

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY -  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

### Degree or no degree, let the cockroach be

**E**VER SINCE Chief Justice of India Surya Kant compared unemployed youth drifting into journalism and activism with parasites and cockroaches, his remarks have invited questions about the problematic language of dehumanisation and sparked a spillover controversy. His subsequent clarification that he had specifically meant those who enter the legal profession, media and social media with "fake and bogus degrees" did not clear the impression of a repressive scolding not in keeping with the grace and generosity that remains the hallmark of his high office. The CJI's remarks also contributed to an internet phenomenon, the formation, tongue firmly in cheek, of a meme party, the Cockroach Janta Party. That the X handle of the satirical collective has now been withheld, following a direction of the Centre, after inquiries by the Intelligence Bureau, and that the government is now invoking national security, best makes the case that the CJI's criticism was misdirected in the political context it comes in. The blocking of the CJI's account points to where the real problem lies — not in the restless young of this country, employed or unemployed, with or without dubious degrees. It lies, instead, in the too-frequent resort by the state, strong-armed and hard-eyed, to weaponisation of the law to quell voices of satire and humour, difference and dissent.

The humble "cockroach" is part of an expanding lexicon. Unintentioned imitators have been scolding "termites", "urban Naxal" is used to activists and critics, "anti-national" and "traitor" have become a stick to beat the political opponent with. The overuse of these terms shrinks spaces for political engagement with all points of view that is so necessary in a robust democracy. Amid this slide, however, the institution of the judiciary, and especially the Supreme Court of India, is — and it must be — the space where individual freedoms and liberties are restored and protected. The SCs, after all, the custodian of the constitutional guarantees for individual rights, including the right to free speech. In recent times, South Asia has seen the sudden, and even violent, outbreak of movements led by Gen Z that have unseated governments, fuelled by disillusion and discontents over dwindling jobs, rising prices and corruption and inequalities. When the CJI speaks about youth who "attack the system", he overlooks a crucial Made in India difference and USP: The young have often, from the JP upsurge of the 1970s to the Anna Hazare mobilisation more recently, participated in and led movements against corruption, for reform. But India's democratic framework has proved itself to be capacious, and its young have taken a position inside it, as per fit, not outside of it. This is why he must, with due respect, reconsider their framing. As for the mandarins in the Intelligence Bureau who cited national security to get the account blocked, surely they know that cockroaches are hard to exterminate — as is the instinct to poke fun at power and hold it to account in a democracy.

### Putin, Xi, and a growing asymmetry

**L**ESS THAN a week after Xi Jinping hosted Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing for what was his 28th official visit in the 25th year since the signing of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship. The summit celebrated a relationship with a long and turbulent history. Russia was among the great predators of Imperial China's "century of humiliation". The Soviet Union became China's patron after the 1949 communist revolution, only for the relationship to fracture in the Sino-Soviet split, leading Beijing to tilt towards Washington. Post-Cold War rapprochement occurred slowly, before deepening into a partnership that Xi and Putin have since elevated into one of "no limits".

But cracks are bound to surface. China is a rising power, while Russia is just in decline but also dependent on China. It holds significant leverage due to its asymmetry, visible nowhere more clearly than in Putin's failure this week to secure a long-sought contract for a pipeline that would double Russian natural gas exports to China. The reality is that Putin needs Xi far more than the other way around, and unless Russia decides to enter into some form of reconciliation with the West, something Trump has expressed optimism about, Moscow's dependence will deepen.

India has long bet on Russia. The military defence in China in 1962 was a major driver of New Delhi's tilt towards Moscow, as the US chose Pakistan as its frontline Cold War partner. The US-China rapprochement compounded India's fears. But things are different now. A weaker Russia, a stronger China, and a mercurial US president wooing both should push India to strengthen its own capabilities. Cooperation with the US in technology and AI is a strategic necessity and India must build on that even as Russia remains a source of energy. As for China, India needs to manage a long border and a massive trade deficit. Alliances cannot substitute for the hard work of domestic reform and modernisation.

### Together & apart, animals in human world

**W**HEN THE HUMANS are away, the wolves, moose and bears will play. The world became clearer during the Covid pandemic when lockdown measures across the world ensured *Homo sapiens*-free landscapes for other species to saunter through. Not only was the air cleaner and every outdoor space quieter, wild boars reportedly strolled through the boulevards of Barcelona in Spain. Nature, as the popular pandemic-era meme went, was healing.

A new study published in *Science* has now demonstrated just how much nature — or rather, wildlife — shapes itself around the presence (or absence) of humans. Using GPS tracking data from 37 species of wild birds and a mammal in 100 districts, the location data across the US, a group of researchers has found that how these species use geographic spaces often depends on human activity in those same areas. The findings show a remarkable diversity of responses. For example, the areas covered by coyotes and wild turkeys shrank in response to human proximity while among grey wolves, the presence of people had the opposite effect of expanding their ranges — in all likelihood to put a greater distance between themselves and humans.

For ecologists, this is findable, helping craft a more granular approach to complex questions of conservation and minimising animal-human conflicts. They're a warning too, against the simplistic "we are the virus" takes — suggesting that eliminating humans will save the planet — that also, not coincidentally, surged in popularity during the pandemic. Healing nature and protecting biodiversity is long-haul work built on the painstaking accumulation of knowledge — not glib formulations.

# Today, India and US interests are not easily aligned. Let's confront this

**A**S UNITED STATES Secretary of State Marco Rubio visits an important visit, India needs to confront hard truths about the Indo-US relationship. Of late, India, like much of the world, gives the striking impression of a deer being caught in the headlights. The US is not just untrustworthy, it is currently the biggest wrecking ball to hit global stability. But dependence on China carries its own discomfort. There are no effective alternative coalitions yet to counter these powers. Many of India's wounds, however, are self-inflicted. India will have to wean itself away from its own delusions.

First, any dealings with the US have to account for not just bilateral considerations or worries about China, but the entire global context. Indian foreign policy has been hugely diminished because we now operate on the assumption that we should focus on our interests, narrowly understood, even if the world be damned. India is not uniquely at fault. But the idea that bilateral wins or very short-term tactical considerations alone can create the space for India's rise is myopic. Given India's history, it is absolutely astonishing that it is the one country that, in the international system is, for all practical purposes, condoning not one but two imperial projects.

India was tepid in its defence of international law when Russia invaded Ukraine. Its near silence, and the open and practical embrace of Israel and the US's strategic objectives on Iran, is damning. India talks the language of civilisation, sovereignty and multipolarity, but

is increasingly comfortable with imperial coercion. But these imperial projects directly harm India's material interests as well. As we have belatedly acknowledged, the war in Iran will do more material damage to our economy than any adversary could. We have to return to thinking that what is good for the world will, in the long run, be good for us as well. This requires recognising the US, in the current form, for what it is — an imperial power unleashing a new and dangerous nihilism in the world order. It's not a saviour, it is a threat.

It is often said that the US cannot deal with countries that are not allies, while India has tried to maintain strategic autonomy. But the present moment far surpasses this framing in two ways. The first is that the US betrays its allies and reduces them to a state of abject dependence. But India's case is peculiar. Over the last couple of years, it has become increasingly apparent that in India, the US has managed to achieve something more than an alliance. In superficial terms, India exercises the rituals of strategic autonomy. It purchases Russian oil, it is trying to achieve trade diversification, and it will even cast an occasional inconvenient vote at multilateral forums.

Yet beyond these gestures, something deeper has shifted. Significant sections of India's foreign policy establishment, if not public opinion, have internalised the assumption that India's rise should be irrevocably tied to American power. This internalisation matters



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

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more than formal alliances. We can see this transformation most clearly in the framing of public discourse. It is astonishing, for instance, how quickly responsibility for instability in the Strait of Hormuz is displaced onto Iran alone, while the fact that the Strait is closed due to the US is underplayed. Whatever one thinks of Iran's regime, India's open embrace of Israel, the US, and the UAE, in a war with extraordinary second and third-order effects for global order, reflects this ideological adaptation.

Nowhere is this blindness more visible than on the issue of Pakistan. It should always have been obvious that the US could never view Pakistan solely through Indian eyes. Our illusion was exposed repeatedly, especially in the political aftermath of Operation Sindoor. The US positioned itself as the indispensable external guarantor of subcontinental stability. India may reject the language of mediation publicly. But America rarely relinquishes the role of regional arbiter, and Pakistan has always been important to its imperial interests. Our interests will not align with America in the Subcontinent, so we have to find a way of dealing with it on our own terms. Another illusion that has been shattered is the idea that India will be indispensable to US strategy in Asia: the truth is, it is quite dispensable.

A deepening of the economic relationship with the US would be beneficial. However, the punitive

tariffs imposed on India were not just about industrial policy, but about showing India its place. The US Supreme Court invalidated President Donald Trump's tariffs, giving India a reprieve. But we should not be under any illusion about how extractive the US intends to be, and will remain so beyond Trump. Again, India could benefit from a deeper alignment with the US's technology. But India should be well aware of the hubris the US brings to the table. It is convinced that India is far behind in technology and that China is not a serious technology option for India. So, it will come begging to the table. There is no easy short-term answer to this conundrum. But we have to resist the defeatism of the pro-America lobby in this regime, which throws in the towel whenever America is in question. It is also ironic that the US will measure success in this trip by how much Indian investment can get to the United States. Again, our political economy and the strategies of the Ambani and Adani groups make us vulnerable. At their best, India and the US's affinity still lay in the fact that both aspired to be open and free societies. What ties the regimes now is a comfort with evil and transactionalism. But even in this moment of darkness, India needs to confront its own abjectness and give up its delusions about America and itself. Our interests are not easily aligned. Let us start by confronting this truth.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

### A pill is not a meal, and AI is not a writer



DEVAPRIYA ROY

**A** FEW months ago, I had invited my friend and colleague from Computer Science, Aalok Thakkar, to speak to my graduate students about AI and its limitations in higher research. This was a writing seminar for PhD scholars across disciplines, including STEM, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, and English Studies. Aalok and I — despite coming from very different disciplines and vastly different levels of expertise on the subject — are often in agreement about what indiscriminate AI use can do in the university. I was, thus, excited for his talk.

Aalok opened with a little game: A series of excerpts were placed side-by-side. The audience had to detect which were AI-generated. My students were pretty darn good at this; to my dismay, I was not (The extracts were short and AI-writing is apparently more difficult to detect in shorter pieces. The longer a piece, the papering-over begins to crack visibly). I was forced to admit, yet again, that AI-writing had been getting better and better while I was going about life. So much so that now we have a controversy of the sort that was unthinkable a few years ago: A short story, one of the winners of the prestigious Commonwealth Prize this year and subsequently published by *Granta*, has been accused of being written substantially by AI.

That the judges of a literary competition might fail to detect AI-writing does not seem surprising to me. Had I not been a teacher of writing in these impatient times when one has to engage with this issue deeply — and daily — I doubt I'd have even thought about it much. Like many of my generation, class and educational background, I would have simply gone about my own reading and writing life as I always had, at a remove from the *afra* *taffra* on the ground. I also doubt my own practices of reading and writing would have changed very much — and without that change, without actively educating myself on the process, I might have been fooled too. After all, the way AI overuses metaphors and stretches every sentence out can be mistaken for a certain kind of overblown style.

To me, ultimately, this controversy seems to be focussing on the wrong end of the stick. Sure, becoming judges of literary competitions will probably now

require going through a military-style training programme — but that is, in the end, a minor irritation. There are many kinds of writers in the world and their lived realities are diverse. In my writing class, there are brilliant scientists in the making. English is a language they came to late. They use AI-assist to polish their sentences as they write academic papers. How can I refuse to understand their context-specific AI-use?

The point of literary fiction, however, is not the communication of a result. A writer uses words to make visible that which is hidden deep within, to give form to what is formless. It is a *Hunger Games* type situation. You have to do it yourself — in order to save yourself (steps include: Delete, retype, lacerate, repeat). The writer who begins a piece is not the writer who finishes the piece. And the pleasure of the process is in the blood and gore involved in this very counter-intuitive lessoning deal (Of course, writers write for lesser goals too — to win prizes, to become famous. And exactly like students who turn in papers written using AI, the cost, most of all, is to themselves).

There's a story I share with my students every semester, drawn from *The Magic of Oz*, from L. Frank Baum's wildly successful Oz series. A prolific inventor, Professor Wogglebug, creates a unique pill that mitigates hunger by providing the nourishment equivalent to a meal of soup, fried fish, roast, salad and dessert. The professor is very put out when his brilliant invention does not catch on in the market. Nobody, it seems, is willing to trade up a meal with a tablet.

The point of literary fiction, in the same way, is the process. Fame, while dazzling, has very little to do with the drudgery of daily practice. Its touch is as mystical and inexplicable as the business of loving and living: it is mundane, it is sublime. To outsource the former is to give up agency upon the latter. The writer who took the shortcut, whether detected or not, failed the story they were meant to write. AI can give a hundred clever versions. But in the vastness of the universe, the chink left by the author's specific lost story does not go unrecorded, even if the writer himself does not register its loss.

Roy is a writer and assistant professor of writing at Ashoka University, Haryana

### Bihar's urban pivot — a necessity and a challenge



AVIRAL PANDEY

**F**OR DECADES, Bihar's labour powered the farms of Punjab, factories of Gujarat, studied the construction sites of Delhi, and sustained the informal economies of India's largest cities, even as the state itself remained overwhelmingly rural and economically stagnant. Bihar remains India's least urbanised major state, with barely 11-12 per cent of its population living in urban areas, compared to the national average of over 31 per cent. Now, Bihar appears ready to attempt something fundamentally different.

The cabinet's recent approval of a \$500 million World Bank-supported Bihar Urban Transformation Programme, including 11 proposed greenfield satellite townships, marks perhaps the state's most serious attempt at planned urbanisation. Colonial economic structures reduced Bihar to a supplier of agricultural output and migrant labour, while industrial investments concentrated around port economies such as Bombay and Calcutta. The bifurcation of Bihar further weakened its economic foundations by transferring most mineral-rich and industrial regions to Jharkhand. Bihar's urban challenge cannot be understood merely as an infrastructure deficit. Its towns never evolved into productive centres capable of absorbing labour, attracting investment, and generating large-scale non-farm employment. The proposed satellite townships are intended to address this structural gap.

Implemented intelligently, planned urbanisation could help Bihar avoid the disorderly expansion that has overwhelmed many Indian cities. Bihar instead requires a network of regional growth centres linked to agro-processing, logistics, manufacturing, healthcare, and education. The expansion of the Patna Metro, Ganga Path, new Ganga bridges, freight-corridor connectivity, and the emergence of Darbhanga as an aviation hub suggest that Bihar's infrastructure geography is gradually beginning to change. But infrastructure alone cannot guarantee successful urbanisation. The government's decision to experiment with land-pooling mechanisms rather than aggressive land acquisition is also notable. A transparent land-pooling framework, if implemented credibly, could reduce conflict while making landowners stakeholders in urban expansion.

Three structural constraints remain especially serious. The first is land governance. Without transparent digital land records and credible planning institutions, even well-intentioned urban expansion could generate conflict and uncertainty. The second is environmental vulnerability. Large parts of north Bihar remain chronically flood-prone due to river systems such as the Kosi, Gandak, and Bagmati. Climate resilience cannot remain an afterthought. The third is institutional capacity. Municipal revenues in Bihar remain among the weakest in India, limiting planning capacity and urban service delivery.

Bihar's future is unlikely to emerge from replicating the service-led urbanism of Mumbai or Bengaluru. Its more realistic pathway lies in agro-industrial urbanisation. The experience of states such as Tamil Nadu shows that dispersed urbanisation through multiple regional growth centres can often generate more balanced development than a single megacity.

Bihar's urban experiment is therefore more than an infrastructure initiative. It is a test of whether India's growth story can extend beyond its established metropolitan centres.

The writer teaches at Patna University

### 40 YEARS AGO May 23, 1986



### Nine terrorists held

THE POLICE caught nine suspected terrorists in Jaffna and Jalandhar districts, as the death toll in the shootout at Amritsar mounted to 11 with two more succumbing to their injuries. In one of the worst killings sprees of its kind in the state, 18 persons had come under a hail of bullets fired from six Sten guns and revolvers wielded by terrorists, who reportedly came to the ill-fated locality on foot and escaped in a jeep.

### Centre alarmed at killings

THE KILLINGS in Amritsar and the resultant panic among the minority community

have alarmed the central government. Arun Nehru, Minister of State for Internal Security, had a series of meetings with senior officials of the Home Ministry and intelligence agencies to review the situation and suggest steps to the Punjab government to control it. The Prime Minister has called for a meeting with his advisors including the Home Minister.

### PM says SWAPO victory certain

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, described the latest bombing of three southern African frontline states by the South African Government as "an extension of the dogma of race aggression". Speaking at a banquet hosted by him in honour of

the visiting president of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), Sam Nujoma, the Prime Minister said that "a common front will be formed through apartheid in South Africa, colonialism in Namibia, the occupation of parts of Angola and the brutal state terrorism of Pretoria".

### Sri Lanka continues bombing

EIGHT PERSONS, including a one-year-old girl, were killed and 20 others injured in force-fused and bombed two villages in Jaffna peninsula as Tamil militants resisted attempts by a large number of troops to link up with their colleagues at Point Pedro on the northern coast.

**• WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**  
The rising number of grisly murders across Bangladesh is indeed creating a growing sense of fear and insecurity among citizens. — *The Daily Star*

## We need to speed up economic reform, but pessimism obscures, doesn't illuminate



V ANANTHA NAGESWARAN

**S**URJIT BHALLA is one of India's most independent economic voices, and his pieces in *The Indian Express* are not to be dismissed with the customary official reflex of pointing to infrastructure spending and sunrise sectors. He asks hard questions, and hard questions deserve hard answers. This one (The BJP is winning the election, but it's losing the economy', IE, May 20), however, contains enough analytical ambiguity to warrant careful examination before one arrives at whatever genuine policy concern remains.

Begin with the most arresting claim: India risks joining Turkey as a residual 'Fragile Two.' The original 'Fragile Five' designation — coined by Morgan Stanley in 2013 — had a specific, operationalisable content: Large current account deficits, fiscal imbalances, and acute vulnerability to Federal Reserve tapering. India's macroeconomic architecture today is categorically different from 2013 on each of these dimensions. Its monetary policy framework is orthodox and inflation-targeting, its fiscal consolidation trajectory is credible, and its foreign-exchange reserves are among the largest in the world. Turkey's travails, rooted in a sustained period of deeply negative real interest rates and institutional subordination of monetary policy to political preference, belong to a different analytical category. The comparison generates a striking headline — not an illuminating analysis.

The piece is also silent on what is perhaps the single most consequential development in global capital markets since the Global Financial Crisis: The end of the era of quantitative easing and near-zero interest rates. The decade of extraordinary monetary accommodation that ended in 2022 produced an artificial compression of risk premia globally, flooding emerging markets with capital that was, in effect, seeking any yield whatsoever. UNCTAD documents that global FDI rebounded sharply to \$1.58 trillion in 2021, a 64 per cent increase over the previous year. What followed was an equally sharp reversal.



ILLUSTRATION: CP SAKSHUMAR

New investment project numbers — greenfield announcements, international project finance deals, and cross-border M&As — all shifted into decline after the first quarter of 2022, with project finance values falling more than 30 per cent as financing conditions deteriorated and interest rates rose sharply across the US, the eurozone, and — for the first time in a generation — Japan. UNCTAD's World Investment Report 2025 confirms that global FDI fell for a second consecutive year. In such an environment, virtually every emerging market has faced currency and capital flow pressures. To attribute India's investment trends primarily to domestic policy failure, while ignoring the most consequential shift in global monetary conditions in four decades, is to mistake the tide for the swimmer's effort.

On BITs, the empirical literature is far less settled than the piece implies. Bhalla treats the 2015 revision as a near-essential explanation for FDI trends. The academic record counsels more caution. Early papers — including Hallward-Driemeier (2003) and Tobin and Rose-Ackerman (2005) — found weak or no effects of BITs on FDI inflows. More recent work finds positive effects, but conditional on the quality of domestic institutions. BITs function as a commitment device that complements strong institutions rather than substituting for weak ones. Most pertinently, a study examining India — Singh, Shree, and Urdhwaresh (2022), published in the *Indian Economic*

**The appropriate response to Bhalla's genuine concerns is to accelerate reform — not to dispute the imperative, but to reject the analytical scaffolding that obscures rather than illuminates it**

*Review* — found that individual BIT signings do not influence FDI inflows; what matters is the cumulative stock of treaties, which signals an overall regime of investor protection. This finding, which the piece does not engage, considerably complicates the monocausal story. Domestic institutional quality, regulatory predictability, and rule of law matter at least as much as treaty architecture — a conclusion that, if anything, broadens the reform agenda rather than narrowing it to a single legal instrument.

The FDI data itself tells a different story from the one the piece presents. Gross FDI inflows stood at \$88.29 billion through April-February of FY26, an 18 per cent jump over the previous year, and are on course to cross \$90 billion for the full fiscal year — well outside the \$70-\$80 billion range of recent years. India ranked fourth globally for greenfield project announcements in 2024, and its share of global FDI has roughly doubled over the past decade. Manufacturing FDI grew 18 per cent in FY25. These are not the indicators of investors leaving. Net FDI has been weaker, driven substantially by higher repatriation of profits and rising outward FDI as Indian companies themselves internationalise — a mark of corporate maturity, not economic distress. The piece collapses gross and net without acknowledgment, and that elision does considerable damage to the argument.

The growth ranking argument deserves similar care. Ranking India 16th in per capita GDP growth

in US dollar terms — behind Bangladesh at 8.3 per cent and Ethiopia at 7.2 per cent — is doing analytical work that the chosen denominator cannot support. Dollar-denominated per capita growth is a joint function of real growth and bilateral exchange rate movements. Currency appreciation or depreciation in Bangladesh or Ethiopia tells us something about their monetary and trade conditions; it does not constitute a welfare benchmark against which India's economic management should be evaluated. In purchasing power parity terms, which better captures actual improvements in living standards, India's performance across the BJP period looks materially different.

What Bhalla genuinely identifies — and what deserves acknowledgment — is that the investment climate requires continuous improvement, that the proliferation of quality control orders has at times crossed from quality assurance into protection, and that the BIT framework revision is incomplete. The government has recognised these issues. The Economic Survey and successive budgets have addressed deregulation, ease of doing business, and the need to signal regulatory predictability. The legitimate challenge is that the pace of reform must match the ambition. That is a fair demand.

It is, however, the same as the broader verdict the piece's headline announces. None of this is to claim that the macroeconomic outlook for FY27 is without genuine difficulty. The Department of Economic Affairs's monthly economic reviews have not shied from saying so. The trade deficit will widen significantly in FY27, as will the current account deficit. Inflation risks are tilted to the upside. A below-normal monsoon adds an agricultural dimension to a complex supply shock. The task of attracting stable, long-term capital — through credible tax policy, regulatory predictability, and reduced friction for investors — intensifies in these conditions. These challenges have been acknowledged in official documents.

Elections can deliver mandates. Only policy delivers prosperity. Both propositions are true, and the government accepts both. The appropriate response to Bhalla's genuine concerns is to accelerate reform — not to dispute the imperative, but to reject the analytical scaffolding that obscures rather than illuminates it.

*The writer is chief economic advisor, Government of India*

## Don't brush the real Cannes story under the red carpet



GUNEET MONGA KAPOOR

**T**HE PHOTOGRAPHS have been published. The jury decisions have been debated. The stars have flown home. And now, the real work of Cannes begins. At every corner of Cannes, there is an opportunity waiting to unfold. A single conversation with the right person can alter the course of a film's journey. From the Marché du Film to the Riviera cafes and the length of the Croisette, Cannes operates as much on chance encounters as it does on official premises.

Having returned to Cannes year after year, I have come to believe that its most defining moments rarely happen in front of photographers. They happen in packed meeting rooms at the Marché du Film, in hotel lobbies between appointments, or over coffees that turn into collaborations months later. In 2024 alone, the market brought together nearly 14,000 film professionals from over 140 countries, producers, distributors, sales agents, streamers, and festival programmers all looking to discover films and build partnerships.

India makes more films than almost any other country, and yet our presence at markets like Cannes remains disproportionately small. The reason for this is structural. Cannes operates on relationships built over years, on a shared vocabulary of global cinema, and on institutional support that many of our filmmakers simply do not have access to. A French filmmaker arrives with the backing of the CNC, a co-production treaty framework, and decades of cultural diplomacy behind them. A Korean filmmaker arrives backed by KOFCI's aggressive international strategy and a wave of critical credibility that took 20 years to build. When an independent Indian filmmaker arrives, they often arrive alone.

This is what Cannes looks like beyond the screenings. The Producers Network brings together emerging producers from around the world for structured meetings, introductions, and conversations about how to build internationally viable careers. The Cinefondation residency supports filmmakers in development. The co-production market connects projects seeking international partners with producers who can bring financing, expertise, and distribution access from their home territories. For many of the world's most interesting filmmakers, these are the primary reasons to be at Cannes at all.

For Indian producers and directors, the opportunity is significant, and significantly underutilised. Co-productions unlock financing from multiple territories. They open doors to public funds in France, Germany, Scandinavia, and Canada that are simply not available to purely domestic productions. They create relationships with sales agents and distributors who can actually get a film seen internationally. The paperwork is complicated and the conversations take time. But this is where the invisible economy lives. Cannes is the most visible stop on a circuit that also includes Venice, Toronto, Busan, Berlin, and Sundance. Each festival has its own character, market, and relationships, and India has a presence at them all. What we lack is a strategy. For example, KOFCI does not just fund Korean films. It actively markets them internationally, maintains relationships with programmers, and treats the festival circuit as an export industry. India's institutional support for its independent cinema's international ambitions remains fragmented. There is no single body with the mandate, the budget, and the relationships to do for Indian cinema what KOFCI did for Korean cinema over two decades. Building that is the work that needs to happen, not just in the years when an Indian film is in the Palme d'Or race, but every year, in the markets and meeting rooms the cameras never film.

When people ask whether Cannes is worth it, I always say the same thing: It depends entirely on what you come for. If you come for the red carpet, the return is a photograph. If you come for the market, the meetings, the relationships, the conversations that start in a lobby and find their way into a co-production agreement months later, the return can be a career.

Indian cinema has extraordinary stories to tell. We have filmmakers of remarkable vision and courage. What we need now is the infrastructure, the institutional will, and the strategic clarity to ensure those stories find a global audience. Cannes is not the answer to that. But for those willing to look past the red carpet, Cannes is one of the best places to begin.

*The writer is an Academy Award-winning producer and founder, Sikhiya Entertainment*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Animal slaughter ban

A SIGNIFICANT part of West Bengal's economy relies on cattle rearing (Animal slaughter ban misreads farm economy', IE, May 22). Getting an animal certified as "fit for slaughter" is a tedious process, especially for small-scale or uneducated cattle rearers. Enforcing this ban essentially renders them helpless. While the government may seek to impose a law shaped by religious considerations, it should not come at the cost of people's livelihoods.

*Abhay Negi, Dehradun*

WEST BENGAL'S decision to strictly enforce the 1950 Animal Slaughter Control Act reflects a policy frozen in time (Animal slaughter ban misreads farm economy', IE, May 22). Modern agriculture no longer depends on bullocks or manual labour, and farmers cannot afford to maintain unproductive cattle. The law's age and certification clauses make enforcing it virtually impossible, forcing farmers to divert scarce fodder or abandon dairying altogether. Clinging to outdated laws undermines both livelihoods and efficiency. Governments must recognise that humane regulation and economic pragmatism can coexist.

*K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru*

### Being a writer

MATTHEW KARNOR articulates something many writers privately feel but rarely say aloud (I want to daydream & write, not parade up the Instagram square', IE, May 22). The pressure to maintain a visible social media presence has defined what it means to be a serious writer. Publishers expect it, festivals reward it, and readers increasingly confuse the performance with the work. Networking demands the very attention that writing requires. There is no easy solution, but the literary community could begin by consciously decoupling an author's platform size from assessments of their work's merit.

*Swathi Senthilkumar, Coimbatore*



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's visit to the Nordic countries was marred by the unbecoming behaviour of a local journalist, Helle Lyng Svendsen. Svendsen's claims that it was a standard "confrontational" approach and the duty of a journalist representing the "freest press in the world" are laughable. Compared to Norway's less than 300 news outlets, India has more than 1.55 lakh publications, 17,000 newspapers, 900-plus satellite TV channels, of which around 400 are dedicated to news and current affairs, and more than 3,700 digital publications. This vast and varied ecosystem enjoys enormous freedom, with several organisations dedicated to criticising the government. Just as Mahatma Gandhi dismissed American journalist Katherine May's negative portrayal of India in 1927 as "the output of a drain inspector", Svendsen's outburst about the lack of media freedom and human rights in India, too, should be dismissed.

Beyond this headline-grabbing incident lies the importance of PM Modi's mission during the visit to the Nordic countries, Italy, and the Netherlands. In an article co-authored with the Italian counterpart, Giorgia Meloni, Modi highlighted the objective of his engagements

**Nordic countries have investment potential running into trillions of dollars. India has engineering talent, scale, innovation and a start-up ecosystem**

with our shared powers. "Our cooperation mirrors our varied awareness," and "that prosperity and security in the 21st century will be shaped by the ability of nations to innovate, manage energy transitions, and strengthen sovereignty," they wrote. Our world is racing into a deep-tech order in which technologies like AI, semiconductors, biotechnology, robotics, and crypto will play a critical role. A few companies in the US and China mastering these technologies is leading to a new "tech-colonialism", posing a threat to many countries' sovereignty. Arthur Mensch, CEO of French AI firm Mistral AI, told the French national assembly recently that Europe has just two years to build an independent AI stack, failing which it will perpetually be at America's mercy.

