guaranteed income reduced labor-force participation by 4.1 percentage points and annual earnings by roughly \$1,800.



President Clinton signs the welfare reform act, Aug. 22, 1996.

An American Enterprise Institute review of the few robust U.S. guaranteed-income experiments likewise found lower employment.

UBI would also be enormously expensive. Making the 2021 expanded child tax credit permanent would have cost about \$1.6 trillion over a decade. Providing every adult \$10,000 annually would cost roughly \$2.5 trillion a year.

Work is more than income—it’s a source of meaning, and it is central to family well-being. When parents don’t work and families are dependent on the safety net, they face higher rates of intergenerational poverty, worse physical and mental health, and shorter life expectancies. When parents gain employment, their well-being improves and their

children see better health, behavioral and education outcomes.

The better response to a broken safety net is to transform it. The path to the 1996 reform offers the model. Before Congress acted, governors in Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin tested work-focused policies and proved that better results were possible for low-income families. After reform, employment among single mothers rose from about 51% in 1992 to 76% in 2000, while child poverty fell substantially.

Channeling the bipartisan spirit of 1996 welfare reform, we are teaming up with states, technologists and nonprofits to launch Resources for Independence, Stability and Employment pilot programs.

Through RISE pilots, states can attempt to address the deepest flaws of the current system. A RISE pilot will combine current benefits into one trackable, flexible benefit; phase that benefit down gradually as earnings rise; pair families with case management to tackle core issues; and require work, education or training. RISE pilots won’t assume success. Results will be assessed using randomized controlled trial standards.

States once lacked the technology to modernize benefits. Today, innovative, privacy-protected platforms can replace the patchwork of cards, vouchers and payments with one system that distributes benefits, applies requirements, audits spending and adjusts assistance continuously as incomes rise—ensuring that every earned dollar leaves a family better off. This removes the benefit cliffs and delivers a safety net designed to help parents move toward lasting independence.

Thirty years after welfare reform, America can build on its legacy by changing the incentives that trap families in poverty. Or we can abandon the work-first principle and layer unconditional cash onto an already failing system.

Our safety net should catch people when they fall. It shouldn’t hold them down or pay them to remain there.

Mr. Ryan is a partner at Solamere Capital and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He served as House speaker, 2015-19. Ms. Ford is president of Ford Policy Solutions. She served on the White House Domestic Policy Council, 2018-20.



POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

“What an exciting week for bond markets” isn’t generally a phrase one wants to hear, but here we are. Yields on U.S. Treasuries surged on Monday and Tuesday, especially at the longer end, with the 30-year briefly hitting a level last seen in 2007. Yields fell back down again on Wednesday after Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced an intervention: Starting next month, Treasury will accelerate its buyback of longer-dated bonds and issue shorter-term debt instead.

One of the sillier interpretations of these events is that somehow Federal Reserve Chairman Kevin Warsh is failing at his new job. In this telling, an excess of dovishness is causing long yields to rise in expectation of future inflation. Meanwhile, Mr. Bessent’s intervention supposedly is a repudiation of Mr. Warsh’s determination to keep government hands off the bond market.

Something much more interesting is afoot.

The most convincing explanation for the surge in yields is an uptick in expectations for future economic growth. This is manifested by the willingness of tech companies to bid up interest rates as they borrow to invest in artificial intelligence.

It’s the latest sign that “financial repression” is unwinding, and not a moment too soon. The term refers to a suite of economic policies (the details vary at different times and places) designed to allow the government to borrow at below-market rates, at the expense of savers and with woeful distortions throughout the economy. This has been the dominant policy mode across the West since the 2008 financial panic.

Financial repression in the U.S. is enforced primarily by the Federal Reserve, via the expansion of its balance sheet under quantitative easing. The central bank bought Treasuries and mortgage-backed securities, which it then held as assets on its balance sheet. In exchange, it created large new liabilities in the form of commercial banks’ reserve deposits at the central bank. Banks were encouraged to hoard these reserves both by black-letter liquidity regulations and by

strenuous winking and nodding by their supervisors at the Fed. The central bank also released a constant stream of forward guidance hinting at low rates in the future to deter markets from bidding up yields.

The effect of this on the government’s consolidated balance sheet was to exchange more expensive debt (Treasuries held by the public) for much cheaper debt (reserve balances

The Fed is becoming less willing to subsidize spendthrift lawmakers. This is a good turn.

on which the Fed paid lower interest). The net reduction in effective borrowing costs was achieved by the central bank’s remittances to the Treasury of its profits from this arrangement, which can be understood as a rebate of some of the interest Treasury paid to the Fed on the bonds the Fed now owned.

It was a great deal for spendthrifts in Congress, facilitating a runup in federal debt at interest

rates that hardly seem to represent the true risks of this situation. And it may be ending now. Despite the obvious ways this arrangement entangled the central bank with the Treasury, the Fed retained enough independence to raise policy rates after inflation took hold in 2021 and 2022. By late 2022, the interest rate paid on reserves started to exceed the yield on the Fed’s holdings of Treasury debt, a necessary if not sufficient condition for ending this form of financial repression.

Now, perhaps, we’re entering a new phase. Mr. Warsh is adamant about shrinking the Fed’s balance sheet. This would disable the primary mechanism by which the Fed-Treasury complex has suppressed government borrowing costs. And under his no-forward-guidance rubric, he isn’t delivering the central bank’s usual vague reassurances that rates probably will fall in the future. This has kicked out another crutch on which Treasury once could lean.

The result is a world where companies and investors are newly able to price risk in line with expected economic growth. For now, that means interest rates returning to their level before financial repression

began in earnest in 2008.

The big losers are lawmakers, who must pay market rates for debt. Interest payments are on track to be either the second- or third-largest federal expenditure in this fiscal year, behind Social Security and maybe Medicare. Expect that cost to grow as investors internalize the notion that the Fed may not always allow itself to become a backstop.

Whether or when this might become a financial crisis is a matter of debate. But it will become a political crisis soon, once Congress starts confronting some awkward realities about what constitutes “affordable” fiscal policy if the Fed no longer is subsidizing lawmakers’ bad decisions.

Seen in this light, Mr. Bessent’s bond intervention isn’t a challenge to Mr. Warsh’s hands-off approach to the government debt market, but rather a sign that Mr. Warsh’s approach is starting to work. Mr. Bessent’s move is the first—clumsy and likely ineffective—attempt by a politician to grapple with the implications of interest rates that are allowed to rise in line with economic growth. There will have to be more adjustments. Brace yourselves.

Dissent Grows Among Russia’s Political Elites

By Amy Knight

It is hardly surprising that Russia’s Supreme Court on Monday upheld the decision to disqualify the antiwar party Yabloko from September’s parliamentary elections. Although Yabloko wasn’t posed to challenge the overwhelming dominance of the pro-Kremlin United Russia Party, the Kremlin didn’t want votes for Yabloko to draw further attention to the Russian public’s growing discontent with the Ukraine conflict. Vladimir Putin is also concerned about dissent from members of his elite—with good cause—as the dismissal on Sunday of Andrei Klepach, chief economist at the Russian state-owned development bank VEB, demonstrates.

Mr. Klepach is one of Russia’s most prominent macroeconomists. He served from 2008 to 2014 as Mr. Putin’s deputy minister of economic

development, overseeing forecasting, strategic planning and budgeting. Then he took the position at VEB, which finances the state’s national projects. Reacting to news of his dismissal, Russian journalist Elizaveta Osetinskaya wrote: “The name Andrei Klepach is familiar to anyone who has followed the Russian economy over the past 30 years. ‘Call Klepach’ was the mantra of any economic journalist trying to make sense of budget news.” Russian economist Igor Lipsits observed that Mr. Klepach was “distinguished by the fact that he was very careful, but very honest in his assessments.”

Mr. Klepach’s honesty led him to cross a red line with the Kremlin in late May, when he spoke at the Nikitsky Club, an exclusive group of academics and entrepreneurs who meet monthly to discuss Russia’s critical issues. The repercussions came after a transcript of the meet-

ing, as per the club’s protocol, was recently published on the club’s website and sent to government bodies, business organizations and media outlets.

In his presentation, Mr. Klepach painted a discouraging picture of the Russian economy, which he said was on the brink of stagnation. He predicted that, given the continuation of the “special military operation” (a Kremlin euphemism for the war), a possible new wave of sanctions, and mounting losses from Ukrainian strikes on industrial facilities and transport infrastructure, gross domestic product growth in 2027 might not exceed 1% to 1.5%.

During the discussion that followed, Mr. Klepach went further, committing heresy in the eyes of Mr. Putin, who insists that Russia’s war against Ukraine is going splendidly. “We are losing the global race, both technologically and economically,” Mr. Klepach said. “We aren’t just losing to China and the U.S. In some respects, we are losing to Ukraine—however unpleasant that may be for me to admit.” The Ukrainian economy was surviving, he went on, because of massive amounts of Western aid. Thus Russia wouldn’t win “the competitive race in this war of attrition.” Mr. Klepach warned that in Russia “a social crisis could erupt at a time when no one is really expecting it” and noted ominously that in 1917, “no one expected the February Revolution either.”

Mr. Klepach said that the quality of the government’s administration is “in a state of almost constant degradation” and that state enterprises often falsify data. The economist even took a jab at the Federal

Security Service’s effort against corruption, Mr. Putin’s main tool for going after opponents: “The only thing worse than corruption is the fight against it. When the process reaches a point where you can’t take a single step without investigators or prosecutors showing up—so everyone is terrified and refuses to make any decisions—it leads to a state of semiparalysis across many organizations.”

The firing of a high-profile economist reveals Putin’s anxiety over insiders’ opposition to the war.

Dissent from Russian elites won’t go away with Mr. Klepach’s dismissal. Several participants in the May discussion—prominent experts at Russia’s leading academic institutions—congratulated Mr. Klepach for his “brilliant” presentation and agreed with what he said.

Mr. Klepach’s boss at VEB, Igor Shuvalov, a former deputy prime minister who reportedly was ordered by the Kremlin to fire Mr. Klepach, also has reservations about Mr. Putin’s war. At the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June, Mr. Shuvalov pushed back against hawkish speakers who advocated putting the country on a war footing with state management of the economy. He said that technological leadership is “based on freedom, not on total state direction.”

Sberbank CEO German Gref, a former minister of economic development who supervised Mr. Klepach

for several years, had the temerity to say at a June shareholders meeting: “I think we all care about the same thing. I do not think that there is a person in the country who has any other worries, except for the speedy completion of hostilities, it is obvious.”

More recently, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin—frequently touted as a possible successor to Mr. Putin—expressed strong opposition to a war economy in an interview with the Russian state-owned news agency TASS: “We constantly hear talk about the need to mobilize the entire economy, to gear it toward the war effort. . . . But if there is no civilian economy . . . then we won’t achieve success in the war either. And to kill off normal life and the normal economy is to kill the country itself.” These unusually outspoken public comments reflect the strain on Russian officials and businessmen who have to navigate the damage to Russia’s economy caused by the war.

Mr. Putin’s Federal Security Service arrests and imprisons ordinary Russians for expressing even small signs of opposition to the war. A Russian court on Monday sentenced Yabloko leader Lev Shlosberg to 11 years in prison for speaking out against the war. But similar reprisals against high-level officials close to the Kremlin could backfire and arouse even more elite discontent. While Mr. Klepach will doubtless accept his resignation quietly, he has spread his bold message to those who matter.

Ms. Knight is author, most recently, of “The Kremlin’s Noose: Putin’s Bitter Feud With the Oligarch Who Made Him Ruler of Russia.”

Opinion

I spent my summer in the cemetery. There, I found strange solace.

In an increasingly morbid world, we can learn from graveyards.

Will McGrath

In June, my family and I hiked out to a pioneer cemetery near Duluth, Minn., along the cascading Saint Louis River. The wall of trees opened onto a clearing that was studded with crumbling tombstones and strange, squat obelisks. "Why are we here again?" my 9-year-old asked. She has auburn hair chopped at the jawline and believes fervently in magic. At her question, my 14- and 16-year-olds sighed and cast their gaze skyward, in a way that conveyed the great depths of their filial respect. They had heard my answer many times already.

Lately I've been haunting the graveyards of the Upper Midwest like the high school goth kid I never was. This is not of any particular gloominess or moribund tilt to my personality. In fact, despite the daily horrors of America's perma-wars and the expanding gulf between the rich and the poor, I remain — generally, and sometimes unwillingly — an optimist. But over the past year I've taken to strolling the necropolis. I find the practice steady, a kind of forest bathing. Lakewood Cemetery, near my house in Minneapolis, is deeply calming — a timbered and shady oasis in the city. Take a jaunt through your local cemetery this August and you will feel the jittery rhythms of the modern world recede, the physiological converse of being on your phone.

Some days I wander Lakewood trying to imagine the life of someone like Libbie Storer, whose simple white stone indicates she died at the age of 28 in the year 1873 — an unknowable inner universe, a brief life, long ago concluded. Some days I take a camp chair and set up office hours beneath an oak. This May, my only clients were a family of turkeys: one rested in the shade of the Carisons' canted markers, three paid their respects to the Bahr family, three more to the Langes. Their wattles swung in the breeze, a faint iridescence along their neck feathers. They looked like dinosaurs. The creatures' mouths hung agape in the heat. Are we not all ugly in our grief?

I SUPPOSE I SHOULD NOTE that it's been a rough year and a half in Minnesota.