It is this urgency that is propelling PM Modi to proactively engage with European and other powers. Under him, India has made commendable progress in digital public infrastructure. But more focus is needed on R&D and investment. India is facing headwinds in investing in the development of its AI stack and semiconductor infrastructure. The government has launched initiatives like the National AI Mission, the National Quantum Mission and Anusandhan National Research Foundation. But

most are government-funded, with little input from private investors. India's annual R&D investment is around Rs 125 lakh crore (roughly \$13 billion). American semiconductor giant Nvidia alone spends \$18.5 billion on annual R&D. India's capital expenditure budget for 2025-26 was around Rs 11 lakh crore, roughly \$130 billion. Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai announced recently that his company plans \$190 billion in capital expenditure in 2026 to drive its AI infrastructure.

Nordic countries have investment potential running into trillions of dollars. India has engineering talent, scale, innovation and a start-up ecosystem. Modi is attempting to achieve "co-creation of value where our respective industrial strengths amplify one another". He has pitched for greater investments from the Nordic countries in India's deep-tech sectors like green energy, AI, etc. India needs such alliances to rise as a deep-tech power while safeguarding its digital sovereignty. Modi is working with that futuristic vision, something a mature leader in the Opposition, Sharad Pawar, understood when he said, "political differences should not come in the way when it comes to protecting India's prestige, and PM Modi is working to uphold the country's honour abroad."

*The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP*

## Weak monsoon and fertiliser crisis, a double whammy



SOUMYA BHOWMIK

**I**NDIA'S FERTILISER problem has quietly changed character. For the first several weeks after Iran effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz in the aftermath of the US-Israel strikes in late February, the dominant anxiety in New Delhi was physical: Would the fertilisers arrive, and if the Gulf conflict endures, that commitment may prove open-ended in ways the fiscal budget cannot easily accommodate. With the sowing season peaking in June, allowing farm input costs to rise visibly would risk both food price inflation and a damaging squeeze on agricultural incomes at precisely the wrong moment in the crop calendar. New Delhi's response was swift, and on April 8, the cabinet approved a roughly 12 per cent increase in the nutrient-based subsidy for the kharif 2026 season, while keeping the retail price of DAP (diammonium phosphate) flat.

India needs to source nearly four times its current urea opening stocks to meet kharif requirements, and that gap must be

bridged through imports purchased at crisis-level global prices. Each additional tonne represents a subsidy liability the exchequer bears. The subsidy mechanism, by design, converts this supply shock into a spending shock. A third of the world's fertilisers normally transit the strait, and unlike oil, there is no strategic reserve architecture or mature alternative routing. Compounding this is the monsoon outlook. On April 13, the IMD forecast below-normal rainfall for the 2026 southwest monsoon

season at 92 per cent of the Long Period Average, the first such forecast in three years, driven primarily by the expected development of El Niño conditions between June and September. For kharif crops such as paddy, cotton, pulses, and oilseeds, the second half of the season is precisely when El Niño's effect is expected to be sharpest and when standing crops are most water-dependent. India is now navigating a fertiliser supply shock and a weakening monsoon in the same crop season.

Sustainable Development Goal 2, the UN's Zero Hunger goal, is a 2030 target the world is already struggling to meet. India's position on this goal is one of visible progress, shadowed by persistent vulnerability: It has reduced its undernourished population from 243 million in 2006 to 102 million today, yet it still ranks 102nd out of

123 countries on the 2025 Global Hunger Index. For a country of India's scale, any season that compresses agricultural yields may not reverse the trajectory on SDG 2, but it makes the road towards sustainable development measurably harder.

Absorbing rising global fertiliser costs through the subsidy system is a well-established instrument of agricultural price stability in India, and its role in protecting farm incomes is not in dispute. The more pressing question is structural: How long can that absorption continue if the Gulf conflict persists, and what combination of supply diversification, demand-side efficiency, and domestic capacity expansion can reduce India's exposure over time?

*The writer is a fellow at the Observer Research Foundation*

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• POLICY

## How new Odisha Bill aims to boost sustainable marine fishing

Sujit Bisoi  
Bhubaneswar, May 22

THE ODISHA government this week approved a proposal to enact the Odisha Marine Fishing Regulation Bill, 2026, to establish a robust, modern, and inclusive legal framework for the marine fisheries sector. The legislation will repeal a 44-year-old law. According to Odisha Chief Secretary Anu Gang, the Bill will ensure sustainable fisheries resource development clubbed with immense economic benefit, while protecting livelihood and safety of Odisha's fishermen as well as conservation of marine ecosystems.

### The 1982 law

State government sources claimed that the existing Orissa Marine Fishing Regulation Act, 1982, was limited in scope and inadequate to address emerging challenges such as marine resource conservation, fishermen safety, coastal security, technological advancements, and prevention of unauthorised entry of foreign fishing vessels into India's border.

Odisha has a coastline of more than 500 km. Home to nearly 15 lakh fishermen, it ranks eighth among Indian states in terms of size of fishing communities.

The existing law only has basic provisions detailing the power to regulate, restrict, or prohibit marine fishing; licensing and registration of fishing vessels; and power to authorised officers to enter and search vessels, impound such vessels and seize any fish found in it.

### The proposed law

The new law is to be placed before the Odisha Assembly in the forthcoming session, likely to be held in August-September. Its scope will include regulation of deep-sea fishing and the promotion of mariculture activities such as marine cage culture, seaweed culture, deployment of artificial reefs for rejuvenation of territorial waters, and many other economically viable ventures for sustainable development.

Officials said the Bill will serve as a catalyst to facilitate and scale Odisha's seafood exports up to Rs 25,000 crore by 2036 from the estimated Rs 5,000 crore a year currently. Major global markets for such exports include China, the US, Japan, the European Union, and Gulf countries, among others.

The proposed law also paves the way for comprehensive smart green integrated infrastructure development, including the modernisation and management of fishing harbours and fish landing centres along Odisha's coast.

The legislation mandates the use of modern survey equipment and communication technologies for coastal surveillance. It also provides for mandatory biometric or QR-coded Aadhaar identification and enhanced insurance coverage for fishermen.

It provides for strict regulation of fishing vessels, fishermen, and related activities, along with provisions for licensing, fishing gear regulation, and prohibition of destructive fishing practices.

Although officials admit that illegal immigrants come via the sea route through fishing boats and settle in coastal districts like Kendrapada, Jagatsinghpur, and Bhadrak, they said the new law will check such infiltration.

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• HEALTH

## 'For Ebola, spillover risk doesn't equal a pandemic'



EXPERT EXPLAINS  
DR AMESH ADALJA

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR (ADJUNCT),  
JOHNS HOPKINS BLOOMBERG SCHOOL  
OF PUBLIC HEALTH

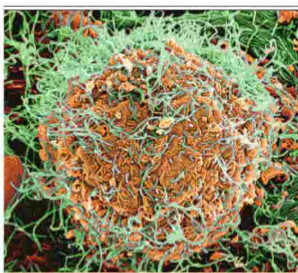
WITH THE World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, expressing deep concern about the speed and scale of the Ebola outbreak, the Union Health Ministry has notified screening norms and vigilance at airports and ports for those travelling from or transiting through the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Uganda and South Sudan.

Ebola is a zoonotic infection caused by the Orthoebolavirus family that can be extremely fatal in humans. It can spread from humans to humans through direct contact with infected fluids such as blood, saliva, sweat, tears, vomit, faeces, and breast milk among others. It can also be transmitted by touching contaminated surfaces and contact with dead bodies of those who have died of the infection. While most of the symptoms of the disease are like flu — fever, headache, muscle and joint pains — unexplained internal and external bleeding is one of the distinct features of the disease.

At the World Health Assembly in Geneva, Dr Ghebreyesus flagged how rapidly the virus had spread into major urban centres, including Kampala (Uganda) and Goma (DRC), the healthcare-associated transmission and the significant population movement across porous borders.

Most approved vaccines target the Zaire ebolavirus, not the Bundibugyo or Sudan strains. The WHO says vaccines require about 10 to 14 days to generate a complete immune response. So, those exposed just before or shortly after vaccination can still develop the disease.

Dr Amesh Adalja, however, says that "urban spread does not automatically mean sustained international spread". A senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Uni-



VACCINES: Two vaccines approved for use (Ervebo, Zabdeno and Mvabii) offer protection from the Zaire strain. Vaccines for Bundibugyo still under development.

versity Center for Health Security in Baltimore (US), Adalja has been working on emerging infectious disease, pandemic preparedness and biosecurity. He spoke to Rinku Ghosh.

**Ebola seems to have crossed into urban centres in Kampala this time. Will this outbreak spread beyond regional containment? What does this mean in terms of future viral spreads?**

The fact that Ebola cases have occurred in urban areas like Kampala is concerning because cities increase opportunities for transmission, complicate contact tracing and place stress on healthcare systems. Urban outbreaks are harder to control than rural outbreaks but urban spread does not automatically mean sustained international spread.

Ebola transmission still depends on close contact with infected bodily fluids, contaminated materials, or unsafe healthcare and burial practices. That transmission pattern makes Ebola fundamentally different from airborne respiratory viruses like influenza or SARS-CoV-2, which spread much more efficiently. Historically, even large Ebola outbreaks have generally remained regionally concentrated, though international exportation of cases can occur.

### • Ebola Fact Sheet

• Zoonotic infection caused by Orthoebolavirus. Fruit bats presumed to be natural hosts.

• Transmitted when people come into close contact with blood or body fluids of the infected.

• Six strains identified to date; three known to cause major outbreaks: Ebola (or Zaire), Sudan, and Bundibugyo. The Bundibugyo strain has caused the current outbreak.

• INCUBATION PERIOD: 2 to 21 days from infection to onset of symptoms.

• SYMPTOMS: Fever, fatigue, muscle pain, headache, and sore throat, followed by vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain rash, and impaired kidney and liver functions.

• MAJOR OUTBREAKS: First identified in 1976 in what is now South Sudan and DRC. Later, in Uganda (2000-01), West Africa (2013-16), DRC and Uganda (2018-20), and Uganda (2025).

**Can existing health systems handle repeated Ebola outbreaks? Why despite Ebola outbreaks, does health infrastructure remain fragile and vulnerable?**

The reason infrastructure stays fragile despite all these crises comes down to what I call the panic-neglect cycle. When an outbreak ends, political attention and money evaporate. External responders flood in, contain the fire and leave without building anything durable.

Local hospitals, lab networks and contact-tracing systems remain exactly as fragile as they were before. Rinse, repeat. Covid-19 didn't break this pattern; it just illustrated it at global scale.

**Will vaccines and treatments keep pace with emerging strains? Not all Ebola strains are equally covered by existing vaccines or therapies.**

There is a need to make countermeasures that cover all filoviruses. While strain-specific countermeasures are critical, ultimately universal filovirus medications and vaccines are needed. However, there is work ongoing on Marburg, Ebola Sudan, and Ebola Bundibugyo countermeasures, the latter of which may see use during this outbreak.

Mere urban spread does not lead to sustained global spread. For a virus to have pandemic potential, it must spread efficiently between humans

Even if there is a vaccine for every strain, what is its efficacy?

Efficacy is very high for the Zaire strain vaccine and one can expect similar efficacy for other strain-specific vaccines as well.

**Are climate and ecological disruption increasing spillover risk? Will every virus now have pandemic potential?**

Not every virus has pandemic potential. In order for a virus to have pandemic potential, it has to spread efficiently between humans. Not all viruses have that biology.

Ecological disruption does increase contact between humans and other animal species and does a spillover risk. However, spillover risk does not equal pandemic.

**Can outbreak surveillance become fast enough to stop transmission early? A lot depends on how quickly unusual clusters are detected.**

Only if there is a fully supported integrated system that is operating all the time and provides prompt alerts. Especially, if it is focused on undiagnosed syndromes.

**Can AI-supported surveillance help? Yes, AI-supported surveillance (refers to the part of one's peripheral nervous system regulating involuntary bodily functions like heart rate, digestion, and respiration) surveillance can do massive amounts of data analysis that can inform medical countermeasures development, epidemiology, and overall surveillance.**

**With repeated outbreaks, will public trust improve or erode because any outbreak control depends heavily on community cooperation with isolation, tracing, and safe funeral practices?**

There are many local factors that influence trust. If, during prior outbreak response, trust was built it will make it easier for future outbreaks. But nothing is guaranteed.

**Are we getting better at preventing zoonotic outbreaks or just better at reacting after they start?**

We have the tools and technology to master this problem. However, implementation remains the challenge.

• ECONOMICS

## Why rising govt bond yields are bad news for people and businesses



GRAPHS, DATA, PERSPECTIVES  
BY UDITI MISRA  
WEEKLY ECONOMIC AND POLICY INSIGHTS USING DATA

IT IS becoming increasingly costly for governments across the world to borrow money. In many cases, the interest rates that lenders are charging are reaching their highest levels since the global financial crisis of 2008.

What's more, this upward shift has been quite sharp, which is a problem all by itself, regardless of the level of interest rates. Sharply rising borrowing costs for governments imply that borrowing costs for average consumers will also rise, possibly by a greater degree.

**Why governments borrow money**

In most countries, governments struggle to meet their expenditures just from taxation and other revenue sources. As such, governments have to borrow money to meet the gap.

This demand is typically higher in developing countries and lower in developed countries, simply because developed countries' governments are more capable and efficient at raising tax revenues. Poorer countries don't have enough people in the well-off bracket to tax.

Repeated crises have meant that even developed countries have struggled to grow fast enough to meet their expenses, thus resorting to higher levels of borrowing — not just in absolute amounts but also as a percentage of their GDP (or size of the economy).

**How governments borrow money**

In any economy, the government is the least risky borrower because it is least likely to fail in paying back. It is, after all, the government. In a crisis, it can even resort to printing money — a facility not available to businesses or households.

However, governments borrow in a different way. They float a bond — referred to as Treasury in the US, Gilts in the UK, Bunds in Germany, G-Secs or government securities in India, and JGBs in Japan — essentially like an "I owe you" statement.

It states that the government borrows a particular sum (say \$100) for a particular

It is getting costlier for governments to borrow

YIELDS FOR 10-YEAR GOVT BOND	DEC 2024	DEC 2025	MAY 2026
United States	4.581%	4.179%	4.560%
Japan	1.070%	2.079%	2.764%
United Kingdom	4.573%	4.474%	4.922%
Germany	2.362%	2.862%	3.060%
China	1.688%	1.850%	1.750%
India	6.870%	6.588%	7.085%

SOURCE: WORLDGOVERNMENTBONDS.COM

**Government's guarantee**

• The government is the least risky borrower because it is least likely to fail in paying back.

• Governments borrow by floating a bond, which is essentially like an "I owe you" statement.

period (say 10 years) and promises to pay a given return or coupon at the end of each period (say \$5) apart from paying back the principal at the end of 10 years. Unlike the annual interest rate (expressed in percentage) for home, car or factory loans, government bonds provide a predetermined exact amount. If all goes well, the annual interest rate (or yield) for this example will be 5%.

But imagine that the government decides to launch a war and, as a result, inflation starts rising and the government's demand for money also rises, while the economic prospects of the country decline. The government may be forced to borrow more money, but investors and lenders would now demand a higher rate of return

because they are wary of the increased risks. The government would have to promise a higher coupon, say \$10, on the new bonds.

This will, in turn, make the old bonds (with an annual coupon return of \$5) appear sub-optimal. Holders will try to sell them, often at prices lower than \$100. How much lower? Anyone buying the old bond must have a yield or expected return of 10% from them, and as such, the old bond prices will have to fall to \$50 so that they can be sold in the markets.

Essentially, this is what is happening globally: government bond yields are rising sharply. It must be noted that countries borrow and refinance in trillions of dollars, as such, yield movements are tracked up to three decimal places (see table).

**Broader impact**

Higher yields for government bonds basically translate into even higher interest rates for people and businesses.

They also mean that governments will have to spend even more of their annual budgets towards paying back annual interest on bonds. That, in turn, can only happen either by spending cuts in other areas such as welfare schemes or defence or by higher taxation. In sum, a bond sell-off and rising yields are bad news.

• CULTURE

## Behind Lahore bringing back Hindu names of localities, pride and practicality

Yashee  
New Delhi, May 22

LAHORE, MUCH like New Delhi, is a palimpsest prepared over centuries, with several histories peeking over the shoulders of several presents. Recently, it has been in the news for turning back a comparatively recent page of its past — reverting to some pre-Partition Hindu and British names of its streets and localities.

Why is an Islamic country embracing Hindu names? Why is the change happening now?

**What is the current name change project in Lahore?**

The names coming back include Queen's Road, Jail Road, Davies Road, Lawrence Road, Empress Road, Krishan Nagar, Santnagar, Dharampura, Brandreth Road, Ram Gali, Tempbell Street, Laxmi Chowk, Jain Mandir Road, Kumbharpura, Mohan Lal Bazaar, Sundar Das Road, Bhagwan Pura, Shanti Nagar and Outfall Road. Jain Mandir road, in fact, was renamed

after the Babri Masjid when the Mughal-era mosque was demolished in Ayodhya in 1992. The Lahore temple had been torn down in retaliation, but has been restored.

The latest initiative is part of a 50-billion Pakistani rupee project called Lahore Authority for Heritage Revival, or LAHR, initiated by the Maryam Nawaz government of Punjab. LAHR's patron is Maryam's father and former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The initiative aims to restore Lahore to its old glory, and conservation of history and heritage is one part of the process.

**Is there no opposition to the name changes?**

The politics of name changes has never been very strong in Pakistan. In the years after Partition, even when some names were changed officially, people still used the old names colloquially. The official page of the District of Lahore says that the city was founded by Luv, the son of Lord Rama. Yaqoob Khan Bangash, historian who teaches at Institute of Business Admin-



The Lahore Fort. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

istration, Karachi, told *The Indian Express*, "There are many government hospitals, like Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, which have retained Hindu names. In fact, there is a Nehru Park in Lahore, whose name has been changed, and I once asked people from three generations what they refer to it as. All three said they call it Nehru Park." Lahore did not see "ideological migration" during the Partition. "The elite Muslims from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, etc., went to Karachi and other cities. The migration in Punjab was not ideological. It was forced. The migrants in Lahore were mainly working class. It did not get a new elite who would want to re-shape the city. Lahore's existing elite were proud of their city, wanted to retain its multicultural and multi-religious past, and did not accept the monolithic identity the Partition brought. So even when names were changed at the government level, there wasn't much enthusiasm for it within the locals."

The fact that refugees in Lahore blended in more easily than in other major cities both sides of the border has been written about elsewhere too. Ian Talbot, history professor at the University of Southampton, has written in a 2007 paper, "Tensions between refugees and locals often occurred either in situations of fear of a refugee takeover, as in Karachi, or of acute competition for resources." In Lahore, the refugees were skilled craftsmen or traders, who "either filled niches in the labour market left by departing Hindus, or started new industries," Talbot writes. He adds that many refugees had pre-Partition "birader" (community) ties with Lahore. Thus, the new Muslim population did not feel the need to erase the Hindu past.

Bangash says that in addition, Lahore was always a hub of education and culture, and this has played a role in the pride the city takes in its heritage. "All of this is true for Lahore, would the reverting to Hindu and British names see protests in other parts of the country? Khawaja Shafique Ahmed, a public policy re-

searcher who hails from Sindh and lives in Karachi, said Sindh too has hospitals and buildings that have retained their names, giving the example of Rai Bahadur Udhvadas Tarachand Hospital in Shikarpur. "The politics of renaming is rooted in a tussle between two religions, and Pakistan, an Islamic state, doesn't really have that. Plus, the common people realise that Islamisation of everything has resulted in extremism. They want to reclaim their history and identity," Ahmed said.

**Why is the change now?**

What is driving the Maryam Nawaz government to spearhead this drive?

Bangash said, "The PMLN (the Sharif party), is not very ideologically driven. They are more a business-oriented party." Pakistan has recently attracted positive international attention. Punjab wants to attract more tourism and investment, and the move is part of an effort to project an inclusive, vibrant image.

LONGER VERSION

INDIANEXPRESS.COM/EXPLAINED



## Home and abroad

The Modi Europe visit may pave the way for collaboration on energy security

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tour to the UAE and Europe – the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and Italy – had a multi-pronged agenda. Much of the visit had been planned last year, including the India-Nordic Summit that had to be cancelled after the 2025 Pahalgaam attack and conflict. It came amid a new push for India-Europe ties that have been forged at a time of growing concern over superpower behaviour – from Russia's attacks on Ukraine and the U.S.-Israel conflict with Iran to China's coercive economic measures – all of which challenge the international rules-based order. The India-EFTA trade agreement, which came into force last year, and the India-EU FTA, to be ratified/signed later this year, reflect a shared desire to diversify supply chains and markets, particularly with Nordic countries, where bilateral trade with India remains below \$20 billion. Finally, the visit came days after Mr. Modi's new "austerity" push for foreign currency and energy conservation. Discussions in the UAE on long-term Strategic Petroleum Reserves, and in Europe and at the Nordic-India Summit on the "Green Strategic Partnerships", were aimed to advance collaboration on energy security. Each of Mr. Modi's stops included robust conversations on the Ukraine and Iran conflicts, bilateral and multilateral talks. There was also a focus on AI governance and critical mineral initiatives. The Nordic countries focused on maritime cooperation and scientific collaboration in the Arctic, which has been hit by climate change. While the visits yielded few concrete outcomes or actual trade deals, the bonhomie and awards conferred on Mr. Modi, indicated expectations of deeper India-Europe collaboration. The engagement will be strengthened as he travels in June for the G-7 outreach summit in France and a bilateral visit to Slovakia, and later this year for the India-EU FTA signing in Brussels.

The picture of common aims and shared values cracked somewhat, however, over controversies in the Netherlands and Norway, where journalists questioned their leaders and Mr. Modi for not addressing any press conferences during the visit. While press meets are the norm across Europe, Mr. Modi has mostly stopped taking questions during his foreign tours, and has not held a press conference in India since 2014. Such press engagements are the prerogative of a leader, and may not evince a response in some countries, but the refusal to take questions clearly stood out in the countries Mr. Modi travelled to. Addressing the press after the India-Nordic Summit in Oslo, Mr. Modi said that their "shared commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and multilateralism" made them "natural partners". That commitment, particularly to transparency and accountability that comes with any democracy, must be manifest internally first, and not because of any objections raised abroad.

## Alarm bells

The Index of Eight Core Industries underscores economic distress

India's economy seems to have begun the financial year 2026-27 on a decidedly tepid note, going by the data released so far for April 2026. The latest of these, the Index of Eight Core Industries (ICI), shows that growth in these key sectors stood at a modest 1.7% in April. It would be easy to attribute this to the ongoing crisis in West Asia, and that is certainly a factor, but the slowdown started well before the war broke out. Growth in the ICI averaged just 2.8% in the entire financial year 2025-26, down from the 4.5% average for 2024-25 and significantly slower than the growth in the previous three years, each of which was above 7%. This suggests a more systemic domestic issue rather than an externally driven transient phase. Of the eight sectors, only three – steel, cement, and electricity – grew at all in April 2026. The rest contracted. The crude oil and natural gas sectors have, in fact, contracted for 16 and 22 consecutive months, respectively. This should be of particular concern. Energy output cannot be ramped up overnight, but falling output for such long stretches should have raised some policy alarm bells even before the current energy crisis began. Separate data from the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas show that domestic consumption of natural gas fell in April. Had India installed long-term gas storage facilities, as it should have, this fall in consumption would have provided a window to fill those reserves. Since such reserves do not exist, LNG imports in April were cut by 30%, likely in a bid to slow the forex outflow. The volume of both oil imports and domestic production fell in April.

This lower fuel consumption could be a result of government curbs on commercial usage. Nevertheless, the implications for growth are severe and are likely to play out over the next few months. Fertilizer output contracted in April after a brief return to growth in March. The only mitigating factor for lower fertilizer output is that demand is likely to be lower this year as farmers grapple with a below-normal monsoon and above-normal El Niño. This is, however, far from comforting. The resultant dip in output and rural demand is a grave prospect for the Indian economy. Steel and cement are the only sectors to have grown consistently, indicating sustained construction activity likely propelled by government expenditure. It remains to be seen how long this push can last amid the fiscal strain brought on by the current crisis. It is also not just the core sector data that is concerning. PMI data is close to four-year lows and GST collections from domestic sales are growing only slightly faster than inflation. The alarm bells are now difficult to ignore.

# Interpreting the 'rise' of the Cockroach Janta Party



**Soumyajit Bhar**  
Senior Assistant Professor at the School of Liberal Studies, BML Munjal University

In just four days, a formation in India calling itself the "Cockroach Janta Party" has accumulated a following that established political organisations often spend years building. Memes, pages, Instagram feeds, and semi-ironic political formations began aggregating at remarkable speed, prompting comparisons with Bangladesh and Nepal, where youth-led mobilisations appeared capable of unsettling entrenched political arrangements through digitally synchronised anger. Increasingly, many are wondering whether this is the future of politics itself: reactive and emotionally charged, and organised less around long-term political structures than around symbolic enemies and collective outrage.

The excitement is understandable because younger people increasingly feel disconnected from institutional politics and representative structures that appear distant from their lived anxieties about work, aspiration, insecurity, and exhaustion. Social media allows individuals who otherwise experience themselves as politically isolated to suddenly participate in moments of collective emotional intensity. A meme or slogan can create the feeling of political participation within hours. Yet, the deeper question is whether politics organised primarily through synchronised outrage can sustain itself beyond moments of emotional intensity.

### The erosion of collective social life

The real crisis is not simply institutional decline or ideological exhaustion. The deeper crisis concerns the erosion of collective social life itself. Public life has weakened, and many shared spaces through which people once experienced collective belonging have steadily deteriorated. In the past, political formations emerged through unions, campuses, neighbourhood associations, and everyday cultures of participation embedded within ordinary social life. Those structures created continuity and emotional investment that allowed political life to exist beyond immediate reaction. Increasingly, however, societies produce individualised subjects who remain emotionally hungry for collective belonging while lacking the social conditions that are necessary to sustain it.

Perhaps this reflects one of the deeper contradictions of modernity itself. The language of liberty that emerged after the French Revolution was historically tied to emancipation and collective self-rule. Yet, over time, especially within consumer societies shaped by fossil-fuel-driven development, freedom increasingly came to mean individualised freedom of choice: the freedom to consume, compete, and privately pursue aspiration. Public life gradually weakened as private life expanded.

Digital political mobilisation also reflects fragmentation beneath contemporary public and social life

Under such conditions, digitally synchronised crowds become psychologically powerful because they temporarily relieve isolation. A common enemy allows fragmented individuals to feel connected once again.

This is where the distinction between synchronisation and solidarity becomes important. Contemporary platforms are extraordinarily effective at producing synchronisation. Millions can feel emotionally aligned within hours through shared outrage or a symbolic target. However, emotional synchronisation is not the same as durable collective life. One produces intensity; the other requires continuity, memory, emotional investment, and long-term commitment. Contemporary politics increasingly forms around antagonism rather than shared futures because outrage circulates faster than organisation, and anger is easier to sustain digitally than commitment.

### Cross-country comparisons require caution

This is why comparisons with Bangladesh and Nepal require caution. The underlying conditions do not appear fundamentally different. In both cases, initial reactive energy eventually moved toward more organised political formations. The decentralised swarm did not remain decentralised; it was redirected, institutionalised, or exhausted. That suggests the deeper issue may not concern student politics or youth mobilisation in one country versus another. The broader structural tendencies – individualisation, fragmented public life, and weakening collective institutions – increasingly appear shared across much of the contemporary world.

This is where reflections emerging from the recent Iran-Israel-United States tensions become relevant. Decentralised resilience is only possible when sustained by deeper emotional and material structures capable of surviving beyond moments of immediate confrontation. Distributed action cannot function indefinitely through outrage alone. For decentralised systems to remain coherent without centralised command at every stage, there must exist some larger shared horizon: collective ethical commitment, emotional continuity, historical memory, or durable symbolic attachment. Decentralisation is not merely organisational or technological; it is also emotional, cultural, and material.

What increasingly appears visible in contemporary digital politics is the coexistence of enormous emotional energy with weakening structures of collective endurance. This is where Jacques Lacan's famous intervention during the May 1968 French student uprisings becomes relevant. At a moment when many intellectuals

imagined the protests as radically emancipatory, Lacan responded with an unsettling observation: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one." His point was not merely cynical. Revolt against one symbolic order does not automatically abolish mastery. More often, desire reorganises itself around new forms of certainty and authority.

This insight becomes important in societies shaped by individualised aspiration and emotional fragmentation because politics organised primarily through opposition derives much of its coherence from the enemy itself. The enemy stabilises identity and keeps the crowd emotionally synchronised. But once movements move toward governance, contradictions emerge, compromises become necessary, and symbolic clarity weakens. The crowd that formed around shared antagonism then discovers that sustaining a collective world is far more difficult than synchronising anger.