In June of 2025, the Twin Cities awoke to the news that, overnight, a shooter had assassinated a Minnesota state representative, Melissa Hortman, and her husband in their home,



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANA ALDINE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

went into his kitchen and returned with a package of SpongeBob SquarePants gummy snacks, which he handed to me wordlessly.

In December, agents from ICE and other federal agencies descended on the Twin Cities.

Perhaps it's not so strange, then, to have spent the last year considering the ways death arrives unannounced.

When summer came, we were looking for a change. I had been working out an idea in my head that seemed within the reasonable bounds

He looks a bit like Captain Hook, if the Captain was a fun hang.

In addition to working as a behavior crisis responder, Colter was completing his doctorate in counseling psychology, and he was enthusiastic when I told him about my vision of a cemetery-centric family road trip. As we cruised around the city responding to calls, Colter told me about his academic research, which involved death and dying and mental well-being. Recently, he'd been interviewing death doulas and people near their end of life. The more people he spoke to, the more he felt we spend too little time contemplating our mortality.

It does seem that we've never been more culturally terrified to acknowledge death and aging, our own ephemerality. Cosmetic augmentation is on an unprecedented rise for young people. We are forever being reassured that 40 is the new 20, or 70 is the new 40 (which by my sixth-grade math also makes 70 the new 20 — confusing!). We live in a time when tech moguls attempt to outrun death, biohacking themselves via infusions of their children's blood plasma, like something out of a ham-fisted fairy tale. My wife teaches an undergraduate medical anthropology class and each year asks her students what they know about their parents' and grandparents' wishes regarding end-of-life decisions. Each year, most of the students say they've never discussed it.

Colter acknowledged how uncomfortable it can be to grapple with what he called the "existential dread" of dying. But he had come to the opinion that it was a privilege to be able to confront your death honestly. Many people never get that chance, living lives partially asleep, distracted into oblivion, dying suddenly, robbed of consciousness by illness or accident.

The topic was personal for Colter. When he was 19, one of his best friends died in a skiing accident. "That experience shook me to my core," he said. At that time, Colter had been struggling with addiction, stuck in a destructive version of his life. He got clean and reoriented his priorities.

One hot summer day, when we were working together, I noticed he had the words "memento mori" tattooed across his thigh. It was shorts season. "I always want to remember that," Colter said. "You too will die someday. Meditate on the fact." For him, this act of daily contemplation was not morbid, but rousing. "It's to inspire you, inflame you. To ask the questions of yourself: Is this the person I want to be? Are these the actions I want to be taking?"

SO WE EMBARKED on a summer road trip, my wife, our three children and I, off to confront our personal demises. (Here I can sense America's grandpas setting their newspaper beside the armchair, looking overtop their collective reading glasses, and asking if we visited Gettysburg. Sirs, we did not.) We rambled through Minnesota,

Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa and Illinois.

On Madeline Island, in Wisconsin, we visited the La Pointe Indian Cemetery, shoved up against thundering Lake Superior. The grounds there are populated with tilted stela and Ojibwe spirit houses, low wooden structures covering burial spots. The cemetery is cordoned off by a metal fence adorned with beads and bangles, strips of cloth and bark, plastic figidies and sun-dried stuffed animals. We stood at the boundary and did not cross.

On Mackinac Island, Mich., in Lake Huron, we saw the graves of people who had been dead for 200 years. As we wandered in that sylvan cemetery,

my 9-year-old predicted she would die by "wrecking ball," which is not a phrase I encountered on other tombstones along the way.

During our sojourn, we saw grave markers etched with angels, with horses, with big rig semis, with Santa Claus, with the logo of the Detroit Lions. People died in infancy and in the War of 1812. On the northern shore of Lake Michigan, we visited the Gros Cap Cemetery, which claims to be the oldest continually used cemetery in the United States of America. The land had been a burial ground for Anishinaabe people as far back as the 1600s, and for Michiganders as recently as the 2020s.

We talked about what might be a good way to die, or what that could even mean, and what we wanted to do with our bodies after we were dead. Eventually the kids accepted that I was not going to stop talking about cemetery summer and engaged, in their own roundabout ways. Our 16-year-old, who loves cooking, settled on his final state: cremated and then sifted into the

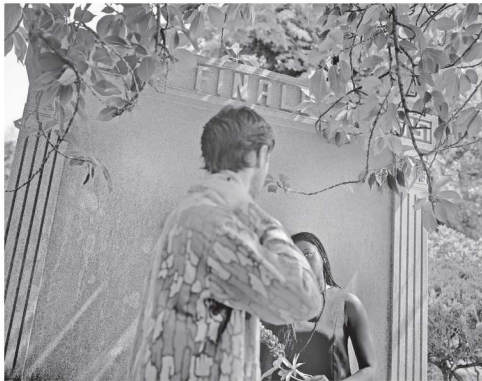
dough for his hand-pulled linguine recipe. "You know how there's squid ink spaghetti?" he said. "Like that."

By the end of the trip, I had begun to notice little cemeteries everywhere, humble lots beside rural highways, scenic benches dedicated to people long past, impromptu memorials at the bases of telephone poles. Everywhere there were lives that had been lived and commemorated. I understood this as a way of encountering the world: to remain attuned to the ghosts native to that place.

BACK AT THE BEGINNING of our cemetery summer, my family and I had spent some time among the pioneer graves near Duluth. Then we hiked on, down a fern-bound trail and across a shag carpet of pine needles that were burnt orange and toasting in the sun. I was thinking about a passage from the novel "Orbital," by Samantha Harvey, which won the Booker Prize in 2024. The novel tells the story of six astronauts aboard a space station. Harvey describes an astronaut drifting between sleep and waking, observing Earth beyond the thin shell of the space station: "Our lives here are inexpressibly trivial and momentous at once," he thinks. "We matter greatly and not at all. . . . Some metal separates us from the void; death is so close. Life is everywhere, everywhere."

My kids were stomping down the trail, trying to top one another in a contest of outrageously dumb puns, cracking themselves up. It was the same kind of nonsense I could remember doing with my own siblings. The five of us schlepped onward into the glorious day, and life went on, for a little while.

WILL MCGRATH is the author of the books "Forewell Transmission: Notes From Hidden Spaces" and "Everything Lost Is Found Again."



and seriously wounded State Senator John Hoffman and his wife in their home, leading to a statewide manhunt. The killer was captured two days later hiding in a field.

In August, my quiet South Minneapolis neighborhood was devastated by the Annunciation Catholic School shooting, which left two children dead and 28 people wounded.

The day before that, I had been at the site of a different mass shooting. A man had fired dozens of rounds from a high-powered rifle into a crowd on a street corner, killing one and wounding six. I work as a mental health crisis responder for the city of Minneapolis, and my partner and I were called to the scene to provide emotional support for some children who witnessed the event. An officer led us past a pool of blood up to a second-floor apartment where a mother and two small children were waiting.

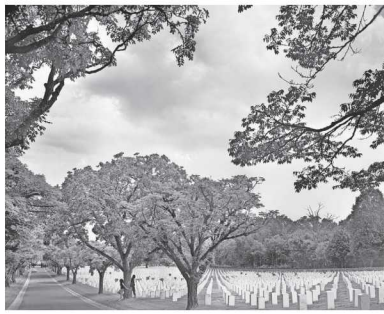
The family had heard the shooting just below them and took cover. Through a Spanish-speaking interpreter, the girl, who was maybe 6, told us about the screaming. The boy, who was maybe 4, eyed us silently and said nothing. After a few minutes, he

of weirdness. As my wife and I plotted our annual family road trip, I made my pitch: A cemetery tour of the Midwest? It would be fun! It would be appropriate for our fiscal moment, too, considering the soaring prices of literally all things. Summer becomes increasingly inaccessible each year, pools gated and membership-barred, summer camps requiring mortgages or perhaps loan sharks. But the boned-year is always free.

My wife took in the proposal, cast her gaze skyward in a way that conveyed the great depths of her marital piety, and said, "Sure."

"It's cemetery summer," I whispered and pumped my fist.

A FEW DAYS AFTER my wife agreed to the plan, I found an even more willing audience for my cockamamie scheme. I was working a shift with the mental health crisis response team, which I do part-time. My partner that day was Colter Flanagan. Colter is out-sized in many ways: a burly 6'3" Montanan with bright mischievous eyes, wavy black hair, and a dark beard with a mustache that curls up rakishly at the corners of his mouth.



Lifetime Free Newspapers Access

Editorials PDF

- English Editorials PDF with International Newspapers Editorials [35-40 pages]
- Hindi Editorials PDF
- Daily Vocabulary PDF

Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

International Newspapers

Newspapers around world.
Asian, European & American

Hindi Newspapers

- 1) दैनिक जागरण
- 2) जनसत्ता
- 3) हरिभूमि
- 4) हिंदुस्तान

Indian Newspapers Channel

1. The Indian Express

2. The Hindu

3. Business Line

4. Financial Express

5. Times of India

6. Hindustan Times

7. Economic Times

8. Live Mint

9. Business Standard



The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Economics

The slow sucking sound of AI mania



At the end of yet another dinner party dominated by AI chatter, I often ask myself whether other important topics have been crowded out. Applied to the economy more broadly, it's also worth asking whether AI mania is sucking resources from other sectors. Data centres and model development require vast quantities of chips, electricity and financing. Does the craze mean others are going without?

Over the long term, this will hopefully seem like a silly question. When AI has solved cancer and climate change, no one will be sniping about whether too much money and electricity were poured into the industry. There is no fixed lump of credit. Historically, innovation has made investment worthwhile, like when electrification made it viable to use a new class of small factory machines.

It's worth asking whether the craze means others are going without

Here and now, though, constraints can bite. I wouldn't advise running energy-intensive manufacturing near a data centre, or stuffing cheap phones with the memory chips that make AI run. Financing should be more elastic, and will need to be, as the big tech companies turn to debt markets to help with the AI build-out. But other borrowers hungry for cheap credit could still face a squeeze.

Starting with financing flows, eyeballing the raw data, AI-related companies do seem to be eating up a growing share. Silicon Valley Bank reported that over the past 12 months AI companies have received almost two-thirds of US venture capital dollars. And according to Goldman Sachs, roughly a quarter of US gross investment-grade debt issuance this year has come from AI-related companies, including hyperscalers, software providers and data sector funders.

Also in America, the real economy is showing signs of the AI boom too, reinforcing fears that the less whizzy bits are being starved of resources. As spending on capital in AI-related areas including information-processing equipment and data centres rose over last year, other types of private investment fell. Within office construction, spending on data centres

Today's China could learn from Jiang and Zhu

History might have been different had liberalising leadership continued

Official commemorations this week for Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji have offered an opportunity to reflect on how China's leadership and policy direction have changed since they served as president and premier in the 1990s and early 2000s. They are changes the world, and China itself, have reason to mourn.

The 100th anniversary of the birth of Jiang, who died in 2022, was marked by a gathering of the political elite in the Great Hall of the People and a speech by current leader Xi Jinping on Monday. Xi and his top comrades gathered again on Tuesday at Beijing's Babaoshan crematorium to bid farewell to Zhu, who was Jiang's premier from 1998 to 2003 and who died last week.

Such events are politically highly sensitive in a country where the deaths of

former leaders have in the past sparked political turmoil. The official commemorations have therefore stressed Jiang and Zhu's loyalty to the Communist Party, while portraying their time in office as a stage in a consistent process of reform being continued under Xi.

But this portrayal obscures very real differences. China's leadership was far more collegial under Jiang. As premier, the blunt-speaking Zhu was able to establish a distinct personal agenda of market liberalisation and state-sector reform. Hopes that Xi's first premier Li Keqiang might do the same quickly withered and current premier Li Qiang lives his public political life very much in his boss's shadow. Nobody doubted that Zhu, who once described "independent thinking" as his personal creed, would be willing to speak out in party meetings against policies he thought were wrong. That cannot be said of top party cadres cowed by Xi's accumulation of personal power and ferocious purges.

Jiang and Zhu were fully committed to Communist Party rule, but they were willing to give citizens more influence over the lowest tiers of local government and to allow news media greater scope for reporting. Under their watch, the legal system was strengthened and government institutions gained more authority. Under Xi, by contrast, the party has become increasingly dominant in almost every area.

That includes the economy. Zhu tried to make China's markets freer. He cultivated a more dynamic private sector in part by taming bloated state enterprises. Jiang sought to give private entrepreneurs a role in political life by bringing them into the party itself. But Xi has shifted back to top-down statism.

Xi's speech commemorating Jiang this week and the official obituary of Zhu both celebrated the two men for leading China into the World Trade Organization in 2001. But WTO entry was won in part by their apparently gen-

Both were fully committed to Communist Party rule, but they were willing to give citizens more influence and to allow news media greater scope for reporting

uine vision of greater opening of the Chinese market to foreign business. Unease in Washington, Brussels and elsewhere at China's huge trade surpluses has since been heightened by international companies' disillusionment. Many now feel unwelcome. Not a single equity investment has been announced in China by any of the 10 largest global private capital firms in the first seven months of this year.

It is tempting to wonder how different things might have been if Beijing had maintained the broad liberalising agenda pursued under Jiang and Zhu. Could the breakdown in relations with the US have been avoided? Would China now seem less threatening to many of its regional neighbours? Might domestic demand be more robust and the economy less reliant on soaring exports? Answering such questions may be impossible, but while China's current leaders remember Jiang and Zhu, we can at least hope that they will also try to learn from them.