There is also a deeper material contradiction. Developmental systems shaped by fossil-fuel-driven modernisation not only intensify individualisation but also structurally reproduce centralisation. Energy systems, logistics networks, financial architectures, digital platforms, and megacities all operate through immense concentrations of coordination and power. Even the platforms through which decentralised political energies circulate are themselves among the most centralised technological systems in history.

### The central point

This creates a contradiction at the heart of contemporary anti-establishment politics. People increasingly desire decentralisation emotionally while inhabiting systems structurally dependent on centralisation. The crowd can challenge power, but reorganising power requires engagement with material systems that push relentlessly toward concentration, scale, and control. Unless societies can begin rebuilding the emotional, institutional, and material foundations necessary for collective life – trust, shared responsibility, organisational memory, and durable public commitment – reactive synchronisation will continue to reproduce cycles of outrage without durable transformation.

The central question is not whether decentralised political energy can emerge. It clearly can. The real question is whether contemporary societies still possess the capacity to transform synchronisation into solidarity, and moments of reactive mobilisation into enduring collective forms, or whether every rupture will eventually reproduce new concentrations of power and, as Lacan warned, new masters.

# Cyber warfare is outpacing global legal accountability

Recent tensions involving the United States, Israel and Iran highlight a clear shift in how force is exercised today. According to reporting and policy analyses, the recent strikes were accompanied not only by conventional military action but also by cyber operations, which has included the hacking of news websites and widely used applications to disrupt communication and influence the information environment. The use of cyber means is not an isolated development, but is part of a broader pattern in which digital disruption operates alongside traditional military force. Cyber operations are increasingly being used to support conventional military action, including by disrupting communication and defence systems ahead of physical strikes.

Recent cyber incidents during the conflict have been linked to groups such as the Handala Hack Team, which has claimed responsibility for attacks on entities including a U.S.-based medical technology company. While such activity shows how cyber operations can extend conflict well beyond physical battlefields, it remains unclear how the law responds to this shift.

### Establishing threshold is difficult

In reality, international law does not lack relevant principles. The prohibition on the use of force under Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, along with the framework of state responsibility, applies to cyberspace in principle. When cyber operations affect infrastructure or essential services, serious legal issues may arise. Determining when such conduct crosses the threshold and becomes sufficiently serious to be classified as an internationally wrongful act or a prohibited use of force is the most complicated part. Such actions could lead to state responsibility and even claims for compensation, in theory. In practice, however, establishing this threshold remains extremely difficult.



**Iyoti Singh**  
Advocate based in Delhi, researching cyber warfare and the use of force under international law

This gap between what the law allows and what actually happens has become increasingly visible. As noted in recent analyses, including those by Just Security, victims of cyber operations rarely succeed in bringing cases before courts or obtaining remedies through legal processes. The problem, therefore, is not simply whether the law applies, but whether it can actually be used.

A major reason for this gap lies in attribution. To establish a breach of international law, the act must be attributed to a state. However, cyber operations are, by their nature, secretive and routed through multiple networks and jurisdictions. Even when governments are reasonably certain about who is responsible for the operation, it is much harder to translate that into legally admissible evidence. This creates a gap between political certainty and legal proof.

### Concerns that hinder litigation

The unavailability of an appropriate forum for such disputes is also a practical constraint. Sensitive cyber disputes are unlikely to be heard by international courts, including the International Court of Justice, without the consent of states. Domestic courts also face similar challenges, particularly because foreign states are often protected by sovereign immunity. As a result, there are very few forums where cyber-related claims can be effectively heard. There is also a strategic reason why states may avoid legal processes. Bringing a case might escalate inter-state tensions or invite retaliation and may require the disclosure of sensitive intelligence or capabilities. For this reason, many cyber incidents are handled politically or diplomatically, rather than through courts.

Another challenge is evidence. Cyber incidents involve technical data, classified intelligence and complex chains of causation. It can therefore be extremely difficult in a court setting to show who carried out an operation, how much damage it

caused, and how it led to specific harm. This makes legal action both complicated and uncertain. International awareness of this matter is reflected in instruments such as the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime and the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, which aim to create a broader global framework to address incidents of cybercrime. However, these initiatives primarily focus on cybercrime and law enforcement. They fall short in addressing issues of state responsibility when cyber operations are part of geopolitical conflict.

The result is a growing mismatch. Incidents of cyber operations are becoming more frequent and, in some cases, more damaging. Yet, they rarely lead to legal consequences. This does not imply that international law is no longer relevant, but it does suggest that applying existing legal frameworks to this type of conflict remains a significant challenge.

### India must help shape cyber norms

This is a particularly significant issue for a country such as India. In recent times, India has become increasingly reliant on digital infrastructure across sectors such as finance, energy and governance. As a result, it faces both greater vulnerability and has a larger stake in shaping international regulations. Strengthening domestic cyber resilience is important, but it is also essential to engage actively in international discussions on accountability, attribution and responsible behaviour in cyberspace.

The challenge, therefore, is not only to recognise that cyber operations have become part of modern conflict, but also to ensure that the law is able to respond in a meaningful way. If cyber operations continue to expand without credible pathways to accountability, the gap between law and reality will only widen, leaving a form of conflict that causes real harm, yet remains largely beyond the reach of the law.

Cyber conflict is challenging traditional principles governing force and state responsibility

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Caste and Census

If the Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011 generated over 46 lakh caste entries and reportedly contained around eight crore data errors, one can only wonder what the outcome of the census 2027 exercise will be. Once again, we risk reinforcing the irrational and inhuman practice of classifying people according to caste identities labels arising solely from the accident of birth which divide them into superior and inferior categories. The new Census should provide an option for those who wish to identify themselves outside the caste framework and choose a "casteless identity". At the swearing-in ceremony of the newly elected Kerala Legislative Assembly, on May 21, more than one-third of the members chose not to disclose caste or religious affiliations, signalling that they place themselves above such loyalties. When

Sree Narayana Guru raised the clarion call, "One caste, one religion, one God for humankind", he was articulating a vision of a casteless social order. The Census 2027 should recognise this aspiration by providing citizens with the option of a casteless identity.

M.A. Oommen,  
Thiruvananthapuram

**Ebola and support to Africa**  
The decision to postpone the India-Africa Delhi

Summit due to the Ebola crisis is understandable. At the same time, India should continue supporting African nations through medical aid, awareness programmes, and financial assistance. Cooperation between nations is essential to fight such health emergencies effectively.

Nagarajamani M.V.,  
Hyderabad

**Showing the way**  
One must extend appreciation to the people

of Tamil Nadu for their secular outlook and commitment to democratic values that have consistently set a high standard in India's political landscape. The duploity of the Dravidian parties, which lasted for decades, demonstrated that political awareness and courage can overcome entrenched systems.

A. Marifrancois,  
Chennai

milestones in Britain and the U.S., where leaders such as Rishi Sunak and Kamala Harris came to represent diverse societies. Tamil Nadu's example shows that Indian democracy is vibrant and resilient. Its electorate has demonstrated that political awareness and courage can overcome entrenched systems.

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



Hindu devotees at the Bhojshala-Kamal Maula complex that was recently declared a temple dedicated to goddess Vagdevi (Saraswati) by the Madhya Pradesh High Court. A.M. FARUQUI

# Saffron clashes with green, again

On May 15, a Division Bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court declared the disputed Bhojshala-Kamal Maula complex in Dhar a temple dedicated to goddess Saraswati, based on a survey by the ASI. While Hindus are celebrating the unrestricted access they have been given to the historical monument, Muslims allege that the survey and verdict were predetermined. **Mehul Malpani** reports from the sensitive town

**S**hanno Bai sits outside her kutch house in Urdaya Baida village, about 35 kilometres from Dhar town in Madhya Pradesh. One of her eight children works in the fields, while her grandchildren play nearby. An unpaved road leading to her house has a small statue. It is of Shanno's husband, Van Singh Araadi, who died in 2003 in police firing during communal clashes in Dhar district.

Recalling the events of that time, the family says that while there had been a clamor call from a local Hindu mystic to join a protest rally in neighbouring Amjhera town, Van Singh had only gone there to get his wheat ground. "My father had gone to get atta from wheat," says Shanno's eldest son, Vikram. "There was a rally which ran into clashes with the police as a curfew was in place in Amjhera. My father got caught in between. After sometime, a neighbour who was also in town came and told us that he had been shot." Vikram adds that the family had nothing to do with the communal dispute.

Van Singh and two others were declared martyrs by local Hindu groups. Their pictures have been displayed at the Bhojshala complex, an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)-protected monument and the centre of communal tensions in Dhar for generations. Hindus believe the site to be a historical temple from the 11th century dedicated to goddess Vagdevi (Saraswati), while Muslims say it is the Kamal Maula mosque from the early 1300s.

With the Madhya Pradesh High Court recently declaring the disputed site to be a Hindu temple, there are celebrations in the Hindu community. Shanno's household and village, however, are focused on making ends meet. Shanno says that some local leaders came to offer condolences after Van Singh's death, but nobody has checked on the family for 23 years. "Two people came on Thursday (May 21) to invite us for a procession at the temple. We don't have much to do with the whole thing but since they asked, we might go," says Vikram.

## What the court ruled

Hindus believe the site to be a Saraswati temple and a learning centre with the name of Saraswati Kanthabharana, established by King Bhoja of the Parmar dynasty in 1034 CE. On the other hand, Muslims believe the site to be a mosque built between 1304 CE and 1331 CE by Maulana Kamaluddin Chishti, a Sufi saint during Alauddin Khilji's rule at the Delhi Sultanate, who arrived in Dhar around 1292 CE.

Tensions at the disputed site escalated in the 1990s as competing claims by the two communities intensified. This prompted then Dhar Collector V.R. Subramaniam to issue a restraining order in 1997, allowing entry into the complex only to Hindus on Basant Panchami and to Muslims on Fridays for namaz. The order became the basis for the 2003 ASI order, which additionally allowed Hindus to enter on Tuesdays. The ASI also opened the site for general visitors barring Tuesdays and Fridays. However, tensions again flared on various occasions, especially when Basant Panchami fell on Fridays in 2006, 2013, and 2016, prompting the authorities to further inter-



The Bhojshala was damaged many times. And every time new structures like tombs, dargahs, and graves were added to the complex as well as in its premises

**ASHISH GOYAL**  
State vice-president of the Hindu Front for Justice

vene with specific schedules for such occasions.

On May 15, after hearing six writ petitions, a Division Bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court in Indore delivered its judgment declaring the complex as a temple dedicated to goddess Vagdevi (Saraswati). The court also said that it was a Bhojshala, or a centre for Sanskrit learning.

The High Court quashed the April 7, 2003 order issued by the ASI stipulating that the Muslim community continue to offer Friday afternoon namaz at the site and Hindus conduct ceremonies on Basant Panchami and to visit every Tuesday with "a flower or two and a few granules of rice". The court also gave the ASI complete control over the preservation and conservation of the site, and regulation of religious access to it.

The court also said that the Muslim community could approach the State government for an alternative piece of land to build a mosque within Dhar district, and that the authorities may consider such an application. However, representatives of the community have turned down the recommendation and filed a special leave petition in the Supreme Court to challenge the High Court judgment.

On May 16, the ASI issued an order saying that the Hindu community "shall have an unrestricted access to the Bhojshala complex in connection with the ancient practice of learning and the worship of Goddess Saraswati".

## The first Friday after the judgment

It is the first Friday since the May 15 verdict and Dhar town has been turned into a fortress. The markets are shut and security personnel patrol the lanes on foot and horseback. Anti-riot vehicles have been deployed across the town and bomb-detecting squads and sniffer dogs work in and around the site.

The Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police, Indore (Rural), Manoj Kumar Singh, says more than 1,800 personnel from the Rapid Action Force, Quick Response Force, Special Armed Force, and the local police have been deployed in and around Dhar.

The complex is heavily guarded with barricades and watch towers. Several Hindu devotees arrive at the complex for the morning aarti. Two dargahs adjacent to the complex have been opened from public view after a barricaded corri-



Shanno Bai, who lost her husband Van Singh Araadi in police firing during the 2003 communal clashes, with her son, Vikram (on the left), in Urdaya Baida village. A.M. FARUQUI

dor was erected along the path to Bhojshala, with sections near the dargahs and the graveyard covered by large white sheets. This marks the first Friday in decades that Muslims do not offer namaz at the site.

Until Thursday evening, some community leaders, including Abdul Samad, president of the Maulana Kamaluddin Welfare Society, which represented the community in the High Court, had said they planned to offer namaz at the site as they had for decades, arguing that the court order had "not restricted" them from doing so. In response, members of the Bhojshala Mukti Yajna, a local outfit, announced a mahā aarti ceremony in the afternoon. The timings of both the events clashed, raising concerns among the authorities.

Senior officials of the district administration and police held meetings with both sides ahead of Friday, while Muslim leaders also held discussions with their lawyers. By Thursday night, both sides cancelled their plans, with Samad asking the Muslims to offer prayers at their homes or local mosques. Hindus have been holding their regular morning and evening aartis since the High Court's verdict.

## The ASI survey and objections

The High Court verdict relied largely on a 2,183-page report of a survey conducted in and around the complex by the ASI between March 22 and July 15, 2024, on the directions of the High Court.

The ASI said it followed various scientific and archaeological methods and its investigations indicated three distinct architectural phases at the site. It identified the existing structure as the third phase, built over an earlier structure that was damaged and later modified for reuse.

Among other findings, the ASI survey also said that the remains of the earliest structures constructed at the site still exist in-situ and are covered under the thick and heavy slabs of basalt used during the construction of the platform. "Based on the artefacts found during the investigations, these brick structures can be dated to the Paramara period, i.e. 10th-11th century CE," the survey said.

The ASI also found 1,610 artefacts or remains of artefacts at the site, recovered from various locations, including walls and underground. The artefacts include 94 sculptures and sculptural fragments, coins of silver, copper, aluminium, and steel. These span multiple periods, including the Indo-Sassanian (10th-11th century), Delhi Sultanate (13th-14th century), Malwa Sultanate (15th-16th century), Mughal (16th-18th century), Dhar princely state (19th century), British era (19th-20th century), and independent India.

"Sculptures of four-armed deities were carved on windows, pillars, and beam used in the existing structure. Images carved on these included [Hindu deities] Ganesha, Brahma with his consorts, Nrasimha, Bhairava, gods and goddesses, human and animal figures," the report said, adding that various carvings also included images of animals and birds as well as mythical figures. "As human and animal figures are not permitted in mosques at many places, such images have been chiselled out or defaced," it added.

The ASI also said that the mihrab (a semicircular niche built into the wall of a mosque) "is a new construction and therefore it is beautifully decorated. It is made of different material than the entire structure."

The ASI report also mentioned several Sanskrit and Prakrit inscriptions on damaged and reused stone slabs in the floor and walls, with the written surfaces altered through chiselling. It also recorded 56 inscriptions in Persian and Arabic.

The Muslim petitioners and lawyers, however, allege several irregularities in the survey exercise and report. They say that the court verdict was "solely based on the ASI report", which in turn they say did not mention carbon dating to determine the age of artefacts that were recovered. They also said that their arguments were "not heard properly" in court.

Samad, who accompanied the survey team as a Muslim representative, alleges that while various items recovered during the excavations



We were not given a chance to cross-examine the ASI experts on the findings. We kept making our objections, but they were not properly addressed.

**ZULFIKAR PATHAN**  
President of the Kamal Maula Mosque Intezamia Committee

were "not disclosed" in the report, some items were also "planted" over the years.

"An idol of Buddha was found during the digging of the complex but the report does not mention it anywhere as it complicates the results," he claims. "A skeleton, largely intact, was recovered from the backyard. It hints at the presence of a graveyard, but it was excluded from the report."

He also alleges, "There is a room that was in the possession of the Muslim community and that was used to store mats and other items for namaz. The ASI took over its control in 1997 and used it as a CCTV surveillance and storage room. When that room was opened during the survey, its floor was already broken. During the excavation, many artefacts, including an idol, were recovered from there. If they were ancient they should have had thick layers of soil, but they appeared fresh."

Samad also alleges that liquor bottles, disposable cups, wrappers of tobacco and plastic waste were found during the digging. "Were any of these things used 700-800 years ago," he asks.

Senior advocate Salman Khurshid, who led the Muslim side's arguments towards the later stages of the case, argued in court that such materials cast "serious doubt on the authenticity of the alleged recoveries". He said that certain artefacts appeared to have been "implanted".

The court said that the ASI had explained that such materials were found only in the uppermost heterogeneous debris layers, which already consisted of conservation debris, ceramic pieces, wrappers, and assorted waste.

During regular hearings in April, the Muslim side demanded videographic and colour photographic records of the survey proceedings and approached the Supreme Court for access. The Supreme Court directed the Madhya Pradesh High Court to consider all objections raised by the Muslim side. Following this, the High Court instructed the ASI to share the videography with all the parties involved in the case.

Samad alleges that only video clips of 45 seconds to a few minutes from each day were shared with them despite the survey being conducted for at least 10 hours per day.

## Two streams of history

Zulfiqar Pathan, president of the Kamal Maula Mosque Intezamia Committee, which was responsible for namaz arrangements at the site, alleges that the survey results and the court verdict are "predetermined" and that the findings were "conveniently presented to reach the desired outcome". He says, "This is what we are challenging in the Supreme Court. We were not given a chance to cross-examine the ASI experts on the findings. We kept making our objections, but they were not properly addressed."

He adds, "We had records that show that this site has been a mosque for about 800 years, but none of them were considered."

Ashish Goyal, State vice-president of the Hindu Front for Justice, which was the primary petitioner from the Hindu side, says the site was damaged several times by attacks by Muslim invaders, including for the first time by Alauddin Khilji in 1305 CE and later by Mahmood Shah Khilji in 1514 CE. "The Bhojshala was damaged many times. And every time new structures like tombs, dargahs, and graves were added to the complex as well as in its premises," he says.

Goyal claims that the offering of namaz in modern history only started in 1935 after the Muslim community sought a place from the then Diwan of the Dhar state, K. Nadkar.

An *aitaan* (official proclamation) issued by Nadkar on August 24, 1935, seen by *The Hindu*, reads that the "starting term of Bhojshala must not confuse anyone that this protected royal structure will be converted into any other form. The way namaz is offered now, there shall be no restriction upon that in future. Thus, the mosque shall remain a mosque".

The *aitaan*, which was among the most prominent tools of the Muslim argument, was not considered by the High Court while questioning its legality as it was issued before the enforcement of the Government of India Act, 1935, in 1937.

## Precedent for future

Hindu petitioners say that the inspiration to file the petition came after the 2019 Ayodhya verdict of the Supreme Court, in the Babri masjid-Ram jannabhoomi dispute case, that awarded the disputed 2.77-acre site to the Hindu litigants for the construction of the Ram Mandir.

The petition in the Bhojshala case was filed by the Hindu Front for Justice in May, 2022, challenging the 2003 ASI order. A similar petition of the Kamaluddin Welfare Society, that had been pending since 2019, was added to the case with the Society as a respondent.

The Madhya Pradesh High Court order on the Dhar dispute also refers to the Ayodhya verdict in 10 principles while saying that it was not deciding the property title of the disputed area.

The chain of inspiration that may lead to further disputes of a similar nature does not appear to stop with the Bhojshala verdict, as several other cases — such as the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi, the Shahi Idgah mosque in Mathura, and the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal, all in Uttar Pradesh — are already sub judice.

The Bhojshala verdict could lead to more disputes within Dhar itself as Gopal Sharma, convener of Bhojshala Mukti Yajna, says that the outfit has already pinpointed three Islamic sites that he claimed were originally temples.

the hindu businessline.

SATURDAY • MAY 23, 2026

## Power equation

Peak demand being capably met, but storage important

**W**e are in the midst of a searing summer — and peak power demand (which lasts for a brief duration in a day) — is breaking new records. On May 21, this touched 270 GW at about 3 pm. The power requirement ebbs as evening sets in, and climbs again after sundown, when home ACs come to life, touching about 250 GW. It is during this second spike that the power system is really stretched, leading to occasional outages — since about 150 GW of solar capacity is out of reckoning.



A deficit between rising demand and assured supplies is met largely by captive generators supplying on the spot market, and at prices as high as ₹10 a unit — the limit set by law. However, rising power demand is now being met with less fuss — when compared with the alarming regional blackouts of yesteryears. It is interesting that while thermal power accounts for 70 per cent of electricity generated over the course of any given day, this dips to 60 per cent or less between noon and 2 pm in summer when peak demand soars; here, solar power pitches in with 30 per cent. In the evening hours, other sources such as hydel, gas, wind, nuclear and storage comprise 30 per cent of units generated — with hydel and gas being able to ramp power output more quickly than any source. During the day, much more solar power is generated than the grid can absorb, while thermal power cannot be 'backed down' quickly to adjust for this supply. Under electricity rules, thermal power output cannot be backed down below a point. This is because it affects costs of operations, creates maintenance issues; above all, it takes more time than hydel or gas, for thermal power to be ramped up when needed.

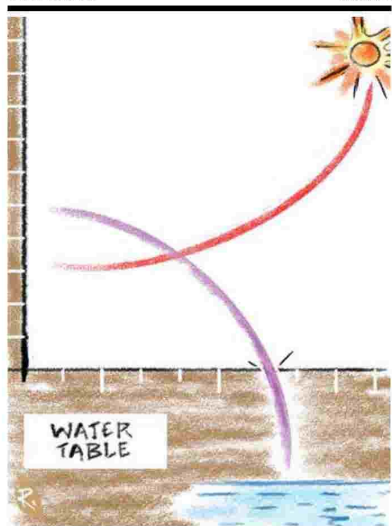
However, China has re-engineered its thermal power plants, allowing them to 'flex' capacity to accommodate renewables supply. This may be worth looking at as an option, since it needs to be seen against solar power forgone. However, the impact on PPA needs to be worked out. In view of the rising role of solar in the energy mix, the role of battery storage in capturing excess daytime output can hardly be overstated. This push makes sense because grid infrastructure is unable to keep pace with rising capacity in renewables. The National Electricity Plan 2023 projects a requirement of 208 GWh of battery storage energy systems by 2030. The Centre has announced a number of incentives.

According to analysts, tendered battery storage capacity stands at 90 GW today, up from about 7GW eight years ago. To meet future power needs, the power generated must be stored and used efficiently. This is all the more because a renewables dominated system cannot operate at much more than 50 per cent installed capacity, as it is weather-dependent. In this context, a push for nuclear could play a role in plugging future power deficits.

Looking ahead this year, the prospect of a weak monsoon could prolong a period of high demand in September and October, even as hydel and gas supplies remain constrained. The Centre should be prepared for such a situation.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



SURENADAR SINGH

**T**he global trading system is shifting from a rule-based order to a more fragmented, transactional, and power-oriented system shaped by geopolitical contestation, regional conflicts, trade protectionism, supply chain realignment, the rise of regionalism, and bilateralism.

According to the World Trade Organisation, a total of 69 RTAs has been implemented globally between 2020 and 2025. India has also signed trade agreements with Mauritius, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and the United Kingdom. Recently, it has formalised a trade agreement with the European Union and has released a joint statement to sign a trade deal with the United States.

Some policymakers, and geopolitical experts contend that India's increased interest in FTAs in the post-pandemic world demonstrates a broader shift in its trade strategy from defensive to a more calibrated and pragmatic approach.

India's trade agreements with the UK and the EU are portrayed as vehicles for improved market access, export diversification, supply chain realignment, and regulatory convergence. These trade agreements undoubtedly open up new business opportunities for domestic firms and integrate them into global value chain networks.

The broader discourse on these two trade agreements presents a rose-tinted view in terms of potential economic gains in labour-intensive sectors, such as textiles and clothing, gems and jewellery, leather, pharmaceuticals, and machinery products. They are also considered as important source of economic dynamism and competitiveness in a rapidly changing global trading environment.

However, this narrative largely overlooks how India's commitments in these trade agreements undermine its trade policy flexibilities. The potential implications of these commitments in the case of the India-UK CETA and India-EU FTA are immense and extend beyond bilateral contexts. Such commitments not only sabotage India's economic interests but also set precedents that may constrain India's trade policy autonomy and negotiating space in future trade deals.

## INDIA-UK CETA

First, the chapter on government procurement under the India-UK CETA states that procuring entities in both countries shall receive "no less than favourable treatment" to goods, services, and suppliers. It further contends that UK firms can qualify as

## Recent FTAs could erode our policy space



**RED FLAGS.** Trade pacts with the UK and EU appear to boost market access. But the fineprint suggests trouble for MSMEs, pharma and digital policymaking

GETTY IMAGES

class II local suppliers with a domestic content of 20 per cent, thereby possibly enjoying the same preferential treatment as Indian suppliers.

This provision may enable UK firms to access Indian government procurements and tenders thereby limiting the potential business opportunities for domestic companies. Given the relative financial strength, scale and technological capabilities, it is unlikely that Indian suppliers can compete with UK firms in government tenders.

Furthermore, it significantly constrains the ability of Indian policymakers to incentivise MSMEs and start-ups participate in government tenders. This will adversely impact India's grand initiatives, such as Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India, which focus on bolstering domestic manufacturing capabilities.

Second, a close review of disciplines related to intellectual property rights under the India-UK CETA states that parties recognise the importance of "preferable and optimal route to promote and ensure access to medicine is through voluntary mechanisms, such as voluntary licencing." The inclusion of the voluntary licencing mechanism in the IPR chapter dilutes India's well-established practice of invoking

**The voluntary licencing mechanism in UK pact dilutes compulsory licencing, which allows domestic generic producers to supply medicines in a national emergency**

compulsory licencing to allow domestic generic producers to supply medicines at the time of a national emergency.

The most concerning provision of the IPR chapter is the elimination of the patent working disclosure requirement, thereby giving undue favour to global pharmaceutical giants. This has significant implications for our generic drug producers, as they primarily rely on "working disclosure" as an important source of market information and intelligence. This can delay the entry of generic drugs into the market, thereby severely limiting access and availability of low-cost medicines for millions of people.

## EU AGREEMENT

Third, a significant concern for India in its trade agreement with the EU is the chapter on trade and sustainable development, as it integrates non-trade issues (labour and environment) in India's FTA template. Provisions related to labour and the environment can easily be instruments of disguised protectionism. It is a different matter that the legal text clearly states that these disciplines should not be used for "protectionist trade purposes", and that the "violation of fundamental principles and rights" at work cannot be invoked.

This provision is open to different interpretations. It provides significant leeway to EU policymakers to challenge Indian exports produced in sectors where labour practices and wage structures differ from EU norms, creating space for them to invoke disguised barriers to trade.

In this context, the EU's green trade measures such as deforestation regulations, CSDDD, and CBAM, will certainly impose strict scrutiny on

India's labour and environmental practices. These green trade measures may offset the potential market access benefits of India's labour-intensive exports.

Fourth, provisions on digital trade in trade agreements with the UAE, the UK, and the EU are in 'best endeavour' language; however, the real challenge is likely to arise when India negotiates digital trade disciplines in ongoing FTA talks with the US and South Korea.

Interestingly, the digital trade chapter of the India EU FTA prevents India from demanding access to source code of EU firms' software and AI systems thereby significantly constraining power of Indian regulators to understand and regulate AI system.

Further, it also places restriction on Indian authorities to audit algorithms even during investigations. There is a high possibility that the US trade negotiators will put tremendous pressure on Indian trade negotiators to convert these 'best endeavour' languages into slightly stronger language, possibly hard commitments in a few areas. Digital trade commitments through trade agreements could subsume significant policy space to frame domestic digital policies.

Indian policymakers should be cautious and pragmatic while negotiating trade agreements, ensuring that the quest for market access, export diversification, and GVC integration does not come at the cost of policy sovereignty, regulatory constraints, and, most importantly, development imperatives.

The writer is an Associate Professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P.J.S. Jindal Global University, Sonapat. Views expressed are personal

## Weather-induced school closures hurt the poor

Schools shift to online teaching during heat waves or pollution. Poor children suffer, as they cannot access instruction

Dibyasee Ganguly

**I**ndia's education policy today rightly emphasises better learning outcomes, equitable and inclusive education. But for millions of children, the basic condition that makes all of this possible — uninterrupted schooling — is increasingly becoming a challenge.

This is different from school dropouts, which is usually seen as the primary cause of learning disruption. The reasons for dropout are many in India, such as poverty or social factors like child marriage and gender roles prioritising boys' education, leaving girls to perform domestic chores, among others. This is particularly seen at the secondary level, where dropout rates are substantially higher than in primary schooling, and retention remains a challenge despite higher enrolment. Increasingly, extreme weather and pollution are also leading to schools being shut.

The problem is not just limited to schools being shut; the alternative, online education, is far from equal. For many children, a shift to online classes is not a smooth substitute for classroom learning, but it is just the beginning of exclusion, as the Covid experience shows.

Findings from the latest third round

of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS-3), conducted in 2022-24, clearly capture this divide. Among children aged 5-15 who were enrolled during the pandemic, 52 per cent of those in private schools were offered online classes during the closure period, compared with only 30 per cent in government schools.

Similarly, 45 per cent of private-school students received educational videos or other online learning material, compared with just 25 per cent of government-school students. Most strikingly, 61 per cent of children in government schools reported that their school shared nothing at all, compared with 43 per cent in private schools. These findings reflect a wider national pattern, with a Ministry of Education report showing that in several large States, between 40 and 70 per cent of school-going children lacked access to digital devices during the pandemic.