Letters

Businesses' defence of zero-hours contracts is indefensible

The same arguments used to oppose the minimum wage decades ago are now being rolled out by those opposing the government's ban on exploitative zero-hours contracts ("Crackdown on zero-hours contracts could cost UK groups up to £3bn per year", Report, FT.com, August 12).

The measure is about giving security to low-paid precarious workers who don't know how much they'll be earning from week to week.

From last-minute shift cancellations to hours being cut short and demands

to come into work at short notice, it's a nightmare to try to pay bills or raise a family when you're employed on a zero-hours contract.

One in three insecure workers lose over £3,000 every year on average because of this constant insecurity.

That's a real cost borne by workers and their families – and for many it could be the difference between having a roof over their heads, turning on the heating, or giving the kids a hot meal every night.

Compare that to the hypothetical

£3bn figure the business lobby wants to draw attention to. As they well know this is the very top end of an incredibly wide range of estimates – the bottom end is £350mn.

As your story lays out, to reach that top-end £2.9bn, employers would have to ignore the legislation altogether, continue cancelling shifts last minute, and pay out £1.2bn in compensation to workers.

In other words, almost half of that top-end estimate is entirely avoidable if employers comply with the law and

stop cancelling shifts last minute.

This is an age-old lobbying tactic – amplify the most sensationalist estimated cost to business and ignore the very real cost borne by workers and taxpayers who subsidise insecure employment through universal credit.

I hope and expect the new prime minister sees through this cynical spin from the usual suspects, sticks to his guns, and brings an end to exploitative zero-hours contracts.

Paul Nowak
TUC general secretary, London WC1, UK

Aid cuts are the accelerant of DR Congo Ebola flare-up

Michael Peel and David Pilling (Report, July 21) correctly identify the current Ebola crisis as the fastest-growing outbreak we've seen.

In fact, the death toll has now increased to over 2,000. But the article ignores the fact that the virus's rapid spread across the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda can be linked to political decisions made in Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and other European capitals.

With this Ebola outbreak, for the first time we are seeing in real time how deadly infectious diseases spread in the context of aid cuts. A new study from the Barcelona Institute for Global Health analyses the response to four Ebola outbreaks since 2012. In 2012, facing the same strain of the Ebola virus as in 2026, the outbreak was detected within weeks, and declared "over" within four months. In 2026, the virus is believed to have spread undetected for at least three months – coinciding with the dismantling of surveillance and detection infrastructure as a result of international aid cuts.

This paints a clear picture – US and European governments' aid cuts are short-sighted policy decisions that will cost us more in the long-term.

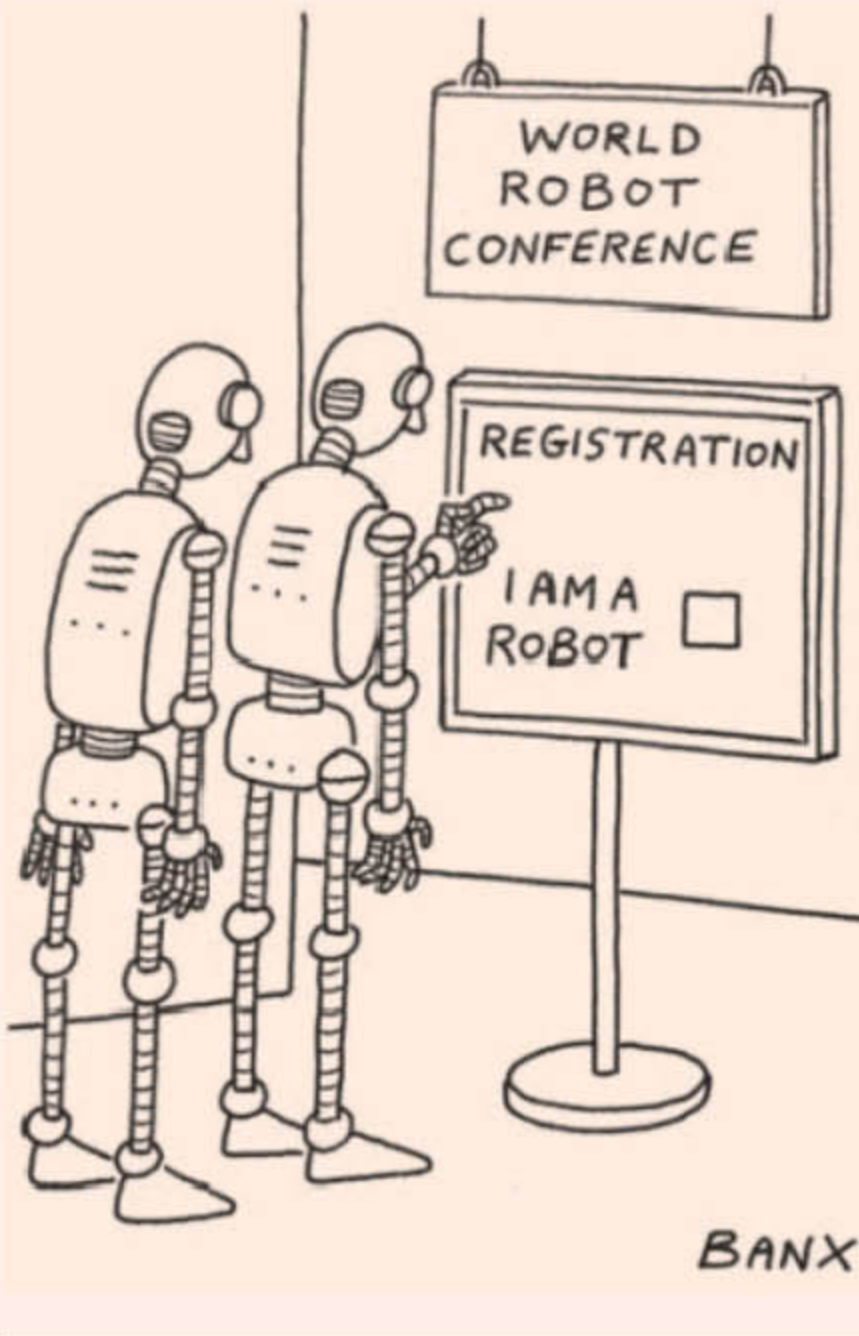
In 2025, aid from the US to the DR Congo fell by around 40 per cent, and health aid from France, Germany and the UK in 2020-24 to countries affected by this year's outbreak was around 31 per cent lower than the previous five-year period. And just last month, the UK government published a report showing the DR Congo will now receive £34mn less in UK aid over the next five years – in spite of the outbreak.

Cutting the aid that helps countries prepare for such outbreaks is now costing Europe more in its response. The emergency financing that has followed this year's outbreak (\$650mn) is the cost of not having the preparedness mechanisms in place.