Teachers' accounts from the IHDS-3 survey help explain why this gap was so difficult to bridge. Among Grade-3 teachers, those in government schools were more likely than their private-school counterparts to report barriers such as poor electricity, weak internet access, and lack of devices — constraints that students themselves had to grapple with. They were also more likely to point to limited digital



SCHOOL CHILDREN. Access issues

MOODITHY BV

skills among students and parents, as well as home circumstances that hindered learning. Remote education fell short not only due to technological gaps, but also because learning from home was shaped by unequal household circumstances.

## UNEQUAL ACCESS

Children already studying in less advantaged settings are more likely to lose access to instruction altogether and less likely to recover quickly deepening long-term inequalities.

That is why the challenge in education goes beyond curriculum, teacher training, and school infrastructure, even though all of these are important. Such discussions often assume that schooling continues without interruption. But

when environmental shocks repeatedly push children out of classrooms and into highly unequal home-based learning conditions, the central policy question becomes one of continuity: who can remain connected to learning when the school gates are shut?

India is not short of digital education initiatives. PM eVIDYA was launched to provide multimodal access to education, while DIKSHA serves as a national platform for digital learning content. Samagra Shiksha has also expanded digital and ICT support within the broader school education framework, and NEP 2020 places clear emphasis on equitable and inclusive education.

But the exclusionary outcomes does not by itself guarantee continuity in learning.

Where households lack stable connectivity, adequate devices, digital familiarity, or supportive learning environments, the children are unable to benefit from them.

As environmental disruptions become more frequent, measures for continuity in learning must be built into mainstream education policy — through stronger digital access, low-tech alternatives, community-based support, and effective last-mile delivery.

The writer is an Associate Fellow, NCAER - National Data Innovation Centre. Views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to [bleditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bleditor@thehindu.co.in) or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

## Climate concerns

The UN General Assembly's support for the International Court of Justice ruling on climate responsibility is a welcome step in strengthening global climate action. The resolution gives climate-vulnerable nations, especially small island countries, stronger diplomatic and legal grounds to demand accountability from major carbon-emitting nations. However, the resolution does not fully address the concerns of developing countries like India.

Developed nations, which benefited from centuries of industrialisation and colonial exploitation, bear a

greater historical responsibility for the present climate crisis. Hence, climate action must follow the principle of equity and differentiated responsibilities. At the same time, India should remain committed to its green-transition targets.

**M Jayaram**  
Shivdandam (TN)

## Educational challenges

As the nation reforms "learning schools" (May 22), India's education system has expanded access impressively, yet the real challenge lies in keeping students engaged and

prepared for a fast-changing economy. As the gig sector and artificial intelligence reshape work, schooling must evolve from rote learning to skill-based education. Adolescents leaving school early for low-wage jobs reflect a system that fails to connect learning with livelihood.

Secondary education should integrate digital fluency, critical thinking, and creativity alongside foundational literacy. The goal must be to make staying in school economically and intellectually rewarding. When education equips students for

higher-value roles rather than repetitive tasks, families will see long-term merit in learning.

**K Chandranand Kumar**  
Bengaluru

## Rupee stress

This refers to RBI's decision to conduct a ₹1 lakh crore VRR auction on May 22 and a separate \$5 billion USD-INR buy/sell swap auction with a 3-year tenor to inject long-term liquidity into the banking system. While both measures improve liquidity, the concern is whether such dual infusion could add further pressure on the INR, which is already

weakening sharply against the dollar. The key question is whether abundant liquidity should be prioritised at a time when the rupee is under stress. RBI may be trying to balance two objectives — preventing a liquidity squeeze caused by forex interventions while supporting growth and banking liquidity. However, critics may argue that excessive liquidity support during persistent rupee weakness could send a dovish signal to currency markets and contribute to further INR depreciation pressure.

**Srinivasan Velamuri**  
Chennai

[ OUR TAKE ]

## Keep politics out of citizenship

West Bengal should uphold due process as it seeks to identify and deport illegal residents

The figure of the Bangladeshi undocumented immigrant loomed large over the assembly elections campaign in West Bengal, fuelled by the controversial special intensive revision of electoral rolls that led to the disenfranchisement of 2.71 million people and injected anxiety about illegal immigrants into the sociopolitical mainstream. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) successfully argued to large chunks of the Hindu population in the border state that the previous Trinamool Congress (TMC) government was lenient on undocumented immigrants and was not doing enough to secure the state's frontiers. It received a landslide mandate in a state where power has changed hands only twice in the last 50 years.

Now the elections are over. Suwendu Adhikari has taken oath as the first BJP chief minister of a state where the political right has never managed to create more than a toothed despot. Jana Sangh founder Syama Prasad Mookerjee hailed from the province. Adhikari must now eschew the pitched rhetoric of the election campaign and focus on the sober daily grind of effective governance. Unfortunately, his recent comments on suspected undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants are not in line with the constitutional responsibility of his exalted position. This newspaper reported on Friday that Adhikari said Bangladeshi immigrants detained in the state should be directly handed over to the Border Security Force for deportation, instead of being produced before courts, in line with a new rule that came into effect in the state a day ago. Instructions were already issued to the police commissioner and the Railway Protection Force (RPF), the CM said. Although he did not name the act under which the BJP government in Bengal made the policy shift for prosecution of immigrants, it appeared the CM was referring to the Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025, passed by Parliament in April last year.

Unfortunately, such a dictat might run afoul of a person's right to a fair trial. The law of the land and due process must take precedence over politics, and courts must make the final determination before a person is declared an infiltrator. Mere suspicion is not enough grounds to expel a person from the country. Similarly, it is the courts, not the police or other law enforcement agencies, which are competent and empowered to decide whether a person is an Indian citizen. This judicial process cannot be short-circuited.

Over the past year, a number of people have been pushed back into Bangladesh on the suspicion that they are undocumented migrants without adequate due process. Some of those people have proven in courts that their expulsions were illegal and they were removed from their homes and workplaces despite possessing citizenship papers. Moreover, many people — a majority of them poor migrant labourers speaking Bengali and working in other states — have complained that they were attacked or intimidated by local administrations and police on the suspicion of being undocumented immigrants. Against such a backdrop, the chief minister should exercise greater caution while talking about this fraught subject.

No sovereign nation can tolerate unchecked migration or a flouting of citizenship rules. But a fair and transparent application of citizenship and immigration laws cannot become synonymous with vigilantism or a disregard for due process. The question of the Bangladeshi immigrant is a key cog in India-Bangladesh ties as well, at a time when both New Delhi and Dhaka are looking to repair ties. Adhikari should leave politics at the door and trust the legal process.

[ THIRD EYE ]  
Barkha Dutt

## Searching for the truth in Twisha Sharma's death

With the CBI set to begin investigation, the conduct of the mother-in-law, a former district judge, has come under the spotlight

Her absolute lack of visible emotion, unflappable and chillingly cold demeanor, and brazen misogyny is not the only reason Giribala Singh is in the national spotlight. I did a double-take, recalling more than once as I interviewed Singh after her daughter-in-law, former model and actor Twisha Sharma was found dead (allegedly) by hanging in her in-laws' house in Bhopal. I shuddered to think that Singh had been a district judge.

Think of all the female petitioners who would have brought their own chronicles of harassment, abuse, and domestic violence to her court. Would she have treated them with the contempt and character assassination she has reserved for her son's wife?

So, why was I interviewing an accused in a dowry, assault, abuse and abetment to suicide case? Because Singh's press conference, where she made sweeping allegations against a young woman who was no longer alive to defend herself, was absolutely atrocious. Sadly, she received very little push-back against her innuendo and sneers.

And so I chose a few central questions to confront her.

As an officer of the law who must have sat on dozens of petitions for bail, how could she defend the fact that her son, Samarth Singh — who's also a lawyer — went absconding? (Samarth surrendered to the Jabalpur police on Friday evening.) I had earlier asked her if she had asked him to surrender and co-operate with the police? Or, had she hidden him in the hope that

some court would grant him anticipatory bail? When I asked her if she knew the whereabouts of her son, she declined to answer. Strangely, she cited the Umar Khalid case to me as an example of the Supreme Court's observations on how bail is the norm, not the exception. But Khalid has been in jail for more than five years without a trial or bail and is, perhaps, the least accurate illustration to make a case for bail as a right. In any case, should she not be additionally booked for obstruction of justice for knowingly encouraging her son to run from the law instead of honouring it?

I then asked Singh about her claim that Sharma used drugs and was schizophrenic. There is no independent corroboration of this, but assuming it to be true, how is it lawful to reveal the private medical records of a patient at a press conference? A mental health diagnosis is a confidential matter, between a psychiatrist and his/her patient. A doctor can lose his licence if he reveals these details unless there is a compelling legal or public service driven reason. Why did Singh have access to Sharma's private medical records? She had no answer except to say her son had access to the details and so did she.

I then pointed out that when she spoke of drugs used by Sharma, she had confided prescription medicines with drugs and used the two interchangeably at her press conference. She had no response to that. On an audio

**THE COUNTRY IS AGHAST AT THE PERSONA OF SINGH WHO APPEARS TO HAVE MASTERFULLY WEAPONISED HER STATURE AND KNOWLEDGE AS AN OFFICER OF LAW TO OBFUSCATE THE TRUTH**

## Delhi Ridge restoration: What the plan gets wrong

The Central Ridge of Delhi, an offshoot of the Aravalli Hills covering 864 hectares (ha), is located barely 300 metres away from the Presidential Estate of India. This hilly mosaic of tropical dry forest, grasslands, streams and rocky outcrops has been historically beset by a range of human interventions, starting with large-scale planting of the vilayati kikar (*Neltuma juliflora*) during the early 20th century. This foreign tree spread invasively over the Central Ridge and left the native forest restricted to tiny fragments.

Through the mid-20th century, the Central Ridge saw numerous encroachments in the form of roads, sports facilities, and buildings, due to the escalating demand for land. Some sections of the forest were converted to parks such as Buddha Jayanti and Mahavir Vanast-hali. The 1980s and 90s were marked by citizens' campaigns to safeguard the Delhi Ridge from further conversion and degradation in the face of growing urban expansion.

Since 2021, the Central Ridge, a Reserved Forest since 1994, is witnessing another wave of modifications that, ostensibly, aim to "restore" its forests. A "restoration" plan was suggested by Delhi University scientists involving the lopping of the vilayati kikar, combined with use of climbers to "strangle" the invasive trees, which is to be followed by the use of JCBs to dig up tree roots. However, this approach has no precedent in restoration

science and will be ineffective and destroy remnant wildlife.

In 2026, the Delhi government announced the creation of four kinds of vans or "theme forests" on the Central Ridge. These will involve clearing of forest land using excavation, followed by fresh planting. The list of tree species for plantation in the Forest Working Plan indicates that 50% of these are not native to the Aravallis and another 12% are exotic.

The Delhi forest department website further reveals that the "city forests" will be extended beyond the Central Ridge; these are expected to provide physical and psychological benefits, along with infrastructure such as meditation huts, amphitheatres, and signages for visitors. In April 2026, the government floated a tender for pesticide use (chlorpyrifos and lindane) to kill termites, seen as destructive to trees.

After citizens pointed out the dangers of using pesticides in the forest, the tender was withdrawn. A gazalshala has already been established, which is likely to impact tree regeneration as cattle will be let loose for grazing.

What is concerning about the recent plans for the Central Ridge is that while it has been identified as a priority area for wild species and ecology as well as sci-



Sharma's father told me he regrets not bringing her home sooner. And therein lies a tale — how we as people remain focused on saving marriages, instead of saving our daughters. AN

recording, made by Twisha's family before she was found dead, Singh can be heard admitting that her son battled drug addiction in his college years. She also says that Sharma may have terminated her pregnancy because she was fearful of the impact of her husband's drug abuse on the foetus.

So, while she was smearing her daughter-in-law, it was her son who had an actual addiction problem at some point, going by the tape released by Sharma's family.

Talking about Sharma's terminated pregnancy, I was stunned when Singh told me that Sharma was guilty of extreme "cruelty" because she had an abortion. As a judge she should have surely known the law. I had to remind her that abortion in India was entirely legal up to 20 weeks for all women and up to 24 weeks for special categories. Sharma had been married for a little over five months and was two months pregnant when she opted for abortion. To hear this stone-faced mother-in-law, who must have had the chance to adjudicate abortion cases, was just galling.

The most egregious of her comments was the way she questioned Sharma's character. On the same audio tape recorded by Sharma's family on April 22, Harshit, Twisha's soldier-brother can be heard arguing with Giribala Singh on why his sister is being treated this way. Singh doubles down, making all sorts of claims about prostitution — and how some sell their brains and others sell their bodies. She then goes on to make comments about promiscuity and Twisha's alleged sexual history.

Nowhere in the conversation are there any comments about her son's sexual history. As a judge whose duty it was to protect the rights of all citizens, she fell back on the oldest trope in the book — tell a woman she's been sleeping around when you want to bully her, control her and slander her.

There are many other unanswered questions in this case. Did Singh work the hotline to other judges on the morning her daughter-in-law was found dead, as widely reported in the media in Madhya Pradesh?

The belt allegedly used by Sharma to hang herself — her family alleges that she was murdered — was not brought forward by the investigating officer for the autopsy. So the ligature material could not be matched with the marks on her neck.

Sharma's father told me he regrets not bringing her home sooner. And therein lies a tale — how we as people remain focused on saving marriages, instead of saving our daughters. The family will be haunted by that for years to come.

But the country is aghast at the persona of Singh who appears to have masterfully weaponised her stature and knowledge as an officer of law to obfuscate the truth, protect her son and smear her daughter-in-law.

I do not know a single woman who is not repulsed by her conduct. Now that the case is set to go to the CBI, may the truth prevail.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

tific accuracy. True ecological restoration should lead to the revival of native floral and faunal assemblages. However, the current plans and their implementation will eliminate such possibilities. They will adversely affect the dwindling insect, bird, and mammal life, existing rootstock, seed banks and remnant stocks of native plants that could help revive native forest.

An undue emphasis on building recreational facilities permeates the plans. The Ridge is being looked at as simply a place for entertainment and recreation rather than being recognised for the diverse ecosystem services that it performs.

The Ridge is a massive green lung for Delhi that secures groundwater, harbours biodiversity, and modulates climate. Instead of ensuring that the natural habitat is restored by science-based silviculture that recognises nature's nuances, the forest department is developing theme-based parks, creating unnecessary infrastructure, planting non-native species, removing rootstock using heavy machinery and establishing cow shelters.

Apart from these grave ecological concerns, there are many legal requirements that have not been fulfilled. The Godavaram order of 1996 of the Supreme Court has not yet been complied with in Delhi. This order envisaged that forests should first be identified as per its dictionary meaning

irrespective of ownership; implying that forest diversion requires permission under the Forest Conservation Act (FCA). It is seen that large-scale diversion has been done illegally by various agencies through the last few

decades without obtaining due permission under the FCA.

Similarly, the Lafarge order of 2011 which envisaged that all forests should be GIS-mapped and demarcated has also not been done which has also facilitated illegal diversions. The same holds good for non-compliance of Section 16(1) of GSR 859 (E) under the amended Forest Conservation Amendment Act 2023 which required that all forest-like areas need to be identified within a year of the rules being promulgated. However, even after the lapse of three years, these rules and orders have not been implemented. Including theme-based city parks in the forest working plan amounts to granting sanctity to activities which detract from the essential character of a natural forest. Such plans could well be taken up in revenue lands instead of reserved forests. Further, allowing cattle to enter the Ridge is violative of Section 26 of the Indian Forest Act (1927), inviting imprisonment and fines.

The JCBs have already rolled into the Central Ridge. Precursor stumps, micro-organisms, seed-banks and native plants are being removed from the area through deep digging, while deep forest soils are being exposed and compacted by heavy machinery. Several acres have already been cleared of their vegetation cover.

Will its proximity to the highest echelon of power, the Rashtrapati Bhawan, protect the Central Ridge from such an ecologically undesirable makeover?

Barkha Dutt is a retired Indian Forest Service officer and Gazalshala Bhawan, an ecologist and visiting faculty of environmental studies, Ashoka University. The views expressed are personal

## Reel to real challenges for Tamil Nadu CM Vijay

Tamil Nadu chief minister (CM) Joseph Vijay has expanded his team of ministers and inducted representatives from the Congress, Indian Union Muslim League, and the Viduthalaithiruvagam Katchi. This is the first coalition government in the state since 1952. His focus now must shift to governance.

Barring some tenuous groups motivated by political animus, a sizeable section of the state's population desperately want Vijay to succeed. Vijay's lack of experience in public administration is cited by most of his adversaries as reason why he will not succeed. There are at the same time those who wanted a change and who describe this as baseless cynicism. The history of modern

public administration in India and a few other Asian countries highlights the fact that a few neophytes have indeed succeeded even when the odds were against them.

My mind goes immediately to the decisively effective rule given by K Kamaraj, who led the much-needed political stability to Tamil Nadu in the early 1950s.

To this day, he is looked upon as the epitome of clean popular rule and a model to emulate even six decades after his rule ended. Kamaraj took the whole of the rural population with him and initiated several projects, including the mid-day meal scheme. He gave a free hand to officials but did not protect those misbehaved with the public.

CM Vijay has rightly kept the home portfolio with him. This is logical because in his first public pronouncements, he cited crime against women and illicit drug trafficking as twin major evils that had ballooned under the DM regime and which needed immediate attention. His assessment will be widely endorsed by the public.

Being an essentially urban bird, I had until recently believed that these two issues had been overstated. A few of my knowledgeable contacts tell me a different story. Women felt threatened in many villages by powerful men with political connections aided by corrupt policemen. It will be facile to believe that enlarging the women police component would reduce the intensity of fear among women citizens.

It could at best enhance the registration of complaints and result in more arrests. That may not be enough unless the speed of disposal of court trials is accelerated.

Speedy trial and certainty of punishment are the two effective means to reduce crime rates.

Visible physical presence of the police should make a lot of difference. This has been the experience of many modern police forces.

Prohibited substances are reportedly available across the state. This is analogous to the situation some time ago in Punjab. A large section of the youth in the state has unfortunately fallen prey to alcohol and this has considerably affected the law and order situation. Conscious of this development, the new CM has ordered closure of liquor shops in the vicinity of educational institutions.

Undoubtedly, Vijay means business. The question is if he will give a free hand to the police so that they act without fear or favour. His intentions are transparent and seem honest. There is no reason to believe he will not succeed.

RK Raghavan is a former CBI director. The views expressed are personal

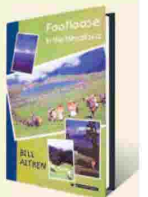
### { EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

### IN THE SHADOW OF THE HIMALAYAS

Earlier this week, the Centre told the Supreme Court that it will not allow the building of more dams in the upper reaches of the Ganga in the Uttarakhand Himalayas. Dam building in recent decades has transformed the Garwal region, affecting the flow in the majestic Alaknanda, the Bhagirathi, and their feeder streams, such as the Mandakini. State-promoted pilgrimage tourism and related construction have disrupted the harmony of life in the mountains.

Bill Aitken's *Footloose in the Himalayas* is a fine volume of essays that offers a peek into the "timeless sublimity of the Himalayas". Aitken was a naturalised citizen of the Himalayas, having lived and died there. These well-written essays available only to an insider — someone who has walked and climbed the mountains. In Aitken's *The Nanda Devi Affair* is an ode to a peak worshipped across Uttarakhand, these essays capture the spirit of the mountain, and the people and wildlife that make up the Himalayan ecosystem.



Footloose in the Himalayas Bill Aitken 2013


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| <u>3) Business line</u>      | <u>8) Financial Express</u> |
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# Reforms will deliver 10x the savings from austerity

Indians prefer saving over spending. But for this to happen naturally, it requires more than calls to save fuel or work from home



**BEYOND IDEOLOGY**  
R JAGANNATHAN

It is difficult to fault the Prime Minister's call for austerity in the wake of mounting pressure on energy costs and the deep fractures in global supply chains. Among other things, he asked citizens to use less petrol-fuels by using public transport, exhorted farmers to reduce fertiliser consumption, and urged companies to allow employees to work from home. He also asked consumers to reduce gold purchases and foreign jaunts to conserve foreign exchange. When the economic going gets tough, voluntary belt-tightening is the first stop.

The problem with austerity measures, while well-intentioned, is that they cannot substantially move the needle on consumption trends because the underlying reasons for this demand remain largely unresolved. And they will accomplish far less than reforms.

Reforms in agriculture, which swallows trillions in subsidies for power, diesel, water, and fertiliser,

would deliver real efficiency gains that would dwarf any voluntary austerity measures that farmers may undertake — which they probably won't anyway, given the way they are politically mollycoddled by all parties. A simple way to start the process would be to price fertilisers at market rates, and shift the subsidy to cash payments per acre of farmland — which would force farmers to rethink how much fertiliser they use. The less they use, the more they save.

Then there is the perverse incentive to use private vehicles due to the poor quality of public transport. In 2025-26, Indians bought over 26 million personal vehicles (four-wheelers and two-wheelers), aided further by goods and services tax (GST) cuts in September 2025. Add this to the stock of 310 million two- and four-wheelers already on the roads at the end of the previous year, and the calculation is simple: Roughly one in four Indians now has access to a personal vehicle, though this is an oversimplification as many families may own multiple vehicles, and others may not even own a bicycle. But it underscores our overemphasis on personal transportation.

The underlying reason for this is the abject failure of public transport in India, which has over the past few decades forced Indians to seek refuge in vehicle ownership. The growth of metros and suburban railways has not kept pace with commuter demand. Moreover, when

public transport is overcrowded, women workers will especially seek to avoid the congestion and physical crush that is unavoidable in buses and suburban trains.

Austerity calls on petrol-fuels will be of marginal help when the alternatives to personal transport are poor. Next, there is the poor quality of urban services like water and power. In most gated communities in Bengaluru, and even in high-rise buildings in Mumbai or other metros, water demand is substantially met by tankers. With power supply being unreliable, most buildings need diesel generators to make sure that at least the lifts work when power fails.

Net result, the demand for diesel is equally difficult to curtail when water tankers and diesel generators are vital to life in metros. If water and power supplies were reliable, there would be no need for these diesel-guzzling vehicles to rush about town, spilling water and belching toxic fumes all along the way.

Our metros and flyovers are also not constructed to optimise fuel consumption. Unlike metros in most cities abroad, which are built underground so that the existing road space is not restricted, in India most metros are built above the ground to save on construction costs. And most flyovers are planned just to jump over a traffic hotspot, and have inadequate service roads to accommodate vehicles that need to go under them.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Let's look at work-from-home (WFH), which requires reliable Wi-Fi or high-quality mobile internet. During Covid, when employees retreated to their homes by necessity, WFH worked well for those who needed to be on the internet most of the time: the rest managed with 4G and mobile hotspots and phones. But here's the problem: If WFH has to be an effective alternative, it also has to be more reliable for the vast majority, and not just for software workers.

Now consider how Wi-Fi really comes to your home. The cable that

enters your building lives a charmed life outside, as it is slung from rooftop to rooftop, and from treetop to lamp-post. So, when these exposed wires snap for one reason or another, there is an outage, making Wi-Fi connections prone to regular disruptions. Till these cables are finally pushed underground like piped gas lines, their reliability will be as good as they ought to be.

And, let's not forget, WFH needs the H as much as the Wi-Fi. Homes in India are priced out of reach for most middle-class households as politicians and builders use regula-

tory hurdles to slow down land supplies in order to collect rents from scarcity. After Covid, rents also went through the roof. The underlying reasons for high home costs, whether for rental or purchase, are the massive restrictions and regulations governing land use and land availability. Politicians (and pliant bureaucrats) use their ability to control land supplies to extract hefty bribes for regulatory clearances — and this is the money that often finds use in purchasing votes and for private wealth accumulation. Consider why simple solutions like

raising the floor-space index (FSI) can bring down land prices. A building with an FSI of four can build twice as many apartments as one with two, which means land costs can fall dramatically if politicians want it to happen. Even assuming that not all crowded areas can afford high FSI due to street congestion and infrastructure constraints, there is no reason why new suburbs with no limits to road infrastructure should not be significantly cheaper than they are now. But vested interests block any shift to a saner regulatory policy that increases the availability of cheaper land, and therefore affordable homes.

As for buying less gold, the problem is one of mixed signals. How can you ask households to buy less gold when our own central bank is going big on gold? How can you prevent gold buyers from assuming that the yellow metal can never lose value, when tariffs automatically push up gold prices in the domestic market? In 2024, the Narendra Modi government reduced gold import duties to bring down domestic prices, now in calling for austerity, it is doing the opposite, thus making gold look even more lucrative as an investment.

Our problem is not austerity, for Indians have always had a penchant to save rather than spend. But for that to happen naturally, we need to think of more than just asking citizens to save fuel or work from home or buy less gold. We have to fix the underlying issues: Public transport, quality power and water supplies, sensible urban infrastructure, and lower land prices. And, of course, reform agriculture.

The author is a senior journalist

## A 'balanced' chief minister



**PLAIN POLITICS**  
ADITI PHADNIS

Here are some important facts about Vadassery Damodara Menon (VD) Sathesan, who has just become chief minister of Kerala, heading the United Democratic Front (UDF) government, led by the Congress.

He is one of the very, very few Congress politicians who are faction-free. The Congress in Kerala is a paradox. In the unit, it is the factions that manage the equilibrium of power and prevent the party from disappearing altogether as it has done in many other states. From the famed A K Antony-K Karunakaran clash to the rise of Oommen Chandy, who co-opted the leadership traits (and supporters) from both groups, divisions in the Congress in the state are also the glue that holds the party together. After he lost his first election (Paravur Assembly constituency, 1996), Mr Sathesan declined blandishments by groups. Mr Antony, former chief minister and former defence minister, was fond of him. Mr Sathesan accepted good wishes but stayed autonomous. In that sense, politically, he is a self-made man, hence the hint of arrogance that tends to creep into his tone occasionally.

The exception was former speaker G Karthikeyan, who spotted the young man in 1996 and sought support from both Mr Antony and Karunakaran to back him. He contested the same seat in the 2001 Assembly elections, won, and has held it ever since. In 2000, Mr Karthikeyan predicted he would be

chief minister one day. He was Mr Sathesan's political mentor, a fact that the chief minister acknowledges publicly.

So, it would not be wrong to say that among the many complex challenges he faces, managing groups is going to be the primary one. Although Ramesh Chennithala, a challenger and an old stager in Kerala's Congress, has yielded for now, he will remain a source of discomfort to the chief minister. K C Venugopal, in addition to having legislators do his bidding, also has the ear of the Congress leadership. So, while driving his policies forward, Mr Sathesan will have to keep an eye on the rear-view mirror.

And what might these policies be? Although there is evidence to support the criticism, Mr Sathesan is not an environmental fundamentalist or a Luddite. It is true that as leader of Opposition in the Assembly, he railed bitterly against the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government's proposal to launch a 530-km high-speed rail line between Thiruvananthapuram and Kasaragod, reducing travel time to four hours, on the grounds of the environmental destruction land acquisition would cause. He scrapped the project (which wasn't going anywhere anyway for lack of central support) in his second cabinet meeting. His criticism of the development of Vizhinjam Port was rooted in concerns about corruption, though the overlap was the environmental impact the port would have on Kerala's ecology after it was up and running. He fiercely defended recommendations of the 2011 Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, headed by Madhav Gadgil. The report called for restrictions on mining, quarrying and polluting industries while proposing decentralised environmental governance and graded ecological sensitivity zones.

But Mr Sathesan put his finger on a throbbing vein in Kerala some time ago. The floods of 2018 and 2019, followed by repeated landslides in Wayanad and Idukki, have created a "green" constituency among people as well as politicians in Kerala like nowhere else. He addressed this group during his campaign, engaged with it scrupulously, and tried to address their concerns. Many conceded that he "used words no other politician had done". But the time has come to address the "man versus nature" conflict for real. The challenge lies in how he does this.

The more sensitive issue he addressed without equivocation was the issue of minority rights. The Left has charged him with communal politics. But he took away their Christian vote from them right under their nose by attending many church congregations (235) and displaying a depth of knowledge of the Bible that many Christians say they lack. Muslim groups, such an important element in Kerala politics, say they back him without reservation because of his assurances on secularism. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) was the first to support his name for chief minister publicly. For many in the Congress that is a problem.

To be sure, the new chief minister has complicated economic issues to handle, especially arising from the war in West Asia and the drop in oil prices. The circumstances, which are an important element in shoring up Kerala's economy. But he's firing on the Left Democratic Front (LDF) first. He has signalled he is pro-public investment and welfare: By offering women free passage on state government buses and increasing the wages of accredited social health activists (ASHA) and *anganwadi* workers, a sore point in politics in the state. The LDF didn't go beyond promises.

Next, the Tone Transplant. Notice how banks stopped talking like

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## Indira & Modi: 1973 and now

An oil shock, monsoon fears, rampant unemployment, and the seeming inevitability of inflation, are common to both eras. Indira Gandhi's self-destructive responses are instructive today

We might be conflicted over whose wisdom to use for history repeating itself: Karl Marx or Mark Twain. Marx said history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce. Twain argued that "history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." A thoughtful look at developments today would indicate a return to the historic crisis of 1973. You could choose the words of Marx or Twain.

I would prefer Twain to Marx because, if I'm risking it, I'd prefer to err on the side of optimism. Just that if the turn of events today rhymes with 1973, it brings not gentle, benign, romantic times. Its essence is prophetic lament, though we won't call it apocalyptic just yet. That's because India has grown far stronger in the past 53 years.

Let's lean back to 1973. Indira Gandhi swept the 1971 general election, netting 80 per cent of the seats with her allies, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Later that year, she defeated Pakistan and Bangladesh was born. The next year, she swept, even more decisively, elections in 15 of the 19 states and Union Territories (UTs) that went to the polls. The four where she missed — Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Goa — were tiny, the last two were still mere UTs. She was at the peak of her power and glory. She owned her party, Cabinet and Parliament. No Indian leader has enjoyed that kind of unchallenged sway. Narendra Modi is now close, and that's another parallel with 1973.

Things changed dramatically. First, India ran into consecutive monsoon failures in 1972-73. Consecutive monsoon failures are rare, and India had already endured 1965-66. These undermined the gains of the Green Revolution in the still predominantly agricultural economy. Then, in 1973, came the oil shock with the Yom Kippur War and the weaponisation of oil by the Islamic West Asian powers for the first time. Oil shortages and climbing prices compounded the distress of drought. And young people in India got angry, first in Gujarat.

Their Navinram Andolan (rejuvenation movement) wasn't politically-led. The economic distress — unemployment, rent and rising prices — affected everybody. In this case, the spark came from the rise in mess fees in college hostels. That morphed into an anti-corruption protest against then chief minister Chimanbhai Patel ("Chiman chor"). Soon student activists in Bihar, notably Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar formed their own Bihar Chhatra Sangharsh

Samiti and built an almighty protest mostly against price rise and corruption. They invited Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) to lead them.

Alarmed, Indira Gandhi responded in multiple ways. Chimanbhai Patel was removed. Abdul Ghafoor in Bihar hung on through 1974 but had to go in April 1975. In the summer of 1974, Gandhi also carried out the Pokhran-I nuclear test. She talked of dark conspiracy theories of foreign powers destabilising her government, the CIA in particular. Nothing changed the mood. Nothing would when unemployment had peaked and inflation touched 29 per cent (28.60) in 1974. In September that year, it was 34.68 per cent, and who could turn back a tsunami? The weapon of mass destruction she used was on her own people. The Emergency remains a permanent blot on our democracy and it didn't save her either. It was only a fair election and a humiliating defeat that became her *Ganga-snan* in 1977.

Check out the events over the past 18 months and look ahead. A new oil shock is upon us with the war in West Asia. The industrial scale pullout of foreign portfolio investors has resulted in a \$20 billion outflow. The foreign direct investment data is more or less net zero, as many big Indian companies are investing overseas. These put the rupee under pressure, ironically, against a weakening dollar.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) erred grievously in the final United Progressive Alliance years by making rupee "strength" a political issue. It now has the reverse of a cricketer batter's nervous 90s. It's afraid of the rupee reaching hundred to the dollar, just as batters are scared of missing a century by a run or two. Your currency will follow the logic of global markets and your economy's health. Currency nationalism is, and was always, illogical. At the least, you should have learnt this from the Chinese, who figured out early enough they benefitted from keeping their currency weak.

This oil shock mirrors 1973. Inevitably, the government will pass the price rise on to consumers, inflation will rise, unemployment will pinch more. Harking back to monsoon failures of 1973 is also the warning that this is an El Niño year, though we don't know how this'll play out. Agriculture is a much smaller element in our gross domestic product (GDP) now than in 1973 but nothing affects more people than a farm crisis. That's why, watch every body's mood, especially the young.

Some indications are clear. The NEET contro-

very reflects this anger. Our government talks of ease of doing business, but spare a moment for the brutal unease of competing for the few jobs, or job-worthy areas of education, that exist. Between multiple-level UPSC, NEETS, JEES, CLAT, the CATS and its many poorer cousins such as NDA, IMA, even Agniveer recruitment examinations, and CUET for college admission, the young Indian is caught helplessly in *chakranasya* of the coaching centre economy.

It's vacuum-cleaning the already stretched middle-class finances and driving the lower-middle-class deep into debt. And, at the end of it all, you find that some crooks have gamed the system, the exams are cancelled, and you must do it all over again.

Just how furious would these young Indians and their parents be? Especially when they find the government reaction bland — we'll lock up some crooks and hold the test again — and are resigned to this awful rinse-repeat cycle. Whether this anger is as intense as the fury over mess fees in Gujarat colleges or price rise in Bihar in 1973-74, is difficult to say. But, just the scale of the upsurge for what started out as a lark in reaction to an unguarded remark by the Chief Justice of India, the Coochack, Janta Party is telling us something. Within a week, millions of young Indians have flocked to its social media handles, spooking the government into getting its X handle blocked. On Instagram, however, at 21 million at the time this was written, it was already two-and-a-half times the BJP's following. Of course, the Prime Minister himself is far ahead of 10 million.

As we said earlier, this is a different, much stronger India. Inflation will definitely rise, growth will slow down and government finances will suffer. Yet, there'll still be some growth, and the Hormuz Strait will reopen at a point. The challenge for the Modi government is also lessened by the fact that today's Opposition and its key leaders lack the credibility of their predecessors in 1973. They had CVs already overladen with a record of public protests, parliamentary craft, leading trade unions and farmers' protests. Most importantly, they had been mostly untouched by power yet, barring the fleeting Samyukta Vidhaya Dal interregnum in the late 1960s. They were not exposed to the "they're all the same" charge.

It's these differences that persuade us to prefer Twain to Marx. These times rhyme with 1973. The factors we listed also give the Modi government space. But, space isn't immunity. If it doesn't use the space wisely, come clean and carry out real reform — including in higher education — the space will vaporise. That "I too am a cockroach" impulse isn't a mere canary in the coalmine. Instead, to confine our choice only to Indian birds, it's like the honk of a peacock in anger.

By special arrangement with ThePrint

## Why legacy brands are getting tattoos



**YES, BUT...**  
SANDEEP GOYAL

Air India's Maharaja has been to the gym — and that, too, not very long ago. The airline's new logo is sleek, geometric, and stripped of nostalgia. Campa Cola is back, but it looks like a craft soda from Brooklyn. Bajaj Auto shifted to a fast, sleek, and minimalist capital "B" after decades. Bank of Baroda, too, recently streamlined its

iconic "Baroda Sun" emblem. India's legacy brands are getting tattoos. Not literal ones, but the corporate equivalent: Bold new identities, edgy collaborations, and a deliberate break from their "uncle energy." This isn't vanity. It's survival.

For 30 years, legacy Indian brands had an unmissable visual Trust. If your father bought Bajaj, you bought Bajaj. If Amul buttered your childhood parantha, it buttered your kid's too. Distribution was king, and advertising meant *Chitrahaar* on Doordarshan.

That world is gone. A 22-year-old brand doesn't care that your brand existed in 1985. She discovers Campa Cola is back, but it looks like a craft soda from Brooklyn. Bajaj Auto shifted to a fast, sleek, and minimalist capital "B" after decades. Bank of Baroda, too, recently streamlined its

And history doesn't scan UP. So the old guard is rebranding, fast and loud.

The tattoos show up differently. First, the Visual Detox. Logos are getting decluttered. Mahindra's new "Twin Peaks" logo lost the oval and the gradients. Britannia flattened its curves. We still use fax machines. A flat, bold mark says "We understand dark mode." Gen Z won't read your annual report. They'll judge your app icon.

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banks. Kotak's "nauda" ad sound like a D2C brand. LIC's iMobile ad use rap, not Rabindranath. Tata Tea's "Jaagu Re" is now "Isbaar badlav ke lie." The voice moved from Doordarshan anchor to their meme-sharing cousin. Legacy brands realised that were getting attention on Meeta and YouTube, which you don't get for 3 seconds with a corporate voiceover.

Second, it with humour, attitude, and cultural fluidity. Hence CREP's Rahul Druval meltdown or Dream11's "Dimasge se Dhoni" remix. The tattoo here is linguistic.

The third, the Collab Sleeve. If you can't be cool, borrow cool. Remyton partnered with Gaurav Gupta to do culture. Parle-G showed up at Lakme Fashion Week. Amul's topical cartoons now drop as NFTs and anime-style reels. Mahindra sponsors the Pro Kabaddi League and

calls the Thar a "lifestyle." Collaborations are how 70-year-old brands get a backstage pass to culture. They signed to 25-year-olds. "We got your world." It's cheaper than building credibility from scratch, and faster than waiting for the old chief marketing officer to retire.

Last, the Product Pivot. A logo alone won't save you if the product feels stuck in 2002. So brands are launching sub-brands that feel nothing like the parent. Tata Consumer's '1868 by Tata Tea' looks like it belongs in a Bandung café. Hero's Vida is electric-and-app-first, nothing like old Splendor pragmatism. Godrej's Cinthol deos and air fresheners are Instagram-first, not supermarket-first. This is tattoo-as-reinvention.

The parent company stays trusted. The new kid gets to be experimental. If it fails, the mother brand is insulated. If it works, the equity transfers upward.

Why now? First, digital destroyed distribution moats. Brands realised that a better-looking, better-talking new comer will eat your lunch. Second, YouTube is cultural now. Venture Capitalists see founders about Instagram aesthetics in diligence calls. Third, India's consumption map flipped. The next 200 million customers are under 30 didn't grow up with Nirma jingles, they grew up with YouTube. Not every rebrand though works. A tattoo without a personality change is just ink. Some brands

sandblast their heritage and end up looking like a confused startup. Zee becoming Z is a bad example. There goes edgy they alienate the core customer who still pays the bills. The rule, therefore, is: Rebrand the wrapper only if you've significantly upgraded.

The smartest legacy brands aren't just changing logos. They're changing how they behave. Faster launches. Public beta testing. Talking to us edgy they alienate the core customer who still pays the bills. The rule, therefore, is: Rebrand the wrapper only if you've significantly upgraded. The smartest legacy brands aren't just changing logos. They're changing how they behave. Faster launches. Public beta testing. Talking to us edgy they alienate the core customer who still pays the bills. The rule, therefore, is: Rebrand the wrapper only if you've significantly upgraded. The smartest legacy brands aren't just changing logos. They're changing how they behave. Faster launches. Public beta testing. Talking to us edgy they alienate the core customer who still pays the bills. The rule, therefore, is: Rebrand the wrapper only if you've significantly upgraded.

The author is chairman of Redifusion

# The dissident who draws on lapses

Anonymous political satirist and cartoonist PenPencilDraw's turns headlines into a sharp visual commentary about our times

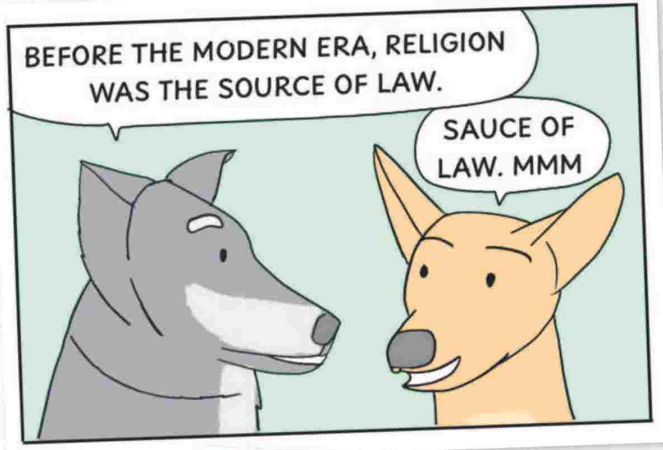
Pritya Ramani

Anonymous political satirist PenPencilDraw's photo gallery is overflowing with images of Bagha, a regal mixed breed man would swear has a Husky or an Alsatian ancestor and Goopy, a sly, exuberant sand-coloured indie, who live with co-author Aakar Patel. Their new collaboration, *Discovery of New India*, is a graphic novel whose title is inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru's seminal appraisal of this country published 80 years ago. Bagha and Goopy are the book's narrators and since anyone entering the Patel residence is warned not to make eye contact with Bagha, many images were required to sketch him. "His tail was the hardest to draw," says PenPencilDraw. "It looks different from every angle."

Drawing never came naturally to the lawyer-researcher, but experiments on a recently purchased iPad opened up a new world in 2020. "I used to draw terribly. Some of my classmates from school still remember how badly I drew a human cell in biology class," PenPencilDraw says. The newly-learned skill on YouTube, combined with legal expertise and academic rigour, turned out to be a *dal-chawal* grade pairing in what they describe as "outrageous times".

It was Day 12 of India's sudden COVID-19 shutdown, or as the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker called it, "the world's strictest lockdown," when the comic lover, who grew up on that urban Indian quartet of *Inrajial*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Tintin* and *Asterix* released their first cartoon. It was a simple black-and-white listicle titled, *How much notice PM Modi will give you*. The list ran from two weeks' notice for an appearance on TV show *Man Versus Wild* to 2 minutes for an alien invasion.

PenPencilDraw's pandemic inspirations included the Prime Minister and his key ministers; the judiciary; migrant workers abandoned by employers and the state; TV anchors spreading misinformation; and the herbal "cure" for covid-19 marketed by Baba Ramdev's Patanjali. The images were shared by prominent figures and referenced in publications such as *The Economist*.



The style was one that combined news and comedy. "I wanted something like John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* in comic form," they say. "Jokes can provide relief, mock powerful figures, or can just show solidarity with gallows humour." Six years after that first graphic, PenPencilDraw is a key member of the small band of cartoonists whose funny, visual critiques repeatedly hold the political establishment accountable. "The role of the satirist is to make people laugh about the tragedies around us," they say. These days the political cartoonist says they best enjoy the work that depicts social structures, cartoons that fall in the we-are-like-this category.

In the last decade, humour, both stand-up and by political cartoonists, remains one of the few spaces for dissent, often at great cost to creators. Months after PenPencilDraw's debut, the Supreme Court issued a criminal contempt notice to Rachita Taneja whose popular *Satirist Panels* stick figure cartoon strips had jabbed the judiciary. "PenPencilDraw's work consistently holds truth to power in a way that is sharp, witty, sometimes dark, and always accessible," says Taneja, whose contempt case is still pending. "They are unique in that they go beyond issues that are trending and address structural issues with moral

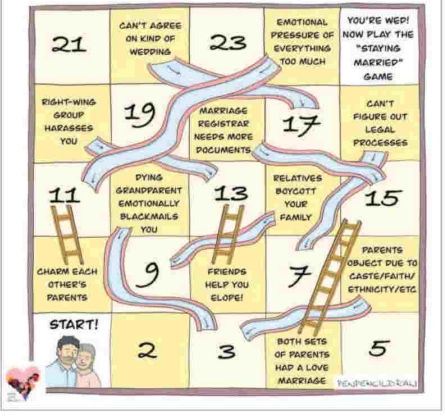


PenPencilDraw's work examines structural issues with moral clarity.

clarity." Taneja's critique of authoritarianism, *Touching Grass*, was published earlier this year. The community has faced police complaints, vandalism and notices to social media companies to block their work, but PenPencilDraw's Tintin-style pastel palettes have so far ducked this bullet. "It actually makes me wonder if I'm doing a good job," they say, jokingly. "What good am I if I don't even get a take-down notice?" The only legal notice they ever received was from India's biggest dairy maker about a cartoon where the cooperative's popular mascot had just learned about the artificial insemination of dairy cows.

In *Discovery of New India*, Patel uses the dogs and two children (one upper caste, one Dalit) to weave a narrative around PenPencilDraw's work, some of it new and some previously published. Their tales of New India reference how constitutional values have repeatedly been compromised, traipsing with Goopy-style energy from the hazardous lies of sewer cleaners to the conspiracy theory of "love jihad" and the menace of laws surrounding cow protection and preventive detention.

## THE INDIAN LOVE-MARRIAGE BOARD GAME



"Technically, I think that their understanding of the issues and the depth at which they are able to know the problems of law is unsurpassed," says Patel, who knew the cartoonist even before he began drawing. PenPencilDraw also illustrated Patel's 2022 *The Anarchist Cookbook: A Toolkit To Protest And Peaceful Resistance*. PenPencilDraw's ease around the legal system is showcased repeatedly in cartoons that draw attention to the misuse of complex laws such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the National Security Act, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the sedition law that was rebranded in 2023. The cartoonist applies their take on the nitty-gritty of labour rights, environmental policies and custodial violence with the smoothness of a moisturising lipstick. Stories from Kashmir, often blacked out by mainstream media, always find a home here.

Their deep research provides a clear guiding light through the fog of misinformation. Who else would read a research paper on a constitutional assessment of uniforms, then break down Karnataka's 2022 hijab row using DC Comics' Justice League superheroes? Every once in a while, their cartoons might shake up the progressives too. Like the one after Iran's January 2026 anti-government protest in which thousands were killed. The cartoon depicted Ali Khamenei covering up bodies with the line, "Any one opposing this is Trump supporter, okay?" Other responses included: "See no offence in your cartoon to call out western hegemony." PenPencilDraw says it gave them a sense of how polarised things are and the positions people expect liberal cartoonists to take. "These tend to be based not on any sense of universal human rights but on ideas of who are the good guys and who are the bad guys."

teetotaler friend you have, eyes alert and blazing, noticing the smallest details, their mind making connections as you speak. They are presently reading space opera *Saga and Foundation* by Isaac Asimov, a cyberpunk series about a journalist in the future. An early inspiration was the sharp political pen of Abu Abraham. "I thought 'wow, this must be such a cool job to have,'" they say. PenPencilDraw remembers encountering many of Abraham's most iconic images such as the one depicting President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed casually giving the go-ahead for Indira Gandhi's 1975 Emergency while soaking in a bathtub or Abraham's take on the fable of the blind men (depicted as politicians) and the elephant (wearing wire-rimmed glasses and meant to represent Gandhi's vision for India). A version of this fable also appears in *Discovery of New India* where PenPencilDraw replaces the elephant with a cow.

"A well-done cartoon is able to communicate information, analysis and a joke at the same time. It draws on certain shared knowledge,

between the artist and the reader. So assuming that person knows what you're talking about, you are kind of telling them your take on it, but it also has to be funny," they say. "If that comes together, I think that makes a really great political cartoon."

PenPencilDraw says they are privileged enough not to feel threatened in a country that persecutes many for speaking against the establishment. *Discovery of New India* is dedicated to Umar Khalid and other political prisoners who have spent years in jail without trial. "Political cartooning may become more coded if the state gets more authoritarian. Maybe, like in China, some day we will need a Winnie-the-Pooh to depict a President Xi Jinping."

Pritya Ramani is an independent journalist based in Bengaluru and the founder of *indiaiveproject*.

# An excess of frippery and indulgence

With its lavish design and whimsical appearance, 'Taste' feels like an overpriced plaything, not a deep dive into an idea

Somak Ghoshal

somak.ghoshal@partner.livemint.com

There were a Met Gala for books, *Taste* (conceptualised by journalist Lakshmi Chaudhary and published by Juggernaut) would have undoubtedly turned heads on the red carpet. Retailing at ₹15,000, this set of two hefty volumes comes in a peachy-pink cardboard shell. Once you've unbundled the cargo, the oversized books—one edited by Chaudhary, the other by designer Tania Singh Khosla—are embellished with bells and whistles serious enough to give competition to Cardi B's costume this year.

For not only is each volume of *Taste* heavily illustrated, the images also come in a variety of forms: embossed, gold-tinted, as cut-outs, poster folds, meant to be viewed through multi-coloured lenses, and full of quaint quirks that would gladden the heart of anyone invested in the book as a decorative object rather than a medium of intellectual engagement. *Taste* is not meant to live on shelves; it is meant to be displayed on a bespoke coffee table, preferably made by a Japanese master carpenter, considering the limited edition of 500 copies that has been released.

Indeed, exclusivity is the calling card for *Taste*. In her introduction, Chaudhary informs the reader that this anthology will

be an annual project. The idea behind it is to rebel against the algorithm-driven markers of taste that social media platforms keep pushing on to our feeds. *Taste* aims to serve as a counterpoint to the flattening homogeneity of our desires, creating a pocket of reprieve in a world perpetually distracted. "After a decades-long news career spent wading through wars, terrorism, pandemics and genocide, I ached to create something of beauty and meaning in a world greatly short on both," as Chaudhary puts it. "Gaza was a tipping point (too many dead babies). Worn by the daily fare of the dire, I wanted to throw a great feast for the mind and eye—to delight myself as much as you. This is an extremum of an entirely different kind."

Extreme, indeed, is this project, self-indulgent and flippant by turn. Designed by Kriti Monga, the ensemble of images and texts resembles a lovechild between Sabyasachi's maximalism and Good Earth bling. The design notes at the end of each piece explain, in painstaking detail, the thinking behind the choice of imagery, fonts, and so on, leaving nothing to the imagination. The multitude of typographical flourishes makes the reading experience choppy. (At times, one isn't able to tell whether a text block is meant to be a pull quote or belongs to the piece.) There are abrupt interludes where artists like Mithu Sen, Subodh Gupta and others offer quick takes on their idea of taste. These interventions feel frilly rather than substantive, offering broad strokes on artistic sensibilities that are too complex to summarise in a paragraph or two.

If the first volume has its moments of interest (though the choice of the writers,



Shah Rukh Khan wearing a cummerbund at the Met Gala 2025.

topics and its overall point doesn't get much clearer), the second one, titled *Time-Space*, has little going for itself other than visual excess. Khosla traces the circuitous, often violently imperialist, histories of four arbitrary objects—the pineapple, Madras checks, cummerbund and *bandhani*. The material could have been engaging in its exploration of the link between a checked-off past and a textured present. Unfortunately, the entries read like Wikipedia lite, with occasional raptures about their after-life in haute couture (Shah Rukh Khan's cummerbund at last year's Met Gala is hailed as one such exhibit). On the whole, the project seems to

present itself as an expensive plaything rather than a deep dive into a layered idea, though some of the essays and interviews do elevate its quality.

### NEW ENCOUNTERS

The first volume of *Taste* opens with an intriguing essay by writer and translator Srinath Perur, who traces the raging popularity of the German band Boney M in India, among other places, for nearly half a century. From Haliyal, a small town in Karnataka, in 1978 to the present day, when the band came to perform in Shillong in 2024, he traces a slice of music history that is also a commentary on the evolv-

ution of taste among listeners in India. Apart from offering his theory behind the undiminished fandom of the band, Perur draws attention to little-known details: the fact that songs like *Starry* and *Rivers of Babylon* have a much darker origin than most of us imagine. While analysing the adoption of Boney M's disco beats in Indian society, he also takes a fascinating detour into the dynamics of class that enabled access and formed the tastes of an entire generation of music aficionados.

Such moments of discovery expand the scope of the idea of taste. As critic and writer Parul Sehgal puts it in her interview with Kannada writer Vivek Shanbhag, "(Taste) can be the ability to arrange oneself to be present for an encounter, to grapple with the unknown." Her definition becomes an entry point for writer Aatish Taseer, who, in his essay, reflects on the muzak-like sameness adopted by the monied classes in contemporary India when it comes to interior design. As luxury condos and penthouses mushroom in Indian metros, Taseer notes a growing preference for a five-star hotel-style decor, where curated floral arrangements, decorative art, and ambient lighting replace personal idiosyncrasies and unique touches that once lent "character" to a space. Instead of the allure of the unknown, the privileged Indian now seeks comfort in the universal. The flat uniformity of their living rooms could belong to anywhere—Dubai or New York. Nobel laureate economist Abhijit Banerjee, also a food connoisseur, reflects on adding a personal touch in culinary innovations in his conversation with four eminent chefs and restaurateurs—Manu Chandra, Garima Arora, Prateek Sadhu

and Thomas Zacharias. While there are illuminating moments in this exchange, we don't really learn much that we haven't heard before.

The other interview in the anthology, between Shanbhag and Sehgal, is edgier, with the former bringing seriousness and candour to the conversation to explore questions of multilinguality, translation and leadership. Shanbhag's take on Jhumpa Lahiri's work in English versus her recent books in Italian is sharp, as are his views on the delicate art of translation. There is a reassuring gravitas in the slow deliberation of this dialogue, where the quest for quality takes precedence over quantity.

The most enjoyable piece, in terms of design as well as text, is Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's sojourn across Europe, as she plants herself among a group of Indian tourists on a guided tour of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* country. With just the right touch of cynicism and pathos, the essay becomes much more than a travelogue—a bitersweet analysis of what it means to be "a citizen of the world." Living in Berlin for several years, fluent in German but still unsure of her place in the social milieu of Europe, Madhavan finds herself drawn to, as well as alienated from, her compatriots. As the rambunctious tourists enjoy *dal* and rice in the land of schnitzels and sauerkraut, take selfies in skimpy clothes in freezing cold and, at the end of the tour, are left underwhelmed, the writer comes away with more empathies than she had perhaps bargained for. The piece becomes a sobering example of a sentiment expressed by Shanbhag in the book: "Our greatest challenge today is the lack of awareness of our own taste."

# Starbucks, Try Some Artisanal Starbright

### Brew business heft with experiential insights

Coffee shops have evolved into a binary business landscape, with hyperscale models at one end and standalone artisanal cafés at the other. Starbucks got its brew right for a while by providing a 'global' standard, both in its cups and outlets. It then went off track with its business strategy. Departure of CEO Laxman Narasimhan after less than 2 yrs was a stain left on the tabernacle. Since mid-2024, Starbucks is trying to return to its core values by simplifying its menu and focusing on delivery times. But that doesn't fundamentally deviate from its cookie-cutter format. What's needed is a hot spot of individualism, something top-notch independent coffee houses have in the beanful. This segment prioritises experiential consumption over on-the-go. Tables spaced at comfortable distances, airy, leafy spaces that are more European cafés than baristas. Even better if those tables are set overlooking an orchard rather than inside a mall.

A business case can be made for branded coffee chains to venture into the artisanal café market, with brands leveraging their strong supply chain in linkages across locations. Starbucks built its business by unanchoring prices and strengthening customer connections. Experience offered by artisanal cafés extends this approach to pricing and customer loyalty. Admittedly, such a model will grow slowly. But it's viable, as seen in hotel chains optimising revenue through differentiation, often across properties they manage. Starbucks has the added advantage of strong brand recall for both product and service.

Coffee houses will retain their status as the 'third place' between home and office, and the experience won't be limited to a template. The range of activity around sharing coffee is wide, and the ambience must cater to this diversity. Since drinking coffee is a global preoccupation, there is scope for cultural divergence. Service models should adapt accordingly. Which is best achieved by combining global business strength with local insight, hyper-niche big biz chops with a wafting ambience.



Starbucks has the added advantage of strong brand recall for both product and service.

## LETTER FROM WASHINGTON The secretary of state comes at a tricky time in India-US ties

# TRUMP LIES THE RUBIO



Seema Sirohi

Marco Rubio carries a heavy burden in his first visit to India. Frothy social media messages aside, Rubio's task is hard — how to placate his counterparts, pacify doubters, and pretend that events of the last year-and-a-half are nothing but a blip in the relationship.

Not easy. But as Trump's most adept cabinet member who can deploy diplomacy when needed, and spew fire when necessary, the secretary of state and national security adviser may be the person most needed for the moment. To be sure, he will face a tough jury. But Rubio may have questions of his own about the recent BRICS meeting in India. Trump thinks the group is inimical to US interests.

The May 23-25 visit includes stops in Kolkata, Agra and Jaipur, besides Delhi, with festivities to mark America's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Rubio's Golden Triangle itinerary is interesting, and a Kolkata stop even more so.

Rubio will get Delhi's Piv to Pakistan and the US's pivot to Pakistan and how it raises the risk of another Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack

since the West Bengal capital hosts the US' second-oldest diplomatic mission in the world. The consulate is situated on Ho Chi Minh Street, the colonial-era Harrison Street that the United Front Bengal government retained in



Mr Secretary, how deep are your pockets?

1989 during the height of the Vietnam War now that BJP runs the state, will the Americans ask that this old 'wrong' committed by the state government be undone?

The official agenda includes talks on energy trade and defence cooperation with an underlying message to 'Buy (more) American' oil, weapons and small nuclear reactors. A Quad foreign ministers' meeting is planned on the last day with Australia and Japan in attendance.

Quasi aside, the need to rearticulate the US-India bilateral relationship from political stupor is more urgent. Systems in Norway and New Zealand also include co-payment models, particularly in primary care.

on a new ORF survey of young Indians shows support for the US is declining. It dropped from 68% in 2024 to 59% in 2025. At least 71% of respondents were concerned about unpredictability of the US, and saw Russia and Japan becoming leading partners in the next 10 yrs.

If this doesn't alarm the State Department, nothing will. But, then, US Diplomats have never truly appreciated the pro-America tilt of most 'regular' Indians. It is not merely a feeling but a nurtured. They would rather spend energy trying to charm the fuming crowds in Pakistan who attack the US embassy and consulates. Almost always at the behest of the Pakistan Army.

India has no choice but to deal with the evolving dynamics, especially one between the US and China. Rubio will no doubt share his thoughts on the recent US-China summit and why the great game of competition got lost in selling soybeans and Boeing to Xi.