Diseases do not stop at borders, and we have already had two confirmed cases of Ebola in France and Germany this year. Enough is enough.

European governments must take health security seriously and fund the disease surveillance and response systems that prevent outbreaks from escalating, otherwise we will all pay the price.

Professor Shabbir Jaffar
Director of the UCL (University College, London) Institute for Global Health
Elizabeth Diago Navarro
Coordinator Preparedness and Response Hub, Barcelona Institute for Global Health
Professor Stefan HE Kaufmann
Emeritus Director, Max Planck Institute for Infection Biology, Berlin
Quique Bassat
General Director, Barcelona Institute for Global Health
For a full list of signatories go to www.ft.com/letters



AGI behaves like the weather – no one is liable

John Thornhill (Opinion, August 12) ends his fine survey of our post-human debates, with humanity in the back of the AGI car asking, as children do on hot holiday trips, are we there yet? The metaphor deserves more scrutiny than the argument it closes.

There is no car. There is no ride to enjoy, and no destination anyone is being driven towards. There are companies making decisions, engineers scoping systems, and executives signing deployments. Every one of those acts has a name attached to it.

The language of inevitability – all roads lead to acceleration, the technology will match us across every cognitive task – performs a specific function.

It converts commercial choices into weather. Nobody is liable for weather, and nobody needs a social mandate to make it rain.

This is why the industry's fatalists and its optimists are less opposed than they appear.

Whether the arriving intelligence is a worthy successor or an existential risk, both camps agree that it is arriving and that the rest of us are its audience. The disagreement is about mood. The premise is identical, and it is what does the work.

Thornhill is right that society should not remain a passenger. But the remedy is not more agency over an autonomous future. It is refusing the description.

Software cannot be asked to answer for an outcome. Organisations have distributed labour without distributing responsibility for centuries; we should insist on the same discipline here and ask every deployed system the older, duller question: who authorised this, and whose name is on it?

Professor Lucas E Wall
Clinical Assistant Professor, The Busch School of Business, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, US

We must heed the warnings about superintelligence

Cristina Criddle's report (August 1) in the FT on Anthropic disclosing that its AI systems hacked into three organisations, a week after OpenAI reported a similar incident, is further proof that the top AI companies are demonstrably unable to control their most powerful AI systems. And this is the least capable AI systems will ever be.

This is the predictable result of major AI companies racing to build, not chatbots or commercial applications, but superintelligent AI – autonomous AI that can replace and outcompete humans across domains, and is capable of overpowering and outmanoeuvring our national security apparatuses. Nobel Prize winners, leading AI experts, and even the CEOs of the AI companies warn that superintelligent AI would pose an extinction risk to humanity.

Governments need to recognise the national security risks that these rogue AIs point towards, and act now to negotiate an international agreement prohibiting the development of superintelligence. There are only two times to react to an exponential threat: too early, or too late.

Andrea Miotti
Founder and CEO, ControlAI, London SE1, UK

Time India had permanent seat on the Security Council

If the UN is to remain relevant and representative of today's world, India deserves serious consideration as a sixth permanent member of the Security Council (The Big Read, August 13). The current structure reflects the realities of 1945, not those of the 21st century.

India is the world's largest democracy, home to more than 1.4bn people, a major economic power, a longstanding contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, and an influential voice for the global south. It is difficult to justify a permanent Security Council that includes three western powers but excludes the nation representing one-sixth of humanity.

Granting India permanent membership would improve the legitimacy, credibility and representativeness of the Security Council while better reflecting contemporary geopolitical and economic realities. Reform will undoubtedly be challenging, but the strongest obstacle to India's membership is political process rather than merit.

A reformed Security Council that includes India would be a more representative and effective institution for addressing global challenges.

M Radhakrishnan
London HA5, UK

PM can make mutuals the high street's beating heart

Your editorial asks "Can Burnham save Britain's high streets?" (FT View, Opinion, August 19). Along with the factors you discuss should be added the government's election manifesto pledge to double the size of the co-operative and employee-owned ("mutual") sector, as these mutual businesses tend to be place-based, at the heart of the local economy and community.

For a recent research publication ("People, Place and the Economy: The Social Value of Mutuals"), we analysed a number of businesses including Newcastle Building Society, whose purpose is "connecting communities with a better financial future".

As many banks withdraw from the high street, Newcastle Building Society is investing in branches and face-to-face services, opening new branches on high streets where traditional banking services have disappeared. Many branches provide free community space and partner with local organisations including libraries, charities and community services. Such spaces could be crucial for ensuring that the life-long learning the AI revolution and other developments demand will be available to communities across the country.

This should be the model for Andy Burnham's pledge to rejuvenate "hollowed out" high streets, making them the "beating heart of local communities".

Jonathan Michie
Professor of Innovation & Knowledge Exchange, President, Kellogg College University of Oxford, UK

Further musings on the Claude chatbot name

Padraig Rooney's letter linking the name of the large language model Claude to the "lame" Emperor Claudius ("Linking Claudius' stammer to the Anthropic chatbot", Letters, August 1) is wordplay dressed up as critique.

It scores a point but leaves your FT Weekend essayist Carmody Grey's actual argument – on why she declines to engage with large language models ("AI's quest for morality", The Weekend Essay, Life & Arts, July 25) – entirely untouched.

For the record, Claude almost certainly takes its name from Claude Shannon, the mathematician whose 1948 paper founded information theory and underwrites every digital exchange since, including this one. Anthropic has never confirmed this officially, but the connection is widely accepted.

It suits a company in the business of measuring and shaping information rather better than an emperor with a limp.

Bob Johnstone
London E14, UK

Opinion

Trump’s South Korea defence flip reminds Japan it has no Plan B



On Wednesday night, after a summer of sharply escalating regional tension, protesters lined the roads near Sanae Takaichi’s residence bellowing pleas for the prime minister to stick to pacifism under the “peace clause” of Japan’s constitution.

Unspoken, as always on these occasions, was an acknowledgment that this clause is underwritten by one of the most enduring and unambiguous Plan A’s in postwar geopolitics. Namely that, should a serious threat emerge, pacifist Japan can rely on the military protection of the US under the 1951 alliance between the two countries.

That’s 75 years not just without a Plan B, but with a unique constitutional constraint on conceiving one.

But Monday’s chessboard-tipping social media post by Donald Trump, calling for a reduction in joint US military exercises with South Korea, casts all this in a very different light, however fleeting the pivot proves and however fulsome the backroom reassurances Washington is currently breezing out to Japan and other nervous allies.

For while Seoul bore the most obviously destabilising impact of Trump’s diplomatic sucker punch, in which he ordered an out-of-the-blue cut “based on my very good relationship with Kim Jong Un”, there is arguably more long-term jeopardy for Japan. If US guarantees come to look genuinely shaky, South Korea must recalibrate; Japan, under the same circumstances, must reconstitute.