The US-India bilateral trade agreement is still not signed. Will Gautham Adani's move to invest up to \$30 bn in the US ease the way? Or will US threats of high tariffs still hang over the stalled deal? Or will US threats of high tariffs continue to hang over the stalled deal? The initial terms/rates agreed upon are no longer valid since the US Supreme Court invalidated the tariff. Trump imposed the emergency power of field marshals. Sergio G's post announcing Rubio's visit garnered many angry comments against H-1Bs, call centre scammer and illegal Indian immigrants. Houston, we have a problem.

## THE SPEAKING TREE

### Sacred Gesture

ULLHAS PATEY  
In depths of spiritual awakening, we encounter a profound distinction. It is not merely a feeling but a sacred gesture. The mindfulness often arises as a spontaneous ripple. Beautiful and necessary, yet, it remains tethered to circumstances. Blooming when life flows favourably and fading when shadows lengthen.

Gratitude, however, transcends this. It is not merely a feeling but a consecrated way of being. It is the soul's quiet recognition that every breath, every challenge, every ordinary miracle flows from the Divine Source. Gratitude sees life itself as unearned grace. It cultivates an inner sanctuary of appreciation that endures beyond the ebb and flow of life's vicissitudes.

This deeper orientation opens doors to transformation. In contemplative practices, gratitude dissolves illusion of separation, revealing the web of divine interdependence that sustains us. It counters the ego's whisper of entitlement, softening the heart towards compassion and contentment. Even in trials, it whispers that hidden blessings. Cultivating gratitude invites us to live as vessels of grace. It shifts our gaze from lack to the ever-present abundance of Spirit. In this sacred posture, we no longer grasp for life; we receive it fully, offering our whole being in return. The soul expands, radiating quiet joy that touches all it encounters. Gratitude is not a momentary thank-thanks into the eternal embrace of gratefulness.

# Take Our Crafts Out Of the Gov Cottage

India has always had a superb array of artisanal products. But its marketplace remains woefully stuck in a time warp and outside the realm of value chains. This has been due to the lingering notion that 'handicrafts' are less a product of individual talent and more about being part of some grand national identity. This show of 'socialistic largesse' does no favour to either craftspersons, or consumers who should have this market flourish.

A new Institute for Human Development-Crafts Council of India study, 'Economics of Indian Craft', drives this truth home. Covering handicraft enterprises across Assam, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, UP and West Bengal, it found that artisans earned, on average, barely ₹7,000 a month — well below minimum-wage benchmarks. Equally revealing is the finding that state-backed melas and exhibitions have only a marginal impact on sales and incomes. Most artisans continue to depend on contractors, intermediaries and local markets.

Indian crafts need to break out of its 'cottage industry' mindset and state-protected hovel-bubble. What artisans, like artists, need is not perpetual state protection but access — to markets, capital, technology and IP. The state should move away from being a PSU promoter of crafts manning emporiums and other white elephants, and, instead, confine itself to being a facilitator of market linkages and help through policy measures. Marketing and selling these creations should be the realm of the private sector, with the crafts person as the main character in this business sector. For a major economy still without a global brand to speak of, empowering artisans is not merely about preserving heritage but about unlocking economic value. And bringing real wealth to creators of astonishing art.



Indian crafts need to break out of its 'cottage industry' mindset and state-protected hovel-bubble.

# How Sure Are Folks to Insure?



Yashish Dahiya

Over 10 yrs, only about 5% of individuals covered under retail health insurance make one or more claims. Yet, this small group accounts for nearly 90% of all hospitalisation costs, with claims often exceeding 10x premiums they have paid. For this system to function, the remaining 95% must continue paying premiums year after year, typically without making a claim.

Hospitals, however, largely interact only with the 5%. The real challenge lies in ensuring that the 95% continue to participate consistently, which is difficult. In many markets, this is addressed through mandatory participation or employer-provided group coverage. Co-payments, deductibles and tiered hospital networks are not customer favourites in India. Yet, they are essential for long-term sustainability.

Even high-income countries with universal healthcare incorporate such mechanisms to manage costs and ensure system stability. In the Netherlands, individuals are subject to mandatory insurance, while Switzerland requires residents to choose deductibles. Co-payments are even more widespread.

► In France, patients bear around 20% of treatment costs, while Japan standardises co-payments at about 30% for most services. ► Systems in Norway and New Zealand also include co-payment models, particularly in primary care. ► Singapore has mandated minimum deductibles and co-payments in private plans to prevent 'first-dollar' coverage and ensure some level of cost-sharing.

When customers share a portion of costs, it discourages unnecessary utilisation and brings discipline into the system, which, in turn, helps keep premiums lower. India's regulator keeps premiums lower. India's regulator keeps premiums lower. India's regulator keeps premiums lower.

Three principles are paramount for building consumer trust in India: ► Honouring claims: An insurer has the right to select its customers and conduct thorough due diligence before issuing a policy. It can impose waiting periods, deductibles, co-pays, exclusions and even a moratorium period for observation. But once this period is over, after 23 yrs, a claim must be honoured, unless there is fraud. IRDAI has taken progressive measures, reinforcing the importance of claim certainty. The focus, therefore, must shift to strict underwriting at the point of sale, not at the point of claim. If insurers are rigorous in selecting risks upfront, it builds confidence in the system.

Hospitals must be carefully empowered. Once selected, their decisions should not be questioned at the point of claim. Medical protocols can be agreed upon between insurers and hospitals in advance, so that customers do not face uncertainty. Once a policy is issued and the moratorium period is over, there should be no ambiguity at the time of claim. ► Stopping mis-selling: It is best to focus on material mis-selling, which is largely concentrated in the savings segment of the life insurance industry. Three steps can reduce mis-selling and plainly disclosed. ► Surrogate benefits must be clearly defined. Customer acknowledgment. Coverage changes must be understood. This will build trust. Insurers must have the financial strength to honour their commitment.

## Barrow, Not Steal

A trader keeps crossing the border with a wheelbarrow full of sand. Customs officers search it every time, convinced he is smuggling something.

Years later, one day, he returns and meets the trader. He asks him, 'Come on, now, tell me. What were you smuggling all those years?' The trader smiles, 'Wheelbarrows.'

The heating element is made in Germany, the wiring in Japan, the plastic in China and the assembly in India. It finally arrives 6 miles later. The man plugs it in, and it explodes. The warranty department says, 'Sorry, the explosion was manufactured in the US. Please contact them directly.' That's globalisation — you get burnt, but at least it's internationally coordinated.

The US and China sit down to negotiate. The US says, 'We'll lower tariffs if you buy more soybeans.' China replies, 'We'll buy soybeans if you stop selling us TikTok bans.'

The US says, 'Deal.' China, after a moment, says, 'Hang on. What's a TikTok ban worth in soybeans?' The negotiators spend 12 hrs calculating exchange rates and leave with only indignation.

## Chat Room

### Stray Order on Stray Dogs

Appos the news report, 'SC Recalls its Order on Stray Dogs', it's unfortunate that the Supreme Court has allowed euthanasia of 'rabid, dangerous dogs' (read: stray dogs) as humane. How the authorities are going to distinguish between healthy and rabid and dangerous dogs to kill them by euthanasia is a million-dollar question. (Srinivas Peruru)

## THINK ABOUT IT

What's common to one of the world's best footballing clubs and not so best?

# Channelling 22 Yrs of Despair, Humiliation

Whether in life, business or football, despair can be an operating system. Arsenal, for 22 yrs, was forever the bridesmaid, never the bride, the proverbial bouquet falling in the hands of the two Manchester, Liverpool, Chelsea... Gunners became consensuses of exquisite humiliation, slipping despair like ash on the remarking on 'late-season collapse' and 'goal difference heartbreak'. And then, this Wednesday, the Premier League crown they last wore in 2004 was theirs. Memorable, in the less stratigraphic arena of Indian Super League, East Bengal FC also remembered 2004 well — the last time the Kolkata club won any national title. Worse than 'forever-second' Arsenal, EB was on speed dial to ignominy, their fans bearing the battering of arch-rivals Mohun Bagan strutting about and maintaining their ascendancy over the last 22 yrs. East Bengal's despair was full-on existential. They were the ghost at every Durga Puja feast, the punchline in every Bengali soirée. And then, on Thursday, they became champions of India again. So, what do these two very disparate clubs prove? That despair is not a dead end, and humiliation — not Tottenham — can be the ultimate spur if one reboots, trains, reinvents. Both iconic clubs have shown that what played, properly channelled, can be transmuted to glory. Well played and praise be upon you, Gunners and Bangal Brigade.

# Enter the Dragon, But on Iptoes



Puneet Shah & Abhinav Gupta

With Press Note 2 (PN2) of 2026, India has rewritten rules of the game for capital flowing from China and other 'land bordering' nations. The amendment reframes the 2020-era national security cordon from a blanket quarantine to a calibrated filter that distinguishes control from mere capital. It is a pivotal move in India's long experiment with 'securocrisis', embedding geopolitical risk into investment policy without choking growth. The starting point remains PN2 of 2020, issued at the height of the pandemic and escalating border tensions with China. That measure shifted all investments from entities in, or beneficial owners from, countries sharing a land border with India from the automatic route to the government approval route, regardless of sector, stake or size. It also extended the approval net to indirect and beneficial ownership.

After 2020 restrictions and accompanying security clearances, investments from both places dwindled to around 0.34% of total FDI between April 2020 and March 2024. The recent PN2 amendment, however, extends the FDI policy, but does not repeal the core security architecture of PN3.

An entity or citizen from a land-border country, or an investment where the 'beneficial owner' is from such a country, still falls under the government approval route. The safeguard requiring prior approval for any transfer resulting in such beneficial ownership has also been retained. The actual liberalisation lies in the revised definition of 'beneficial owner' and procedural clarity.

PN2 clarifies when beneficial ownership will be construed to vest in a land-border country, namely where citizens or entities from such countries cross PMLA thresholds of 10%, exercise control, or hold ultimate effective control over either the investor or the Indian investee. The real innovation of PN2 is not the 10% threshold but the decision to outsource the most contested concept in FDI regulations, viz. beneficial ownership, to an anti-money laundering statute. PMLA tests are detailed and multifactorial. They examine shareholding, control rights and ultimate effective control. The new approach corrects the earlier regulatory overreach, but it also assumes that government will possess the analytical capacity to pierce complex offshore fund structures quickly enough to plume circumvention. That's a tall order when applications in sensitive sectors are expected to be processed within 60 days. The strategic logic behind PN2 is much more economic as geopolitical. India's trade deficit with China crossed \$100 bn between April 2025 and March 2026, touching about \$12 bn, even as Chinese-origin FDI into India remained negligible. From electronic compo-

nents and telecom equipment to machinery and APIs, India remains structurally dependent on Chinese goods. So, the 2020 FDI policy created a paradox: India continued to import heavily from China while constraining Chinese capital that could potentially help localise manufacturing and move India higher up the global technology value chain. By reopening the door selectively, the new framework attempts to rebalance the structure.

Industry participants suggest that easing Chinese FDI restrictions could benefit consumer electronics, technology startups, power equipment and infrastructure and emerging sectors like EVs and solar components by enabling partnerships for technology access and capacity building. Manufacturing, technology and infrastructure are similarly expected to benefit, as non-controlling stakes may now proceed without bespoke security vetting, subject to ordinary sectoral rules. PN2 seemingly is a step towards China that a signalling device to global capital, and another step towards India's ambition of increasing Chinese FDI inflows to \$100 bn. By restoring the automatic route for clearly non-controlling stakes, India is signalling to international investors that neighbour-linked capital will now be assessed through a risk-based lens rather than a blanket presumption of hostility, underlining that this is not a return to the pre-2020 status quo.

Shah is partner, and Gupta is principal associate, ResPFin Legal



### Editor's TAKE

## Xi-Putin meet: A new axis in the making?

Days after hosting Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin, reinforcing China's emergence as a global power

There is a certain theatre to summitry, and Beijing staged it masterfully. First Donald Trump arrived, then Vladimir Putin - each travelling thousands of miles to sit across from Xi Jinping in Beijing, now at the centre of geopolitics. The optics were unmistakable: China is now the world's indispensable interlocutor, and Xi its undisputed convenor-in-chief.

The agenda of the Xi-Putin summit, held on Wednesday, was broad in scope and strategic in intent. The two leaders signed documents spanning trade, technology, scientific research and intellectual property, while extending their foundational treaty of "good neighbourliness and friendly cooperation". First inked a quarter of a century ago. They spoke warmly of cooperation in artificial intelligence and even the conservation of rare tigers and pandas. But beneath the ceremonial warmth lay statements that matters greatly for the rest of the world.

"The global agenda of peace and development is facing new risks and challenges, with the danger of fragmentation of the international community," the Xi-Putin joint declaration stated in clear terms. The centrepiece of their joint statement was a pointed condemnation of United States. Both leaders warned of a world drifting back towards the "law of the jungle" - a deliberate rebuke of American foreign policy, directed squarely at the Trump administration's unilateralism, its pursuit of a "golden dome" missile defence system, and its decision to allow a nuclear arms treaty to lapse in February. Whatever the diplomatic niceties, this amounted to a declaration of an alternative world order - one centred on Beijing.

Yet the summit also revealed limits. Russia and China failed to finalise a long-anticipated gas pipeline agreement that would have doubled Moscow's fossil fuel exports eastward. Pricing disagreements reportedly blocked a deal - a reminder that even the warmest partnerships have hard commercial edges. Currently, China sits at the forefront of global geopolitics. It can pick and choose partners and dictate the terms of engagement. Putin needs China far more than China needs Russia, and Beijing knows how to use that leverage quietly. However, it is unmistakable that the two powers are drawing closer, and the synergy is evident.

First, the Russia-China axis has deepened beyond rhetoric: from military exercises to - according to European intelligence agencies - covert training of Russian soldiers, Beijing's "official neutrality" on Ukraine is increasingly difficult to sustain as credible. Second, Xi's carefully choreographed reception of both Trump and Putin in the same week underlines China's rare position as a power that neither United States nor Russia can afford to alienate. Third, and perhaps most consequentially, the joint warning against American "unilateral bullying" signals that Beijing and Moscow intend to shape the architecture of whatever post-American international order may be emerging together.

Whether the world should find that prospect stabilising or alarming is, perhaps, the defining geopolitical question of our era.

## The slow death of peacekeeping

The peacekeeping system the world built to prevent its worst instincts from running unchecked is dying - not in a single dramatic moment, but through the slow bleed of empty budgets, absent troops and political indifference



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

The international system built to keep the world's most fragile regions from descending into chaos is quietly falling apart. Not through dramatic collapse, but through slow, steady exhaustion - shrinking budgets, fewer troops, weakened mandates and fading political will. A forthcoming report from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) lays bare the scale of this retreat: personnel deployed to peace operations worldwide have fallen to just 78,633, the lowest figure in at least 25 years and barely half the number seen in 2016.

This is no temporary setback or administrative hiccup. It is evidence of a structural contraction in the willingness of states to honour their collective security commitments - a signal that the multilateral ideals underpinning modern peacekeeping are losing their grip on the real world.

**From optimism to exhaustion**  
Peacekeeping operations once embodied the defining optimism of the post-Cold War era. The belief that nations could set aside their rivalries and cooperate through international institutions to contain conflict and protect civilians seemed, for a time, genuinely achievable. That belief is now badly depleted. What survives is the shell of a once-ambitious system - kept alive more by institutional inertia than by any coherent strategic vision.

The United Nations, at the centre of this system, is operating under severe financial and political strain. SIPRI points to persistent liquidity shortfalls driven by delayed or unpaid contributions from major member states. A funding gap approaching two billion dollars within a single peacekeeping cycle is not merely an accounting problem - it is a political statement. It signals that several influential powers no longer regard collective security as an urgent shared responsibility.

International leaders continue to invoke the language of solidarity and multilateralism at global forums. But the practical foundations that once gave those words meaning are weakening. The gap between rhetoric and operational reality has become impossible to ignore.

**A council that can no longer agree**  
Much of this paralysis flows from the United Nations Security Council, originally designed as the stabilising core of the post-war inter-



purpose and accountability.

### A model built for a different world

The conceptual crisis runs as deep as the operational one. Modern peacekeeping was built on assumptions that no longer reliably hold - that external forces could stabilise conflicts where all parties retained some interest in restraint, and that armed groups would respect international presence even without coercive backing. In today's most volatile conflict zones, those assumptions are routinely confounded. Armed actors indifferent to international norms are unlikely to be deterred by lightly equipped missions operating under restrictive mandates.

Meanwhile, those mandates have grown ever more ambitious - encompassing civilian protection, governance support, human rights monitoring and counterterrorism assistance - while the political backing required to deliver on such expansive responsibilities has steadily eroded. Missions are asked to stabilise increasingly complex crises without adequate resources, military capability or diplomatic consensus. The result is peacekeeping that risks becoming little more than a symbolic presence.

### The erosion of a shared belief

Perhaps the most profound shift is normative. The idea that peacekeeping represents a shared moral and political obligation of the international community is losing force. States increasingly treat participation as optional, shaped by domestic political calculations rather than enduring international duty. What is disappearing is not just funding or troops, but the underlying belief that nations - despite their rivalries - have a collective responsibility to preserve a minimum standard of human security.

Kofi Annan, in one of his final interviews before his death in 2018, described himself as a "stubborn optimist" and insisted that international cooperation remained indispensable. He argued that there could be no security without development, no development without security, and neither without human rights. That vision now feels distant. The institutions he represented still survive rhetorically, but much of their operational substance has been hollowed out.

What is ending is not peacekeeping itself, but the coherence of the global system that once gave it legitimacy and shared purpose. In its place is emerging something more fragmented and uneven - a landscape of interventions that may contain individual crises, but no longer reflect any unified vision of international responsibility. The decline of peacekeeping, in this sense, is also the decline of a broader idea: that the world, at its best, can still act together.

KOFI ANNAN, IN ONE OF HIS FINAL INTERVIEWS BEFORE HIS DEATH IN 2018, DESCRIBED HIMSELF AS A "STUBBORN OPTIMIST" AND INSISTED THAT INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION REMAINED INDISPENSABLE. HE ARGUED THAT THERE COULD BE NO SECURITY WITHOUT DEVELOPMENT, NO DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT SECURITY, AND NEITHER WITHOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

The author is a columnist based in Colombo  
@dailypioneer  
@TheDailyPioneer  
The Pioneer



A vendor arranges earthen pots filled with taps for sale amid intense heatwave conditions during the summer season. PHOTO: PFI

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## Everyone wants change, but who should change first?



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

### 2ND OPINION

Across the globe, almost every leader today articulates the need to base the educational system, politics, trade and commerce, and all other professions on moral and human values. But when these leaders are themselves faced with real-life situations, they discover that there are dimensions galore, even among the elite, about the right type of values and also about who should observe which values. For example, heads of many countries that are members of the United Nations or its Security Council stress the withdrawal of one powerful country's troops from a less powerful country, for it is an act of forcible occupation of another member state's territory and is against the accepted principles of international amity, cooperation, coexistence and non-covetousness. They therefore call upon powerful nations to observe moral norms and maintain the status quo ante. But those nations argue vehemently that the

United Nations Security Council and its member nations do not themselves practise the values of justice and fairness in their treatment of all countries because, if they did, they would earlier have declared military blockades and economic sanctions against many such powerful nations that have repeatedly occupied the territory of another member state illegally. Likewise, in India, those opposing reservations in many sectors argue that merit should be given the highest value and that selections and promotions should be based on merit, for neglecting merit means placing a premium on mediocrity and turning back the wheels of progress at a time when other nations are advancing rapidly. Denying opportunities to those who deserve them on merit, they say, is an injustice to those who work hard to achieve excellence and higher standards.

On the other hand, those in favour of reservations argue that denying better opportunities to backward classes and castes is an even greater injustice. Others maintain that promoting employment prospects on the basis of caste is a negative and indirect way of encouraging casteism and of converting the present meritorious sections of society into the backward classes of tomorrow.

In a similar way, those driven by the zeal to build a place of worship at a disputed site argue that the minority should respect the sentiments of the majority and cooperate in correcting a historical wrong committed by invaders who

dismantled a religious structure out of fanaticism. Those opposed to this argue that the majority community should be more liberal and magnanimous and should not revive bitter conflicts that may inflame religious tensions, fear and instability.

In short, there is constant dispute over who is failing to observe which values, and yet everyone insists that grave moral degeneration has taken place. Each person raises an accusing finger at another without realising that the remaining fingers point back at themselves.

The real remedy for transforming society and grounding it in cherished values lies in self-transformation, rather than in fulfilling the responsibility of practising values in one's own life first.

Transformation, as we all know and experience ourselves, is a natural process of life filled with many ups and downs. It is a journey of self-discovery, with moments of triumph and moments of despair. A single nurtured seed grows into a fruitful tree. Imagine the world if every individual transformed positively from within! It would undoubtedly become a far better place in which to live. Therefore, never think that only if others change will you change, because if you change, those around you will inevitably change too. The true process is about changing "I", not "them".

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

### INDIA-ITALY PARTNERSHIP SIGNALS EUROPE STRATEGY SHIFT

This refers to the editorial "India Expands its European Footprint" (May 22). The elevation of Italy-Italy relations to a special strategic partnership marks an important diplomatic development, though its long-term significance will depend more on implementation than symbolism. Among the many outcomes of the engagement, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) remains the most consequential. Italy's location as a Mediterranean gateway gives it strategic importance that goes beyond diplomacy. If IMEC is to emerge as a credible alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, it requires committed partners with strong infrastructure and logistical capabilities, and Italy is well positioned in that regard.

The bilateral trade target of 120 billion by 2029 is realistic, but achieving it will require Indian industry to move beyond conventional exports and deepen cooperation in defence manufacturing, green technology and advanced industrial sectors. The opportunity is substantial, but preparedness and coordination within Indian industry will be equally important. Even the cultural references to Rome and Vesuvius carry diplomatic significance. Shared civilisational narratives help project India as more than a transactional partner and contribute towards building deeper political goodwill across Europe. India's European outreach is finally acquiring strategic coherence and deserves sustained follow-through.

A MYLSAMI | COIMBATORE

### Empower girls beyond education

The recent deaths of two young brides have once again exposed the dark reality of dowry and domestic abuse in our society. While investigations are still underway, these tragedies raise painful questions. Why do parents leave their daughters in abusive households despite knowing about the violence and harassment they face? Why do families continue to fulfil dowry demands, often beyond their financial capacity, by taking heavy loans and making lifelong sacrifices?

At a time when dowry-related deaths continue to rise, parents must focus not only on educating daughters but also on making them emotionally strong, financially independent and fearless enough to speak against injustice. Girls should be taught that marriage is not a licence for abuse and that they have every right to walk away from toxic environments. Equally important is changing society's mindset. Simpler marriages, strict rejection of dowry and an end to patriarchal thinking are essential. Daughters must know that their parental home will always remain their safe space. Only then can society prevent more women from becoming victims in the name of marriage.

ABHILASHA GUPTA | MOHALI

### Ebola vigilance must continue

Amidst "Ebola scare delays India-Africa summit" (The Pioneer, May 23), the recent Ebola outbreak has understandably triggered concern worldwide. The World Health Organization has declared it a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" (PHEIC), urging countries to strengthen surveillance and precautionary measures. Though the outbreak has not yet reached epidemic proportions globally, the increasing number of suspected cases and deaths has placed health authorities on high alert.

The present outbreak is linked to the Bundibugyo virus (BDBV), for which no approved vaccine currently exists. Since treatment remains mainly supportive and symptomatic, anxiety in affected African nations has intensified. The situation is further complicated because many infections are being reported from conflict-hit regions, making it difficult for authorities to identify and isolate infected individuals.

Ebola symptoms include fever, headache, muscle pain, vomiting and bleeding. India has strengthened screening measures, while public awareness and timely reporting remain essential to contain the disease.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

### Teaching regains its purpose

The growing shortage of quality teachers reflects a deeper structural crisis within India's education system. In many States, corruption and irregularities in teacher recruitment have repeatedly derailed public trust. When appointments are influenced by money, political patronage or personal networks rather than merit, classrooms inevitably suffer. Increasingly, teaching is pursued not as a vocation of learning and public service, but as a pathway to secure government employment with stable salaries and long-term benefits.

An unhealthy hierarchy has also developed within the profession. Many private school teachers aspire to become guest teachers in government schools, while guest teachers spend years waiting for permanent appointments. This cycle creates frustration, insecurity and careerism instead of encouraging intellectual commitment and educational excellence. The consequences are visible in declining classroom engagement, growing dependence on coaching centres and widening educational inequality.

A nation cannot nurture scientific temper or social harmony when its educators themselves operate within unstable and compromised institutional structures.

HARSH PAWARIA | ROHTAK

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## When AI speaks in tribal languages: The promise of inclusive development

## An energy crisis in disguise

As technology bridges distances, as science delivers healing, as AI speaks in the languages of the forests and the hills, and as governance reaches the last family in the farthest village, we move closer each day to India that is not merely developed in measure, but complete in its humanity



**RANJANA CHOPRA**

In the forests, hills, and remote habitations that stretch across our country, a quiet yet consequential transformation is underway. Tribal communities, long awaiting their rightful place at the centre of India's development story, are today emerging as active architects of the nation's progress. This is the spirit that underlies Janjatiya Garima Utsav: a national celebration of a journey towards Viksit Bharat, where progress is not a privilege of geography or circumstance, but a right belonging equally to every citizen.

### The scale of the ambition

To appreciate why technology has become indispensable to tribal development, one must first appreciate the magnitude of challenge. Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN), Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DAJGUA), the National Sickle Cell Anaemia Elimination Mission, and related initiatives cover more than 63,000 villages across 549 districts and 2.91 billion in 35 States and Union Territories, benefiting more than 3.5 crore tribal citizens. With special focus on Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), these efforts aim to ensure saturation coverage of essential services such as housing, drinking water, sanitation, education, healthcare, connectivity, and livelihoods. Reaching every family across such diverse and expansive terrain demands system that are data-driven, connected, and responsive and that is precisely what we are building.

Janjatiya Garima Utsav this year is organised around four thematic weeks, that together reflect the full arc of tribal development. The opening theme, "Technology as a Development Driver," captures how digital systems, science, and innovation are helping extend governance and opportunity to some of India's remotest communities. At the heart of this vision lies a simple principle: development must reach the last mile while remaining deeply respectful of tribal languages, cultures, heritage, and traditional knowledge systems.

### Technology in service of tribal dignity

The most vivid illustration of what technology can accomplish when directed with purpose is BIRSA 101 — India's first indigenous CRISPR-based gene therapy for sickle cell disease. The cell disease has long posed a significant health challenge for tribal populations, and India is now answering that challenge with advance science rooted in equity and accessibility. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has extended financial assistance to support research, clinical trial infrastructure, and technology transfer in collaboration with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), CSIR-Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology (IGIB), and Serum Institute of India Ltd. A recent seminar at CSIR-IGIB brought together scientists, policymakers and Sickle cell warriors, reflecting both the scientific progress and the human urgency behind the efforts.

The shared goal is clear: to develop an affordable, one-time curative treatment that can reach every tribal family in need. BIRSA 101 is not merely a medical milestone. It is a declaration that India's most advanced science will serve its most deserving communities. This conviction runs deeper than a single initiative. Efforts such as the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) and Ayurgenomics demonstrate how modern technology can help document, validate, and preserve the rich medicinal and ecological knowledge long safeguarded by tribal communities. The same spirit of inclusion is shaping how artificial intelligence is being integrated into tribal development. At the India Impact Summit 2026, the Ministry presented range of AI-enabled platforms built on a simple but powerful belief: that language is not a barrier to be overcome but an identity to be celebrated. Adi Vaani, an AI-powered Translator for Tribal Languages, supports text-to-text and text-to-speech translation, OCR, and delivery of government scheme information in tribal languages, enabling citizens to engage with public services in the language



they speak at home. TriBot, a multilingual conversational AI assistant, further strengthens this effort by providing real-time guidance and grievance support to citizens in remote regions. These efforts were also discussed during a national seminar organised with the Bhagwan Birsa Munda Cell and IIT Delhi, which focused on culturally sensitive and community-centric applications of AI, including long-term preservation and strengthening of tribal languages.

Technology is also becoming a powerful instrument of cultural assertion and economic empowerment. The forthcoming TriBotX platform aims to create a digital ecosystem for promoting tribal arts, languages, traditional knowledge, music, crafts, and cultural experiences. Complementing this effort, the proposed GI Potential Art and Craft Atlas of Tribal India will digitally map tribal handicrafts, forest products, and traditional art forms with Geographical Indication potential, helping strengthen branding, market access, and recognition of tribal intellectual heritage. Innovation Hubs, planned across Tribal Research Institutes in five states on a pilot basis, will go further still, combining design and product development support, GIS-based planning dashboards, and incubation infrastructure for innovation-led tribal entrepreneurs and startups.

Technology is equally transforming the way governance reaches tribal communities. Survey Setu, deployed under PM-JANMAN for PVTG household surveys, enables real-time, geo-tagged monitoring of welfare delivery across remote regions. Operating across 18 States and 1 Union Territory, the platform has already recorded 3.43 lakh household submissions with support of 8,552 surveyors. Such data-driven systems help ensure that every eligible family is identified and connected to essential services. In parallel, the Ministry is developing an AI-enabled Forest Rights Act governance platform to streamline claim submissions, GIS-based mapping, workflow monitoring, and grievance redressal. Together, these initiatives are making governance more transparent, responsive, and accessible for tribal citizens.

**Tribal communities: Drivers of Viksit Bharat**

There is a moment that, captures the essence of everything we are working towards. It is not found in a policy document or a ministerial review. It is found when a tribal woman in a remote habitation, empowered by technology, by language, and by the assurance that the state is listening, engages with government services on her own terms and receives an answer with full dignity. That moment is not the end of a journey. It is the beginning of a new chapter in India's national story. Janjatiya Garima Utsav carries this message with pride. Tribal communities, with their resilience, their ecological wisdom, their artistic traditions, and their deep roots in this land, are not waiting at the threshold of Viksit Bharat. They are among its most powerful and inspiring drivers.

As technology bridges distances, as science delivers healing, as AI speaks in the languages of the forests and the hills, and as governance reaches the last family in the farthest village, we move closer each day to India that is not merely developed in measure, but complete in its humanity. That is the Viksit Bharat we are building together, inspired by the vision of Prime Minister.

The writer is Secretary, Ministry of Tribal Affairs

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**ACHARYA PRASHANT**

A nation, like a person, can go for long periods avoiding what it would prefer not to know about itself. The economy occupies one set of conversations and one set of professionals; the climate occupies another; the inner condition of the citizen, if it is examined at all, belongs to a third domain, often dismissed as private or soft. These separations make ordinary public life manageable. They also make certain kinds of understanding nearly impossible.

Such a moment arrived in India this month. When our Prime Minister appealed to Indians to drive less, take public transport, work from home where possible, delay foreign travel and refrain from buying gold, he made a request that was reasonable, practical and entirely correct. It was also, in a more fundamental sense, an indictment.

The problem runs in two directions. One is ignorance: the ordinary citizen has no idea what petrol consumption costs the country or the climate. The other is more uncomfortable: some of what needs to be known has been encountered and set aside because generating absorbing it would require a reckoning with one's own habits, which is harder than ignoring them. The first failure is educational. The second is a failure of intent.

India spent \$134.7 billion on crude oil alone in the financial year ending March 2026. With the Iran war having driven Brent crude above \$109 per barrel, CRISIL has projected the current account deficit to widen to 2.2 per cent of GDP in FY27. India's foreign exchange reserves have declined by \$40 billion since the Iran war began, and the rupee has lost 7 per cent of its value against the dollar in 2026, making it Asia's worst-performing major currency. India is simultaneously the world's second-largest importer of gold, spending a record \$72 billion in FY 2025-26 on what is primarily a consumption and status purchase.

The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has risen from 280 parts per million before industrialisation to 430 today, with fossil fuel combustion responsible for 90 per cent of that change. Species are being driven to extinction by fossil fuel combustion at rates climate scientists classify as the sixth mass extinction in Earth's half-billion-year history, the first caused not by an asteroid or volcanic event but by the accumulated choices of one species acting upon unexamined desire. India's own carbon dioxide emissions grew by 4.6 per cent in 2024, the highest rate among major economies.

Rising income explains the capacity to consume. It does not explain the compulsion. These are different things, and conflating them produces recommendations that address the first while leaving the second entirely untouched.

The connection between fuel consumption and the absence of a genuine inner life is not metaphoric. It is a mechanical chain. The human being who believes satisfaction must be sought outward, because he has found no access to genuine sufficiency within, acts upon his emotions and desires without examining what drives them. Every desire acted upon requires energy. Energy, in a civilisation built on fossil fuels, means burning them. The citizen sitting in traffic in his third car is not simply making an economic choice. He is pursuing a fullness he has not found within himself, and he does not see what he is doing. The fuel is not the cost of getting somewhere. It is the cost of the attempt.

The dispersed centre, the ego that has no fixed point of sufficiency, has scattered its search across a hundred objects simultaneously. A vehicle here, a gold purchase there, a foreign holiday, an apartment upgrade, a new phone before the old one has worn out, a flight taken not for any destination but for the proof of having gone: none of these objects resolves the insufficiency, each merely displaces it briefly. The centre is not completed by any of them because it is not the absence of objects that has made it incomplete. It is incomplete by definition, constitutively, as the very structure of what it is to be an ego at all. The reaching does not end because the ego finds what it was reaching for. It ends only when the ego honestly sees what the reaching is and what it is not.

A population of people who cannot sit quietly with themselves will consume more than a population that can. This is not a moral judgement. It is a mechanical description of how inner poverty converts into outer demand. In the aggregate of 1.4 billion people, the inner condition of each person adds up to a macroeconomic profile and a carbon footprint. These are not separate domains. They are the same domain described in different units.

The citizen who cannot examine what actually drives his consumption cannot restrain it because he does not know what he would be restraining. He does not see that what he calls aspiration is the ego's perpetual dissatisfaction wearing the costume of legitimate ambition.

This is the second and more serious failure the appeal reveals: not merely the failure of information, but the failure of a society to honestly recognise what it has encountered and quietly set aside. People have encountered the information and chosen not to be changed by it because being changed by it would cost something. That cost is the only cost that actually matters. It is also the only one that a government appeal cannot assess or correct on anyone's behalf.

What the appeal could not say, because public discourse has not yet developed the vocabulary, is that the petrol problem and the gold problem and the current account problem and the carbon dioxide problem are not four separate failures but one: a vast population of egos running a structural deficit, reaching outward for what can only be found, if it can be found at all, in the other direction.

An economy that rests on this kind of demand carries a fragility that no foreign exchange reserve can fully buffer, no interest rate can adequately hedge and no government appeal, however sincere and urgent, can structurally address. The appeal was necessary. In a nation genuinely awake to itself, it would not have been. That gap is the real measure of the distance India has to travel, not in kilometers of pipeline or gigawatts of renewable capacity, but in the quality of what the citizen knows about himself and what no policy instrument, however well designed, can provide in his place.

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

@acharya\_prashant\_paf  
@Prashant\_Advait  
prashantadvait

## Sixteen deaths a day: Every dowry death shames entire Indian society



**SIDDHARTH MISHRA**

The recent incidents involving the death of a 17-year-old girl, a 16-year-old girl, and a 15-year-old girl, brought the issue of continuity of dowry system, in India, in public discussion. Irrespective of the veracity of the causes of these deaths, it is so unfortunate, as we stand at a juncture of civilisation-peak, that we still hear of dowry deaths that result from dowry related harassment. As per NCRB data, India recorded 5,737 dowry deaths in 2024, translating to about 16 women losing their lives every single day. Every conscientious citizen is naturally shaken to know this death rate and is compelled to ask the question that why is it that the civilised society still has to hear of, and bear with, the dowry deaths?

At a point of time when India boasts of becoming a Vishva Guru and claims of being the fastest growing economy making all round development, how pernicious is it to have the phenomena of dowry death existing in this country. How farcical it is for a country to make such tall claims when it rather than ensuring respect and security, miserably fails to protect

its own daughters. Indian society very pompously boasts of empowerment, security and respect for women, and posits to be a model where girls are worshipped and treated as deities. However, shamefully, we still have the retrograde practice of dowry prevailing among almost all the communities throughout the nook and corner of this country.

Though laws and machinery exist to prevent and control the menace of dowry in India, but that has largely remained ineffective in stopping or eradicating the social evil of dowry which continues and is widely pervasive in India. Indian laws such as the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 contain necessary provisions to check the menace of Dowry. Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 in its Section 80 (formerly Section 304B of the Indian Penal Code) applies specifically to cases of dowry death occurring within seven years of marriage while other provisions of law such as Section 85 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (formerly section 498A IPC) continue to provide protection against cruelty and harassment for dowry demands irrespective of the duration of marriage. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 prohibits and penalizes giving or taking of dowry so as to safeguard women against dowry harassment. Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNS), 2023 provides for speedy investigation and trial of criminal cases including Dowry related cases.

The government has already directed that



the dowry related cases must be adjudicated expeditiously to avoid further harassment of the women and has even appointed the dowry prohibition officers, and keeps issuing advisories to all States/UTs from time to time to effectively deal with, and for proper enforcement of law and convictions in, women related crimes. Further, Bureau of Police Research & Development, conducts training programmes for personnel of criminal justice system including investigation officers, prosecution officers and medical officers etc. to deal with crime against women effectively and sensitively.

However, unfortunately, despite such comprehensive legal measures, the evil of dowry continues to exist in Indian society, and leads to frequent conflicts and disputes that sometime result in dowry deaths as well. This state of affairs signifies that the solution to this

problem cannot be provided merely by legal measures, rather the solution must be sought from treating dowry as a degrading practice. This requires not only making strong laws and ensuring their effective implementation but also simultaneously educating and sensitising people against this evil practice.

The voices against dowry must emerge from within the society in the form of strong public opinion to fulfil the gap between law and public policy in this regard. Thus, there is pressing need to educate the society as well as the state, about the ill effects of practicing the dowry system. The presence of dowry system is not in the interest of the society and it creates a distrust in the institution of marriage, the ill effects of which have already started appearing through delayed, broken or no marriages.

In this scenario, members of the civil society should come forward voluntarily and stop giving and taking dowry in marriages of their children. The families must educate their children, especially, their sons against the dowry system and encourage them to be self-dependent. Boys should be taught to have high self-esteem, who should consider taking dowry as an inferior and insulting practice. Men and women in the families across all the communities must become part of a mass campaign for giving up the bad practice of dowry. The government must run campaigns against giving and accepting dowry in any form in the marriages. Even civil society should run #QuitDowry campaign through social media

so that it turns into a mass movement and people, especially, the youth of this country start treating dowry as a degrading practice. This movement shall succeed the day when dowry shall come to be treated as amounting to beggary and accepting it shall be considered as receiving alms. As the circumstances that led to the origin of dowry system do not any longer exist in this country, so there is no justification of its continuation at present. Dowry death is a curse for, and a darkest blot on, the whole civilised society as well as the state. It impinges upon the capacity of the state to protect the members of half of its population. Dowry death is not just a horrendous crime but also a matter of gravest concern and shame for the whole society.

However, even a single dowry death does not shake the conscience of the society, then it severely reflects on the poor value system of members of society, and also adversely impinges on the values that the society is going to pass on to its future generations. The state and the society need to seriously start thinking about curbing this menace and should take meaningful, effective and foolproof measures to eradicate the social evil of dowry from the Indian society, completely.

The writer is Associate Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi

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@TheDailyPioneer  
The Pioneer

A thought for today

I distrust Great Men. They produce a desert of uniformity around them and often a pool of blood too

EM FORSTER

Trump Dives In

Commercial mining on the ocean floor: Terrible idea

Washington's nod to commercial deep-sea mining, the boat pushed out Friday, has prospectors diving in, to loot the ocean floor. UN-backed International Seabed Authority has called Trump's move "unlawful". Commercial seabed mining in international waters is off-limits. For anyone. That's why there aren't even regulations in place for such mining. Rules exist for exploitation in exclusive economic zones in waters under national jurisdictions. But when have such considerations impeded US presidents? When has the word consequences, or costs of such industry, held meaning for those eager to plunder?

Oceans are uncharted territory - barely 25% of deep seabed is mapped. Of millions of species, barely 5,000 have been discovered, in areas mining companies are eyeing. These tracts - 13k feet under sea - are dense with special seabed rocks, which together, contain trillions of dollars' worth of minerals. Called polymetallic nodules, prospectors see rare earths and copper, manganese, nickel in these, but are blind to the sea sponges, nematodes, brittle stars and other life forms that live in them. There's no measure for the extent of damage from 1) mining ships, 2) 'collector robots', 3) pipelines that'll extract, 4) lifts to ferry material to the surface, 5) drilling noise or 6) heat produced. All that is sure is that marine ecosystems, oceans temperature, and migrations will be overwhelmed. Yet, American companies spot an El Dorado on the ocean floor putting humanity in peril, regardless of the justifications.

One justification is the 'demand' for critical minerals. Yet, experts say those 'estimates' don't account for tech advances of battery recycling, or emerging techs that don't use cobalt or nickel. Another preposterous argument is that ocean floor mining doesn't displace human settlements. Pah! Jeopardise ocean ecology - unique, fragile, diverse - and you jeopardise all of Earth.

Nanny State

The wisdom, or otherwise, of college uniforms

It's touching when gov't loves citizens so much, it even lays out the clothes they should wear to college - like UP has just done. "Nanny," you cry, seeing the white shirt, blue trousers, black shoes, or whatever's struck nanny's fancy this time. Gratitude brims over when you realise nanny has stopped time. Nothing's changed between the year when you were three, and stepping into nursery, and now, when you're 20, and in college. "Go, wear this," says nanny, "because you know not what's best for you." But I'm old enough to vote, you say. "That doesn't matter. This does," you wonder why. Nanny says a uniform binds the gap between rich and poor. So, nobody feels disadvantaged. Ah, the wealth gap erased. Hear that, Piketty?

But doubts arise. Nanny, if 15 years of school uniform didn't fill that gap, how will three more years of college uniform? And what about life outside college? Who lives where, drives what, parties where in the evening, holidays where in summer - how do we use all of that with the blinkers of uniform? Above all, how do we use and unlearn. "Jaant nahin hoga kya karta hai" America, consider, life in uniform is not the same for all. Shirts smell differently after a drive in a car, and a long commute in a crowded bus. Some gaps are only erased with outcomes - learning and employment. Everything else is tokenism.

The Lawyers Versus Engineers Battle

A unique way to look at the US-China rivalry

Trump and Xi met, and there was the usual avalanche of headlines about US-China rivalry: can the world's two largest powers manage their competition responsibly or are they destined to tumble into the so-called "Thucydides Trap" - where a rising power inevitably collides with an established one? Yet, the relationship between Washington and Beijing is far more layered. Beneath diplomatic theatrics lies a deeper civilisational contrast - in how the two nations think, debate, and build.

In Breakneck China's Quest to Engineer the Future, Dan Wang offers an elegantly simple argument to understand this divide - China is run by engineers, while America is run by lawyers. One side is obsessed with building, the other with regulating. China sees every challenge as a construction problem waiting to be solved with more factories, railroads, housing and infrastructure. US, meanwhile, instinctively approaches problems through rules, litigation, oversight, and compliance.

This contrast is visible even in political leadership. China's top brass is packed with technocrats and engineers. Xi Jinping himself studied chemical engineering. The Chinese state therefore tends to think in linear, technical terms: identify a target, mobilise resources, and execute at speed. America's leadership, by contrast, is overwhelmingly shaped by the legal profession. From Abraham Lincoln to Joe Biden, 28 of 45 US presidents have had legal backgrounds. Naturally, the American instinct is less about bulldozing through red tape and more about lawsuits, environmental clearances, public hearings and procedural safeguards.

Consequences are starkly visible in infrastructure. In 2008, both countries embarked on ambitious high-speed rail projects. China launched the Beijing-Shanghai line, while US approved a rail corridor linking San Francisco and Los Angeles. China

opened the line in 2011 at a cost of roughly \$36bn. America, meanwhile, remains trapped in paperwork and delays. Seventeen years after approval, only a modest stretch has been built, costs have exploded to nearly \$120bn, and operations are no expected no earlier than 2033.

Yet Wang cautions against romanticising China's model. Beneath the gleaming skyscrapers and futuristic train stations, lies a brittle reality. Much of China's infrastructure is overbuilt and underused. Ghost cities, debt-ridden provinces, and rampant local corruption expose the darker side of compulsive construction. Social offers an elegantly simple argument to understand this divide - China is run by engineers, while America is run by lawyers.

During Covid, the contrast became more stark. US pumped thousands of dollars directly into households through stimulus payments, while China offered only limited employment support that reached a tiny fraction of workers. Ironically, Wang argues, China's leadership - far from being technologists or philosophers, but by missile scientist Song Jian, whose rigid engineering logic produced one of the greatest demographic crises of modern times. Even today, Beijing's response remains mechanical, with Xi urging women to return home and have more children, as though population decline can simply be recalibrated like a machine.

Still, China's relentless futurist drive gives it a sense of momentum and national purpose. America, despite its innovation and freedoms, increasingly struggles to build with confidence or speed. Perhaps the lesson for both nations is clear: US needs to rediscover its lost appetite for grand projects and physical ambition. China, meanwhile, must learn that societies cannot thrive on concrete and steel alone.

All The Stars...But Fifa's Offside

Some shine is off the world's greatest sporting spectacle. US advertisers have made football a game of 4 quarters. Tickets are too pricey. Trump's immigration goons may target fans. India doesn't have a broadcast deal as yet. What more can go wrong?

Rudraneel Sengupta



The late great English commentator, Jimmy Greaves, once people believe, mine a phrase that has since become an inescapable cliché - "football is a game of two halves..." It sounds tautological. You play 45 minutes. Take a break and go into the dressing room, where the coach gives his rousing speech (or just a terrifying "hairdryer treatment", as made famous by Alex Ferguson), tweaks tactics, and sends the troops out for another half of the post-break. Ask

Things can change completely. They will, and they will tell you about the "Miracle of Istanbul", that legendary Champions League final where the English club trailed 3-0, utterly dominated by the mighty AC Milan, before Liverpool emerged transformed from the dressing room, blasted their way to three-all, and won the title on penalties. A game of two halves, indeed.

Except now that's about to change. At the 2026 World Cup, the world's favourite sport will make a fundamental shift and become a game of four quarters, with a mandatory "hydration break" of three minutes inserted at the midway point of each half.

Fifa would like everyone to believe that this is being done for the safety of players, since temperatures in the US summer are expected to breach 30°C. Hydration breaks in hot playing conditions are not new though; in fact, they have become increasingly common as climate change takes its toll. What is new, is the mandatory nature of it during the World Cup, where many of the matches will be played in ideal weather conditions far below 30°C, and where many venues will feature closed-roof, temperature-controlled arenas.

The core reason for this shift then? Advertising. American sports broadcasters have always railed against the limited window for commercials in football - US prefers its sports played in smaller bursts, with the opportunity to saturate match-day coverage

with advertising. Now they have got their wish to do the same with football.

France coach Didier Deschamps called it out when the new was tested at a slew of friendlies at World Cup venues in March. "It is very good for you (broadcasters), to be able to show a commercial," Deschamps said. "But regardless of the team, if they are having a strong period of the game, three minutes... that breaks everything."

USA coach Mauricio Pochettino shared the sentiment: "I don't like it because I think you cut the rhythm of the game." But like it or not, it's happening, so coaches are working accordingly using

than the most expensive final ticket at Qatar.

Now, Fifa is taking all the ticket, broadcast, merchandising, and even parking revenues. Which means the host cities have to think of ways to make the World Cup count financially. Bus tickets in Boston, if you are travelling to the stadium for a World Cup game, will cost \$70. New Jersey is planning to charge \$100 for a return ticket for the World Cup train shuttle from Penn Station to MetLife Stadium, roughly 13km apart.

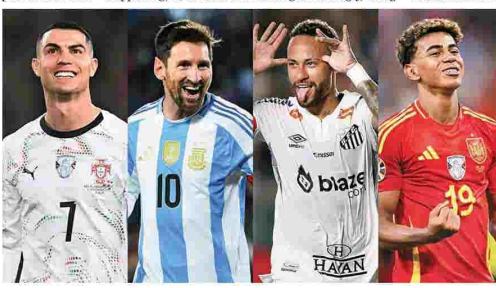
It's easy to forget that this is a tournament being jointly hosted by three countries, Canada and Mexico though will only be home to 26 of the record 104 matches, and none at all past the Round of 16.

This too is a pity - Mexico City's Estadio Azteca, that colossal 90,000-seater temple to football, has witnessed four of the greatest matches ever to have been played at a World Cup: the 1970 semifinal where Italy beat West Germany 4-3, the 1970 final where Pele led a Brazilian team to a thumping 4-1 win over Italy; Maradona scored his world goal against England in the 1986 quarter-finals here, and then went on to lift the trophy against West Germany in the final. Estadio Azteca deserved better.

Another problem - Fifa is yet to finalise a broadcast deal in the two most populous countries, India and China. Both nations have summarily rejected the massive broadcast money Fifa has asked for, and offered paltry sums instead. This is a fight Fifa has already lost.

Major sporting events like the Olympics or World Cups usually come wrapped in political positions of the host nation. But this one is unique in the way it has taken everything to the edge - the extreme capitalist model of extracting everything possible without regard to the paying public, participating countries being treated as hostile nations by imposing travel bans on their fans and encourages (Haiti, Senegal, Cote D'Ivoire, and Iran), a participating country (Iran) at war with a host country, the spectre of ICE raids in and around match venues. Has there ever been a more politically combustible World Cup? Is anyone talking about football anymore?

The writer is a sports journalist



those three minutes to change tactics and introduce new gameplans, as was evident during the friendlies.

"Like it or not, it's happening" may apply to the tournament as a whole, and that's probably unprecedented in the history of football World Cups.

Most all of the talk leading up to what is supposed to be the world's greatest sporting event has centred around greed, conflict, and keeping people out, instead of inviting them to the party.

The cheapest tickets on offer cost roughly \$600, which is nearly three times more than what it cost at Qatar 2022. Premium tickets to the final were put on sale by Fifa at \$32,970 per ticket, thirty times more

'What If We Behaved Like the Japanese - Just Occasionally?'

Indian tourists find so many things amazing in Japan. Some we can and should bring back too. Here are six Japanese micro-philosophies, which we can learn, and really improve our life

Sandeep Das



Last year, I visited Japan and was absolutely amazed by the richness of their culture. Specifically, by how polite, graceful, and dignified everyone is. Even though the country has had its share, and more, of darkness. Think of the catastrophic WWII bombings, devastating earthquakes and tsunamis, prolonged periods of economic pain. Despite all this, if the Japanese people are still polite and graceful, it's not by accident. Their behaviour has to be understood in terms of certain key Japanese philosophies, which shape their thinking, and help them live an excellent quality of life. Indeed, we can also improve our lives by adopting some of the Japanese micro-philosophies.

**Kaizen** | This has been heavily popularised by firms like Sony and Toyota. It's about continuous improvement. Ideas like 'improve by 1% every day', come from this philosophy. Its application potential is boundless. For someone wanting to pick up a reading habit, reading 5 pages a day for a week, then making it 6 pages a day next week, and so on, is a great example. Or someone wanting to get physically fit, walking 10 minutes every day for a week, then making it 15 minutes next week.

It's also about overcoming negative habits. For someone trying to reduce smoking, this means cutting their consumption by 1 cigarette a day for a week, then by another cigarette the day after the next, and so on. No great habit is formed overnight, but micro-habits over a sustained period of time can result in great improvement.

**Ichigo ichie!** | This translates to 'one time, one meeting'. Meaning, the current moment is unique, we should not lose it to thinking about the past or the future. For

instance, let us slow down the pace of eating, enjoy every morsel of food. Reduce the portion size, chew a little more, feel the texture of our food. Practise active listening: instead of thinking about how to respond to the other person, try to really, really understand what they are saying, and where they may be coming from.

**Shokunin!** | This is about a deep dedication to mastering your craft. Often, it involves lifelong self-improvement, in the pursuit of excellence. In Japan, regular people, barber, train ticket collector, garbage collector, everyone takes so much pride in their work, trying to do their jobs to the best of their abilities.



Many of us Indians, by contrast, view our job in a poor way: it is too manual, too basic, it doesn't add real value. But remember how Steve Jobs, in his famous connect-the-dots speech, spoke about a day at the new Apple store. No attending entry-level class he attended ended up equipping the Mac with beautiful fonts. Even the most mundane task can deliver the most exquisite outcome. We have to do it to the best of our abilities.

**Osewa!** | This is about acknowledging someone's efforts to look after you, conveying your appreciation and respect.

It's a core reason why everyone in Japan is so polite. A simple micro-habit for us to imbibe is to generously thank the people we deal with - be it the lift man, cocount vendor, flight attendant, or our domestic help.

Subconsciously, this is also connected to the principle of reciprocity. If you're nice to others, you'll be nice to you. In other words, being respectful and polite has business benefits over the long run. A simple micro-habit of smiling at the people you work with, can go a long *osewa* way.

**Iki!** | Perhaps this is the Japanese philosophy that's travelled furthest in the world. It's about identifying your purpose and being energised by it every morning.

It can make a heck of a difference in a world where every other person seems miserable at work - struggling with low motivation or burnout. To find your *iki*, ask yourself some key questions. What are you good at? What do you love doing? What will the world pay money for? What does the world need? At the intersection of these questions, is your *iki*. To be honest, finding this is not easy. It can take years, even decades. Still, this is the most simple and effective framework to get there.

**Gaman!** | This is about building emotional resilience. Whatever Japan has been through as a society, its people are rarely bitter. Because, per the *gaman* principle, while you are not in control of what life throws at you, you do control how you respond to it. As our Dhoni has said a few times, it's about controlling the controllables.

In terms of micro-habits, this translates into not saying unpleasant things when you are angry, and not feeling sorry for yourself when you hit a difficult stage of life. The bigger question *gaman* philosophy pushes you to ask is, what are three things you can do to respond to the difficult situation? After all, the only thing that can't change is change. Good times give way to difficult times and difficult times give way to good times.

Calvin & Hobbes



AK Merchant

In the 19th century Shiraz, Iran, a 25-year-old youth took the title, 'The Bab', meaning 'The Gate'. He announced that he was the prophet-herald of a new era, sent to pave the way for a global spiritual revolution.

Though his ministry lasted a brief six years, the Bab attracted thousands of followers across West Asia. Crucially, he foretold that his teachings were the prelude to an even greater divine revelation, which soon arrived through Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

We live in an era torn between two opposing currents: a painful process of global disintegration, and a quiet, powerful movement towards integration. Looking at the chaos of the modern world, Bahá'u'lláh once asked a series of poignant questions that still echo: "How long will humanity persist in its waywardness? How long will injustice continue? How long are

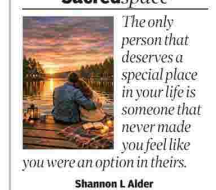
chaos and confusion to reign among men? How long will discord continue? He assured that the spiritual impetus, through the fresh outpouring of divine guidance, would provide enlightenment amid global turbulence.

While nation-states repeatedly struggle to solve interlocking crises threatening our civilisation, Bahá'í sees a silver lining. The Bab's message provides a direct roadmap for societal evolution, famously calling on humanity to unite as 'brethren in one and indivisible religion'. The ultimate destination of this journey is the birth of a new World Order built on global cooperation. To avert looming global catastrophes, the Bahá'í community actively champions a path that harmonises two major forces: religion, *dham* and science. Bahá'í Faith provides the bridge between

reason and faith for global welfare. Science provides the technological tools to solve material problems that seemed insurmountable a century ago. Religion provides the moral and ethical framework, ensuring those tools are used with tolerance, justice, and sustainability.

At grassroots level, this looks like communities committing to essential, foundational truths required for a healthy society: (i) absolute equality (ii) equitable sharing of the planet's finite resources; (iii) eradication of all prejudices (iv) ethical governance rooted in collaboration, continuous learning, and grassroots action. The fundamental purpose of life is to know our creator and to collectively advance human civilisation. The Bab's declaration sparked a paradigm shift, challenging us to outgrow old mindsets of domination, ego-driven success, and

Sacred space



The only person that deserves a special place in your life is someone that never made you feel like you were an option in theirs.

Without art competition. In their place, we are called to cultivate global awareness and an appreciation for universal welfare. Bahá'í writings remind us: "So powerful is the light of unity, it can illuminate the whole world." True worship is expressed through a life of prayer, meditation, personal well-being, and active service to humanity. Real, tangible global transformation is an architecture we build together, and it begins right in our own homes. As our everyday thoughts and habits become anchored in ethical living, darkness of hostility naturally yields to mutual support. Let us celebrate the bright promise of a more spiritually attuned, unified humanity, ever hopeful for divine blessings that guide our shared journey. The writer is member, Bahá'í Community of India. Followers of the Bahá'í Faith will celebrate the 182nd anniversary of the Declaration of the Bab on May 23

Light Of Unity Can Illuminate The World

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Rupee's slide

Policymakers must do a careful balancing act

THE rupee's sharp fall in recent months — it has depreciated by about 8% since the Iran war began in late February — reflects vulnerabilities in India's import sector. While currency woes are not unusual for emerging economies, the present decline appears far more worrisome because it is unfolding amid geopolitical instability, rising crude oil prices, persistent inflation and slowing global growth. Together, these pressures have created a fragile environment in which the rupee's weakness could trigger wider economic disruptions.

India imports more than 88% of its crude oil requirements, along with essential commodities such as edible oils and fertilisers. As the rupee slides against the dollar, these goods have become costlier. Rising fuel prices, in particular, are having a ripple effect on transport, food and household expenses. The depreciation is also keeping corporates and policymakers on tenterhooks. Indian companies with foreign currency borrowings are facing higher repayment obligations, while widening trade deficits are putting additional pressure on the current account deficit. Persistent foreign portfolio outflows have worsened the situation, as global investors move funds to safer US assets amid uncertainty. Although the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has intervened through forex reserves to curb volatility, such measures can only moderate the pace of decline.

Arvind Panagariya, Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission, has argued that allowing the rupee to depreciate naturally could help correct trade imbalances over time. He has urged the RBI to look past specific exchange-rate milestones (such as Rs 100 per dollar) when navigating currency fluctuations triggered by global supply disruptions. However, unchecked depreciation carries serious risks, especially when driven by speculative capital outflows rather than economic fundamentals. Policymakers must strike a careful balance between allowing market adjustments and preventing excessive volatility. Managing inflation and maintaining investor confidence will remain crucial to ensuring India's economic stability.