Any question over US reliability is profoundly alarming: for all the arguments that this is just a Trump pathology, there is the plausible thesis that he is merely a symptom of a far less reversible shift.

It still, just about, feels premature to panic. Tokyo, along with other US ally capitals, has been finding its sea legs

amid the churn of on-the-run foreign policy redrafting and evidently has internal mechanisms for separating wheat from chaff. It has also played the Trump game pretty well, expediting a \$550bn pledge to invest in the US and moving relatively quickly to present itself as an indispensable partner in critical supply chains and production of military equipment.

If Washington’s guarantees look genuinely shaky, Seoul must recalibrate, but Tokyo must reconstitute

But Monday’s post, which cheerfully juxtaposed the central announcement with a reminder that Seoul had not joined America’s war on Iran, demanded to be read as an abrupt departure from conventional US calculus around regional stability, its core interests and the wisdom of linking multiple diplomatic issues.

The problem with Japan’s Plan A is

twofold. The first, which had seemed remote until this Trump term, is its vulnerability to US reliability. The second has been that the country’s commitment to both its pacifist constitution and the alliance has made serious consideration of a Plan B nearly impossible — whether that be conventional rearmament, national service or contemplation of a nuclear deterrent.

Earlier this month, Japan published its annual Defense of Japan white paper. This pledged that by fiscal 2027, Japan would have strengthened its capabilities to the point where it could take “primary responsibility” for dealing with an invasion, though with US support. This takes the country a very significant distance, conceptually, from where it was 10 years ago but it remains, say analysts, some way from being a Plan B.

All of this may suit Takaichi very well, as Japan’s sense of beleaguement intensifies. Since the start of her premiership, the argument for the country to start thinking more radically about its defence, and for the public to embrace the debate, has been repeatedly made for her by others.

Almost from day one, China cast her as a re-militarisation-hungry fanatic in a way that has made Beijing look the more unreasonable. North Korea, meanwhile, has actively supported Russia against Ukraine while significantly escalating its anti-Japanese rhetoric, accusing Tokyo of fostering a “nuclear alliance” with South Korea and the US. Earlier this month, Vladimir Putin paid his first-ever visit to one of four islands disputed between Russia and Japan, reviving Japan’s consciousness of another potential foe on its doorstep.

But the final, and perhaps most influential, card has now been played by Japan’s closest ally — not just through Trump’s Truth Social post, but the rapid erosion of norms that leaves nobody exactly sure how seriously to take his proclamations.

The protesters outside Takaichi’s residence were a reminder of the constraints that have bound her predecessors from tampering with Plan A. August 2026 has reminded her how suddenly the public may demand a Plan E.

leo.lewis@ft.com

US president is losing his war of independence on rare earths



In a retreat humiliating even by Donald Trump’s standards, the US president last November withdrew threats of tariffs against China in return for Beijing agreeing a year-long ceasefire on export controls of rare earths and other minerals. His administration says it’s used the time since to boost production of minerals and secure supplies from allies, trying to reduce Beijing’s hugely powerful leverage from critical raw materials.

That claim is wildly overblown. Going up against China would not just require huge financial firepower to support companies but a ruthless commitment to productive efficiency — and to building a lasting international coalition to secure minerals. Instead, the administration has displayed its familiar cronyism, inept attempts at coercion and a capricious America-first foreign policy. This shreds its credibility in anchoring an international mineral agreement.

Certainly there’s been a big flurry of activity. The administration has made the extraordinary step of taking equity stakes in several companies and a bewildering array of purchase guarantees, credit support, loans and grants that it claims total \$30bn. The overseas initiative with the most teeth is a deal signed with Australia in October that has led to US investment in mining projects there.

But beyond this, the US has typically deployed only coercive one-sided bilateral trade agreements. These “gunboat deals” have tried to force trading partners to exclude other countries as customers and export their minerals to the

In going up against China, America has displayed its familiar cronyism and inept attempts at coercion

US. These lack the legal and economic credibility to succeed.

Take, for example, Indonesia, which produces two-thirds of the world’s nickel, used in batteries, solar technology and wind turbines. Over the past decade China has invested heavily in the country to create a complete nickel supply chain from mining to finished product. Trump attempted to rival this with a deal coercing Indonesia into supplying the US, but it was heavily undercut when his threatened tariffs were declared unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court in February.

The administration has rushed to impose replacement tariffs, but those too are legally and politically uncertain, and Indonesia has yet to ratify the agreement. Such a shambles will not override Indonesia’s relationship with China.

The administration’s broader plurilateral ambitions also have serious credibility issues. In February, Trump convened 54 countries to secure critical minerals supply chains. But to create a genuine challenge to China, any programme would need to include a demand-side strategy, and to set up price floors that would guarantee producers’ revenues even in the face of Chinese dumping. European governments in particular were highly suspicious: they had little trust that the US would set a pricing formula in anyone’s interest other than its own. After all, the wider process of handing out money to mining companies has involved billions of dollars being given to companies with financial ties to figures within the Trump administration.

This jumble of a campaign compares very badly with the fierce focus of the Chinese government. Production of rare earths has been consolidated into two main groups that operate under strict state control, with limits on the international dissemination of technology and very serious criminal consequences for smuggling.

Supply interruptions from Chinese export controls remain a constant threat. There was a recent sudden leap in the price of erbium, a particularly niche rare earth, following fears that it would be restricted once the export restriction ceasefire ends in November.

The US remains a far richer economy per head than China’s. But when it comes to dominating and controlling economic chokepoints like critical minerals, America’s inept leadership frequently leaves it trailing.

alan.beattie@ft.com

Burnham and the perils of cost of living policies



Andy Burnham, Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak have three very different governing styles but they all share an obsession: the cost of living. And there are obvious reasons for it: more than anything else, this issue decides whether the government will be re-elected. But that mutual focus did not, in the end, help Sunak or Starmer — and it might similarly prove actively unhelpful for Burnham.

Burnham is a more impressive politician than either of his immediate predecessors. Unlike Starmer, who neither respected nor liked politics as a discipline, Burnham enjoys the cut and thrust, is interested in ideas and provides a clear sense of direction. Unlike Sunak, who often brought to mind David Mellor’s line that making William Hague Tory party leader in 1997 was like “opening a very good wine several years before it should be drunk”, he is politically experienced.

The new prime minister has made the cost of living the biggest single focus of his summer tour, with his government freezing costs here or rolling out a free scheme there. The two emblematic policies are the £2 bus fare cap and scrap-

ping VAT on energy bills. But as Sunak himself demonstrated, knowing the importance of this can’t save you if you are in office at a time when global circumstances are sending inflation upwards and people are getting poorer as a result.

Just this week, figures from the Office for National Statistics showed that UK inflation rose to 2.9 per cent in July, driven by higher energy costs as a result of the Iran war. Burnham is no more able than his predecessors to ease the global pressures that are making Britons feel poorer.

The Iranian regime is not going to see an engaging Instagram video of the new prime minister reminiscing with a former tutor about A-level results day and decide to strike a peace deal on President Donald Trump’s terms. This does not mean Burnham’s presence on social media has no ups:de. One of the ways he represents an upgrade on his predecessors, in terms of raw politics, is that he is better at sounding like he gets it. This is important for settling his party’s nerves and winning the trust of the voters.

Neither Starmer nor Sunak was indifferent to the consequences of inflation, but the former often sounded robotic while the latter resembled an economics seminar. When Burnham talks about “taking a little bit of pressure off”, it is the same argumently Sunak was making when he said the biggest tax cut of all he could deliver was in reducing inflation. The difference is that the former is easily understood by everyone.



What sounding like you “get it” does not do, however, is give the new prime minister any more control over the cost of living than the old one. Chatter about an early election and Burnham seeking his own mandate is never far away, even during the parliamentary recess. But the war in the Middle East, which is driving up the cost of essentials, means that households are in for a painful increase in costs when the energy price cap goes up in the winter.

And although most people recognise intellectually that this isn’t Burnham’s fault, the elections of 2024, when incumbents across the world were punished at least in part for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine, show that government ultimately tends

Obsession with this issue risks focusing on ‘what can we subsidise’ rather than ‘how can we get wealthier’

to be blamed regardless. For that reason, whatever private hope some people in Downing Street may have, it is more likely that the next election will happen in 2029 rather than any earlier.

One risk of focusing so much on the cost of living, therefore, is simply that Burnham ends up writing cheques he can’t cash. But the other is more fundamental, in that it can result in a government that ends up looking at the wrong things.

Sunak made the focus of his premiership delivering cuts to national insurance that cost the Treasury a lot but gave households very little. Starmer opted, essentially, to use government spending as a way to mechanically lower the headline rate of inflation, subsidising everything from energy to soft-play centres. In the end, help with discretionary items makes little difference when global factors are driving up the cost of essentials. While Starmer’s actions do mean energy bills have gone up by much less than they would otherwise have done, they have still risen significantly.

But the other risk of the cost of living obsession is that it distorts the government’s focus. Its economic policy becomes a question of “what can we subsidise or freeze?” rather than “how can we get wealthier?”. It is tempting to use the government’s limited fiscal firepower to offer small sums to help households, but it might be better to use it to adjust the pace at which the government reduces its debt, hopefully securing lower interest rates that way.

Ultimately the reason why the cost of living is getting higher and more painful for most of us is that, as a result of Putin and Trump’s wars of choice, we are all now poorer. The price signal is telling us something very important, too, about the costs of energy and of burdens on business. A government that becomes focused on the cost of living may, ironically, find itself distracted from the measures most likely to bring real relief for households in the long run.

stephen.bush@ft.com

From balloons to pans: in praise of useful tech



Party balloons may be good fun for children but they are bad news for seagulls. Ingesting fragments of discarded balloons kills birds by blocking their guts. One study of dead seabirds found “balloons were the marine debris most likely to cause mortality”.

But a partial solution, at least, is at hand. Part-funded by an events company, researchers at Imperial College London have developed a less harmful and more biodegradable form of latex. The team, which has now founded the start-up Bioloan to license the technology, estimates its potential market at about \$40bn, including medical gloves, clothing and condoms.

Juliana Cumming, the PhD student who led the research, tells me the new

material avoids sulphur vulcanisation, which is currently used to make natural rubber strong and stretchy but leaks toxic chemicals. “It’s a modified version of a natural latex blended with a biodegradable polymer,” she says.

Seabirds may particularly appreciate the invention. But this kind of commercialisation of expert knowledge also exemplifies a far broader positive trend: there has probably never been a better time to solve the world’s material challenges. Human ingenuity, smart technology, flexible academic institutions and accessible venture funding are significantly expanding the set of problems that can be solved.

The Bioloan team relied on human insight to improve an existing product. But the increasingly widespread adoption of AI may be opening up novel ways of developing completely new materials. For example, the start-up Cusp AI, which is attempting to create a “search engine” for material science, is working with the Finnish chemicals company Kemira to tackle so-called forever chemicals, used in non-stick pans and food packaging. Using AI, the company

has explored 300tn possible material structures, selecting 20 priority candidates, which are now being tested.

If companies really can develop new materials with previously unknown and useful properties, it could accelerate the development of more efficient semiconductors, carbon storage systems and nuclear fusion reactors. “This could completely change the world,” Max

The widespread adoption of AI may be opening up ways of developing completely new materials

Welling, the co-founder of Cusp AI, said in a recent FT interview.

Yet Silicon Valley, which tends to monopolise the talk about innovation, has historically prioritised different interests, focusing more on bits than atoms. As the old joke goes, Silicon Valley is optimised to solve the everyday problems of nerdy twenty-something men because they are the ones who run

the place. Uber, Airbnb, WhatsApp and DoorDash are the result. Little surprise, therefore, that coding is such an obsession of AI research labs.

Moreover, venture capital investors appear to be drastically narrowing their field of interest, making far bigger bets on a handful of mega AI start-ups. In the first half of this year, Anthropic and OpenAI sucked in 53 per cent of all the \$407bn of VC money invested in AI start-ups globally, according to Pitch-Book. This is an unprecedented level of concentration.

Tim O’Reilly, the veteran entrepreneur and investor, has even gone so far as to describe Silicon Valley as “anti-capitalist”. VC investors pour so much capital into their chosen companies that they, in effect, pick the winners and kill off competition, stunting alternatives.

To date, these big AI labs have mostly focused on building stronger generative AI models, improving software and automating processes. But some industry leaders, who talk grandly of creating a world of radical abundance and curing all disease, acknowledge they now have to generate material benefits from AI if

they are to win over an increasingly hostile public.

To that end, Anthropic is now investing heavily in Claude Science and Google DeepMind has spun off Isomorphic Labs to focus on drug discovery. “We haven’t yet delivered on our big promises to benefit the world,” Anthropic’s chief executive Dario Amodei posted on X.

In that regard, China may be stealing a march on the US by focusing more on physical applications of AI. Whereas the US AI industry still resembles a massive bet on achieving machine superintelligence, Chinese companies have been applying the technology across a wide range of industries, most notably manufacturing, energy and transport. Some 61 per cent of US AI developer companies are focused purely on software, according to a recent study from the Rand think-tank. Only 26 per cent of Chinese are.

We all still live in a material world. Now we have a chance radically to reinvent and improve it. AI needs to get more physical.

john.thornhill@ft.com