## Room for dignity

Care for parents is a legal duty

THE Punjab and Haryana High Court's ruling directing a son to provide his elderly mother a room, separate bathroom and basic amenities in the family home is more than a legal order. It is an indictment of a society increasingly failing its parents. Invoking the timeless dictum "matru devo bhava", the court reminded citizens that filial duty is not merely cultural ornamentation but a legal and moral obligation. The facts of the case are deeply unsettling. An elderly woman had to seek judicial intervention simply to secure a habitable corner in the house built by her late husband. That a mother should be compelled to fight her own children for shelter and dignity reflects the erosion of the joint family ethos that once defined Indian society. The high court was justified in rejecting the son's plea and imposing costs upon him.

Courts across the country are increasingly confronting disputes involving abandoned or harassed parents. In several rulings, tribunals and high courts have ordered eviction of abusive children, upheld parents' rights over self-acquired property and reinforced the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. At the same time, the judiciary has carefully balanced welfare concerns with property rights, ensuring that the law is not misused in family feuds.

The larger concern, however, cannot be addressed through courtrooms alone. India's rapidly ageing population, urban migration and shrinking family structures are creating conditions where many senior citizens face loneliness, insecurity and economic dependence. Legal safeguards are essential, but social attitudes matter even more. A civilisation that reveres motherhood in scripture cannot abandon mothers in practice. Providing elderly parents with respect, care and security should not require judicial enforcement. The high court's verdict rightly emphasises that inheritance may be negotiable, but humanity is not.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, MAY 23, 1926

Sense of disillusionment

WHEN the Paddison deputation was sent from India to South Africa to negotiate the holding of a Round Table Conference, many Indians asked, of what avail was it? So obdurate was the Government of South Africa in the matter of its Indian policy that people, who knew the strong racial bias of the white population, did not entertain any great hope of success. When subsequently the Paddison deputation, aided by C Andrews, succeeded in securing the Boer statesman's consent to the holding of the Conference, there was some measure of satisfaction in India. Most people thought that there would be an opportunity of convincing reasonably minded men of the justice of India's demand. This expectation, however, was short-lived for the South African Government subsequently passed the Colour Bar Bill which is calculated to keep out Indians as well as the native population from skilled occupations and makes the Round Table Conference practically futile. At any rate, most people in India considered that it would be farcical to hold the conference when we see the obvious determination of the South African authorities to drive out Indians altogether from that country. Lord Birkenhead's statement in the House of Lords, of which Reuter has sent a summary, seems to confirm this view. He has distinctly stated that "it would be premature to say that the holding of the conference necessarily connoted the certainty of an agreement or even of a compromise."

## India returns to its geopolitical centre

Challenges are enormous because the straying has accentuated fractures, distended relationships



REPORTS that Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin are coming to India in September to attend the BRICS summit are welcome — especially in the wake of the Quad foreign ministers' meeting this coming Monday, when US Secretary of State Marco Rubio plus the foreign ministers of Japan and Australia arrive in the capital.

An India-Africa summit slated over the next few days has had to be unfortunately put off because the Ebola virus is rearing its head. At long last, India is returning to its own geopolitical centre. It may have taken Donald Trump's irrefragable fondness for Pakistan, the war in West Asia's knock on the economy and the potentially doomsday US-China cinch to focus the mind. At last it's happening — notwithstanding the lecturing by senior MEA official Sibi George about India's ancient civilisational heritage to a young Norwegian reporter because she asked a question that he entirely disapproved of.

It's a small price to pay. Fact is, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin and Lula da Silva and Cyril Ramaphosa and Narendra Modi are all going to be in the same room a few months from now — all leaders of China, Russia, Brazil, South Africa and India, the founder members of BRICS. The Quad foreign ministers' meeting is an indication that the long-delayed Quad summit could materialise soon.

It's a measure of how things have changed if only to remain the same, is the real story of India's foreign policy in the last



12 years, since PM Modi won power. India has deepened friendships with the US (these days on a bit of a roller-coaster), Israel and UAE, faced off with China on the cold, icy heights of Galwan, made friends with Pakistan and then punished it for continuing cross-border terrorism, sought to reinvent other parts of its neighbourhood (like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) and gone Dutch in the Netherlands. As for Norway, we know by now that it's a six-letter Wordle you can rearrange nicely when you drop the 18th letter in the alphabet.

Not that a new international realignment is in the offing just because India is hosting the BRICS summit. The Trump visit to Beijing last week told us that China will continue to refuse to confront the Americans, because America remains its largest trading partner. While Putin's visit to Beijing this week tells us that in the fourth year of his stalemated war with Ukraine, and with the help of leaky Western sanctions, Russia will continue to seek the stabilisation of key relationships, such as China and India. (Russia is keenly aware that China's economic ties with the US will limit

The return of both BRICS and Quad is a good sign, because both are centres of stability.

Beijing's feelings for Moscow, no matter how much the two agree on other matters.)

Let's call this the Age of Seeking New Friends and Influencing Peoples — even elites, who live on the right side of the railway track and are in the business of managing nations will understand the spirit that infuses multi-alignment. This is not a withdrawal from the world, like non-alignment was, but an even greater engagement. As India enters the 80th year of its independence, it has understood that

as a regional power that must make the best use of its circumstances, it is best suited to the pursuit of multiple relationships.

Not that India has not spoken its mind even when the tie with the former Soviet Union resembled an alliance. When Boris Pasternak won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958 for *Doctor Zhivago*, it was Jawaharlal Nehru who led the charge for allowing him to travel to Sweden to receive the medal. (The Soviets didn't listen.)

So many other examples come to mind. From Indira Gandhi's smiling retort to an American journalist who asked if India leaned Left or Right, and she said "we stand upright," to Atal Bihari Vajpayee's invitation to Bill Clinton to India in 2000, only two years after the US had sanctioned India for going nuclear — the former US President spent five glorious days in India, being fetted everywhere he went (and about five hours in Pakistan in a security bubble), enjoying himself so much that it didn't matter anyone who had punished whom and who had offered forgiveness.

That's why the "coat-tail school of diplomacy," which proposes that you ally with a powerful pow-

er so that you avail of the benefits that come with being in its shadow — much like what Japan and ASEAN nations have done these past several decades — cannot work with India. The country is too vast, too different, too diverse, too messy to fit into one regimented framework. That's why the One District One Cuisine policy in Uttar Pradesh (none of which are non-vegetarian), is bound to come a cropper. To take the food allegory a bit further, the BJP has understood that its beef bans in the North Indian states it rules cannot be imposed on its allies in North-East India.

That's why the return of PM Modi's foreign policy to its own geopolitical centre is welcome. The challenges are enormous because the straying has accentuated some fractures, distended some relationships and broken off others. It is equally true that the straying has taught us a valuable lesson, which is to trust, but verify. RSS leader Dattatreya Hosabale's exhortation to PM Modi to normalise ties with Pakistan — keep your borders stable, remain watchful, he is saying — is an essential part of the "trust, but verify" doctrine first enunciated by that all-time guru, Chanakya. (Like Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, stabilising borders was the first touchstone of Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy in the early 1980s; these gentlemen understood that a calm periphery is a recipe for peace within.)

The return of both BRICS and Quad is a good sign, because both are centres of stability. Sending a political player to Bangladesh is an expansion of that idea. Sweetening ties in Sonia Gandhi's mother country, Italy, was a tiny gesture worthy of that Italian philosopher, Machiavelli. Now to restart the hard work of fixing the house within. Sending Sibi George home for an all-expenses-paid trip to Kerala to look at how communists as different as Syrian Christians and Moplah Muslims and Malabar Hindu Nairs look at the same story might be a good beginning.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Without stability, there would be no progress. — Deng Xiaoping

## The cop who could not be bribed

RANBIR PARMAR

Mylate father-in-law had a rich stock of stories about his career in the police force. Belonging to the fabled Panta clan of Jubbil in Himachal Pradesh, he was popularly known as *Panta Sahab*. One story concerned the theft of an ancient Vishnu idol from the Lakshmi Narayan temple in Chamba in the 1960s.

His posting in this hill town as SHO was only three months old when the idol was stolen. The once-peaceful town was plunged into anger and gloom. Public protests escalated to the point that the government had to form a special probe team, headed by a DSP. The latter discussed the details of the case with the SHO (*Panta Sahab*), but there was no breakthrough.

The SHO was sure that no local resident would dare steal the idol and invite divine retribution. It had to be the work of an outsider. The police made enquiries across the town. They zeroed in on a shopkeeper, whose distant relative from Canada had stayed with him a fortnight ago and departed the day after the theft. The probe revealed that the NRI was set to fly abroad from Bombay in a couple of days.

The SHO asked the DSP to authorise him to go to Bombay with a police party. The DSP considered it a wild-goose chase, but he eventually gave permission. *Panta Sahab* checked the booking records for all flights to Canada and found what he was looking for.

The next day, he waited for his quarry at the check-in counter of the airport in plain clothes, carrying handcuffs and a revolver. His two colleagues were posted at the gate. When the accused arrived at the counter holding a heavy-looking suitcase, a search warrant was flashed before him. He initially appeared perturbed, but then a faint smile appeared on his face as he said, "Can you listen to me for a moment?" He took the SHO a few steps away and made two offers. Yes, he had the stolen idol in his suitcase, and if he were allowed to fly to Canada with it, he would pay Rs 5 lakh. And if he were allowed to leave without the idol, he would pay Rs 2 lakh.

Both sums were staggering in those days. My father-in-law belonged to a very poor family. His father was a marginal farmer who had taken a heavy loan to educate him, and he had inherited the loan after his father's death. But the thought of accepting the bribe never crossed his mind. He rejected both offers and handcuffed the man after recovering the idol.

"The DSP got the promotion he deserved after the case was solved, while the people of Chamba got their deity back," my father-in-law had said while concluding his story. "As for me, I was happy to receive what I most cherished — the gratitude of the people of that hill town. They presented me a miniature brass replica of that idol at a public function."

The writer is a freelance contributor based in Shimla

epaper.tribuneindia.com

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Diplomatic tight rope

Apropos of 'Diplomats need not play to the gallery', in an era driven by instant media reactions and social media visibility, there is a growing temptation to respond sharply to garner domestic applause. Yet, successful diplomacy is measured not merely by headline-grabbing responses but by national interests secured. Firmness need not come at the cost of courtesy. National strength is reflected not only in forceful words but in thoughtful, disciplined and balanced engagement. Diplomatic conduct should remain guided by institutional responsibility and long-term national interest rather than the desire to impress audiences at home or abroad.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), MOHALI

## Envoys in a double bind

With reference to 'Diplomats need not play to the gallery', Indian diplomats should not pander to their domestic audience when dealing with foreign press, but it is really possible to avoid doing so? Diplomats always have to consider foreign and domestic dimensions, engaging in what political scientist Robert Putnam terms the "two-level game". As the writer describes his own experience interacting with reporters in the UAE, had he dealt with them inappropriately, he would have lost his job. This double bind in which diplomats find themselves applies not only to press conferences — it takes centre stage at international negotiations too.

REED CHERVIN, SONEPAT

## Time ripe for non-alignment

Refer to 'China balances Washington and Moscow carefully', even when both these countries are engaged in conflicts, their leaders still found time to meet Xi Jinping in Beijing. It signifies a special position that China enjoys in the emerging world order. Surprisingly, Pakistan is playing a proactive role in the West Asia conflict too. In such a situation, there is no need for India to tilt towards the US. Maintaining equal distance from these superpowers is the key to keeping its sovereign status alive. In other words, non-alignment needs to be revived immediately for best results.

DEEPAK TAAK, PANCHKULA

## Holistic Himalayan policy

Apropos of 'Limiting dams', the Centre's decision to bar new hydel projects in the upper reaches of the Ganga acknowledges a reality long ignored: the Himalayan ecosystem is too fragile for reckless infrastructure expansion. However, allowing already sanctioned projects to continue despite known geological vulnerabilities appears contradictory. The Himalayas are among the youngest and most unstable mountains in the world. India surely needs clean energy, but not at the cost of putting vulnerable lives and ecology at risk. A holistic Himalayan policy based on scientific scrutiny, ecological balance and disaster resilience is urgently required.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

## Heatwave an administrative issue

Apropos of 'Heat stress', we are not merely enduring a harsh summer, we are living through the consequences of a long-brewing ecological collapse. When our cities routinely rank among the hottest, this is not an act of nature alone. It is the outcome of choices — deliberate, repeated and largely unaccountable. For a decade, the blueprint has been clear — replacing soil with concrete, lakes with layouts, trees with towers and regulation with convenience. A city with tree cover, water bodies and reflective material heats differently than the one choked by asphalt and glass. We ensured that environmental clearances became procedural formalities. Heat today is as much an administrative problem as it is an environmental one.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWANA

## Reclaiming safe public spaces

Refer to 'SC draws the line on stray dog menace', by ordering the permanent removal of stray dogs from key public institutions and banning the release of aggressive dogs back into the streets, the apex court has addressed a severe public health crisis. It is a pragmatic step toward reclaiming safe public spaces for all. The alarming surge in stray dog-bite incidents across our cities has left vulnerable citizens living in constant fear. The Supreme Court judgment rightly prioritises public safety and the fundamental right to life under Article 21 over flawed policies.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

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@tribuneindia.com

# The cockroach has spoken. India should listen



**SUHEL SETH**  
FOUNDER, COUNSELAGE INDIA

LET me tell you something about India that most people in positions of authority still refuse to accept: this country's youth is neither stupid nor silent. They are, in fact, ferociously, brilliantly, devastatingly articulate and when you insult them from the highest Benches of the land, they don't sulk.

They organise. They satirise. And they may make you look like a fool in ways that no editorial, no press conference, and no prime-time debate ever could.

Enter the Cockroach Janta Party.

Chief Justice Surya Kant, in an open court hearing, declared that 'parasites' were attacking the system and then, with perhaps rightful and breathtaking condescension, compared unemployed youngsters to cockroaches — those who 'don't get any employment or have any place in the profession' and

who 'start attacking everyone.' Now, one presumes that a man who has presided over some of the most consequential constitutional matters in recent memory would possess, at minimum, the political instinct to avoid comparing an entire generation of struggling young Indians to insects.

One would be wrong.

The clarification that followed — that the CJI had been misquoted, that he was referring to those with fraudulent degrees, not the youth at large — landed with the grace of a courtroom adjournment that nobody asked for.

The damage, as they say in South Delhi drawing rooms, had been done. But something rather magnificent had also begun.

Within six days of its launch on May 16, the Cockroach Janta Party had amassed over 16 million followers. Let that number sit with you for a moment. Sixteen million.

The CJP's founder Abhijeet Dipke told the Associated Press quite plainly: 'It is the younger people who were actually very frustrated. They didn't have any outlet. They were really angry at the government.' That sentence is worth printing on the front page of every newspaper in this country — not because it is revelatory, but because it is



**SATIRICAL:** The CJP has given a name, an identity, and a vocabulary to a generation's rage. LALIT MOHAN

so obvious and yet so consistently ignored by those who govern us.

India has a youth employment problem that is not a secret but is treated like one. Government data reveals an unemployment rate of nearly 10% among those aged 15 to 29, climbing to 13.6% in urban areas. More than half of Indian Gen Zs have reportedly postponed major life decisions — buying homes, starting families — because of economic anxiety. These are not abstract statistics. These are the young men and women who are crammed for competitive exams only to discover that the job

market had moved on without them. Who scroll Instagram at midnight not for entertainment, but because there is genuinely nothing else to do.

And what did their Chief Justice call them? Cockroaches.

Well. You reap what you sow.

The genius of the Cockroach Janta Party is not merely that it is funny, though it undeniably is.

Its genius lies in the alchemy of reclamation. The party calls itself the 'Voice of the Lazy and Unemployed.' Its satirical manifesto demands a ban on post-retirement Rajya Sabha seats for chief justices, 50% reservation for women in Parliament, and a 20-year ban

on defecting legislators. These are not the demands of nihilists. These are the demands of people who have been paying attention — who understand the architecture of how power perpetuates itself in this country and who, in the language of memes and irony, are demanding accountability.

Anurag Kashyap, Dia Mirza, Sonakshi Sinha, Kunal Kamra and the usual suspects have followed the CJP's Instagram page. You may roll your eyes at celebrity endorsement, and normally I would join you. But this is different. This is not brand ambassadorship. This is a signal: that the sentiment animating the CJP resonates well beyond the campus and the hostel room.

Predictably, the establishment's first instinct was suppression. The CJP's X account, which had gathered around 2,00,000 followers, was withheld in India. The response from Dipke? A new account, a poster reading 'Cockroach is back,' and the immortal line: 'You thought you can get rid of us? Lol.' If you needed any further evidence that this generation has absorbed India's political theatre and is now writing its own script, there it is.

Now, before the usual brigade of credentialled commentators rushes to dismiss this as mere social media

froth, let me offer a counter. Every significant political realignment in recent Indian history has had a cultural precursor. The Anna Hazare movement lived on social media before it hit the streets.

Movements do not arrive fully formed; they gather energy from precisely these kinds of cultural flashpoints.

The CJP may never file a nomination paper. It may never contest an election. But it has done something arguably more important: it has given a name, an identity, and a vocabulary to a generation's rage.

Dipke — who is Dalit, and has faced casteist attacks online since that identity became public — has spoken of wanting the CJP to guide supporters towards concrete activism: filing RTIs, becoming politically engaged, refusing to be invisible. That is not the language of a meme page. That is the language of a movement.

India's establishment has a well-practised habit of waiting for inconvenient energies to dissipate. Sometimes that strategy works. But the cockroach, as biology will confirm, is among the most resilient creatures on the planet. It survives conditions that would obliterate lesser species.

Perhaps the Chief Justice, of all people, should have known that. Or perhaps he does.

## Faith, fear and Punjab's sacrilege debate



**SHELLEY WALLIA**  
FORMER PROFESSOR, PANJAB UNIVERSITY

IT is important, at the outset, to be precise about what the debate around sacrilege legislation in Punjab is all about. What is actually being legislated raises a question that liberal political philosophy has never satisfactorily resolved. Understandably, no one is legislating reverence, and as it is, reverence cannot be legislated. What is being necessitated by newly assertive religious voices in the state is a criminal law that seeks to impose imprisonment for acts of desecration or blasphemy against Guru Granth Sahib.

Clearly, reverence is a condition of the inner life, of what a childhood spent in intimate familiarity with Guru Granth Sahib imperceptibly and irrevocably instills. No law can produce that reverence and no law could have. The distinction matters enormously.

This is not an abstract question for me. Growing up, we as children were drawn into the world of Sikhism not through instruction or obligation but through something far more powerful. Our mother would gather us around her and read aloud stories of Guru Nanak from his *Janamsukhi*, pausing often to explain a relevant

stanza, its meaning, its texture, its significance to the life we were living. The reverence that formed in us was entirely spontaneous, born of understanding rather than compulsion or fear.

The sacred stories were simply ours, along with Guru Granth Sahib that sat in our homes and gurdwaras the way a beloved elder sits with weight and sturdy authority. Our journeys through a landscape of gurdwaras became, over the years, a part of the architecture of our growing. Each visit deepened a familiarity that was never ceremonial, never anxious, never held in place by the shadow of legal consequence. Guru Granth Sahib was a living presence, encountered with fearless intimacy that comes only when a text has genuinely entered one's inner being. That fearlessness was itself a form of respect, deeper, I would argue, than anything a blasphemy law could produce. That reverence was unlegislated. It arose from somewhere interior.

Which is why laws criminalising the desecration of Guru Granth Sahib trouble me in a way that is difficult to name at first, and then becomes very easy to spell out. The assumption is that desecration is possible. That a human hand, a careless or a cruel act, can diminish what is eternal. But if you believe in the sanctity of the Granth, then you must also believe it is beyond harm. The Word does not require the law's protection. It never did.

It is from this experience that my reflections arise. The demand for legislation on blasphemy conflates two



**SANCTITY:** Reverence can never be legislated into existence nor can faith be placed under surveillance. FILE

things that must be kept distinct: the legitimate collective hurt caused by deliberate desecration, and the very different question of whether criminal penalty is the appropriate response to it. One can treat the former seriously without conceding the latter. And it is that distinction between honouring what is sacred and legislating against its violation through fear that the debate in Punjab requires us to examine.

The problem is not incidental. It goes to the heart of what religion essentially claims to be doing. Let us look at Sikhism and Buddhism, the two traditions that share a profound orientation towards interiority and emerge from premises that sit in a complex relationship with doctrinal coercion.

The Buddha's epistemological injunction, preserved in the *Kalama Sutta*, insists that truth cannot be inherited or imposed through institutional fiat. It must be tested against experience, verified through

practice, realised in the depths of individual consciousness. Tradition places the burden of understanding on the individual and refuses to sacralise any object or institution beyond the reach of inquiry.

Sikhism begins in a register that shares certain deep affinities with this orientation. The Gurus privilege *Naam*, ethical conduct and contemplative discipline over ritualism, formalism and the mere performance of belief. The divine in Sikh theology is not external or remote; it is immanent and accessible through reflection and grace. The *Shabad*, the Word, is not simply an object to be defended but a living truth to be realised through sustained engagement. In this theological register, the relationship between external acts and inner spiritual reality is one that the tradition has asked its followers to reflect upon.

And yet, Sikhism does not remain within a purely contemplative frame, nor should one expect it to. Its historical

evolution produced a distinct institutional and shared identity, anchored in Guru Granth Sahib as a living Guru, and not merely a repository of wisdom but the living focal point of collective devotion, authority and continuity. This is not incidental but constitutive of our Sikh tradition, in which the scripture is a symbol of collective survival, a condensation of historical memory and dignity accumulated through centuries of immense sacrifice and resistance. To treat acts of deliberate desecration as merely symbolic offences, without social or legal consequence, would be to misread both the phenomenology of religious community and the specific historical vulnerabilities of the Sikh experience.

To acknowledge this fully is not to settle the question of legislation. It is to understand the conditions that give rise to the demand for it. The push for stricter sacrilege laws in Punjab must emerge from history, from asking whether the lived experience of a community has found its most sacred symbols repeatedly targeted in contexts of political destabilisation. What is being debated, therefore, is not theology in isolation. It is memory, collective dignity and the question of whether certain forms of targeted desecration constitute a form of emotional hurt that the law has an obligation to address.

However, while nearly every religious tradition seeks legal protection against acts perceived as desecration, such laws cannot become instruments of securing favour with a religious community. Rever-

ence can never be legislated into existence, nor can faith be placed under perpetual surveillance by the state or by self-appointed guardians of religious sentiment. The question of whether every individual possesses the 'proper' degree of respect for Guru Granth Sahib cannot be adjudicated through punitive law without producing an atmosphere of fear, suspicion and vigilantism.

India's legal framework contains provisions to address acts that deliberately inflame communal tensions or wound religious sentiments. To go beyond this and to encourage a politics of continuous vigilance around sacrilege risks transforming a deeply personal and spiritual relation of reverence into a public regime of coercion and fear.

This is precisely where the philosophical complexity becomes most demanding. Law operates through coercion. Reverence, by contrast, is at its most meaningful when it is freely given, arising from genuine understanding rather than external compulsion. The question that political philosophers and theologians have long grappled with is whether these two registers, the legal and the devotional, can be aligned without one compromising the other. It is a question without easy resolution, and one that the tradition itself, with its emphasis on inner realisation, places before us with particular force. The question, thus, is how that tension is best handled, and whether criminal law is the appropriate instrument for doing so.

### QUICK CROSSWORD

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8						
9			10			
11						
12						
13						
17						
20						
22						

#### ACROSS

- 1 Of the earliest times (8)
- 5 Heartfelt (4)
- 9 Reflected (5)
- 10 Nevertheless (7)
- 11 Working on a freelance basis (4-8)
- 13 Easy to remember (6)
- 14 English painter of horses (6)
- 17 Virtually (2,3,3,4)
- 20 Brightly coloured flowering plant (7)
- 21 Open space in a forest (5)
- 22 Gaelic name for Ireland (4)
- 23 Jack of all trades (8)

#### Yesterday's Solution

**Across:** 1 Eagle-eyed, 8 Exult, 9 Rat race, 10 Fulfill, 11 Feeler, 12 Cocktail, 15 Sediment, 18 Trudge, 20 Demure, 21 Initial, 22 Wine, 23 Downgrade.

**Down:** 2 Abate, 3 Lordly, 4 Encircle, 5 Debunk, 6 Ruffian, 7 Still life, 11 False dawn, 13 Cotton on, 14 Adamant, 16 Marked, 17 Muster, 19 Grand.

### SU DO KU

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

#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

#### CALENDAR

- MAY 23, 2026, SATURDAY**
- Shukla Samvat 1948
  - Jyestha Shukla 9
  - Jyestha Purnashtami 9
  - Hijri 1447
  - Shukla Paksha Tithi 8, up to 4:28 am
  - Dhruva Yoga up to 6:14 am
  - Vyagataha Yoga up to 4:43 am
  - Maha Nakshatra up to 2:10 am
  - Moon in Leo sign
  - Gandmoola ended 2:10 am

### FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	40	24
New Delhi	44	28
Amritsar	38	26
Bathinda	44	25
Jalandhar	38	26
Ludhiana	40	27
Bhivani	41	28
Hisar	41	27
Sirsa	45	30
Dharamsala	31	18
Manali	23	12
Shimla	26	15
Srinagar	24	14
Jammu	41	28
Kargil	22	08
Lah	22	07
Delhradun	37	22
Mussoorie	29	20

The Statesman

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Hidden Inflation

India's inflation numbers are beginning to tell two very different stories. One is reassuring. The other is a warning. On paper, retail inflation remains comfortably below the Reserve Bank of India's medium-term target. That creates the impression that the country has escaped the inflationary turbulence now affecting large parts of the world economy. Yet beneath that surface calm, another indicator has started flashing red. Wholesale inflation has surged sharply, driven overwhelmingly by energy costs and imported commodity pressures linked to the escalating conflict in West Asia.

The divergence matters because wholesale inflation is often where broader inflationary cycles begin. Producers, transporters and manufacturers absorb higher costs initially, but they rarely absorb them indefinitely. Eventually those costs travel through supply chains and appear in the prices that consumers pay for food, transport, services and consumer goods. India may therefore be entering a delayed inflation phase rather than a controlled one. Fuel is central to this story, especially diesel. Unlike advanced economies where inflation is often driven by consumer demand, India remains highly vulnerable to energy-linked cost inflation. Diesel powers freight movement, agricultural pumps, buses, construction equipment and large sections of the informal economy. When diesel prices rise, almost every layer of economic activity becomes more expensive. Vegetables cost more to transport, factories pay more for logistics, and farmers confront rising cultivation expenses.

What makes the present situation more delicate is that India's economy is still recovering unevenly from years of global disruptions. Household consumption has improved, but wage growth in many sectors remains fragile. A broad-based rise in prices without a corresponding increase in incomes risks compressing purchasing power at a politically sensitive moment. The government also faces a difficult balancing act. India cannot indefinitely shield domestic consumers from global price shocks without sacrificing fiscal stability. Excess reductions and fuel subsidies offer temporary relief but strain public finances. At the same time, allowing fuel prices to rise rapidly carries inflationary and electoral risks. The price is often gradual price adjustments that delay, rather than eliminate, inflationary transmission.

The RBI's dilemma is equally complex. The central bank had appeared to be approaching a phase where interest rate easing could support growth. But imported energy inflation changes the equation. Cutting rates aggressively while crude prices remain elevated could weaken the rupee further, making imports even more expensive. The RBI is therefore likely to remain cautious, prioritising inflation credibility and currency stability over rapid monetary easing. The trajectory of the West Asia conflict, global oil markets, shipping disruptions and even the monsoon will influence whether inflation remains manageable or trends into a prolonged cycle. A poor monsoon combined with sustained crude price rises would place India under simultaneous food and fuel pressure - historically the most politically and economically destabilising combination. India's inflation challenge, therefore, is no longer about present numbers alone. It is about the lag between shock and visibility. By the time retail inflation fully reflects today's wholesale pressures, the economy may already be living with their consequences.

Elastic Justice

For decades, the United States projected itself as the world's foremost defender of rules-based governance. American judges in the Supreme Court have spoken across continents, lecturing developing nations about transparency, institutional independence and equal treatment before the law. Yet every so often, a case emerges that exposes the uncomfortable flexibility beneath that moral language.

The reported resolution of the American proceedings involving Indian billionaire Gautam Adani is one such moment.

The facts are striking enough on their own. The US Securities and Exchange Commission has moved to settle civil fraud allegations against Adani and his nephew through financial penalties and behavioural safeguards, without any admission of guilt. The US Justice Department has reportedly sought dismissal with prejudice of criminal fraud charges, effectively ensuring that cannot ordinarily be revived. Simultaneously, the US Treasury has imposed a separate financial settlement on Adani Enterprises over alleged sanctions-related violations involving Iranian-origin LPG shipments.

None of these actions is new. Prosecutors possess wide discretion in deciding whether cases should proceed. Civil regulators routinely settle without admissions of wrongdoing. Governments often resolve sanctions matters through negotiated penalties. Formally, the American legal system remains fully within its constitutional boundaries.

And yet, the broader optics are difficult to ignore. The episode acquired an added layer after reports that Mr Adani hired Mr Robert Giuffra Jr, one of President Donald Trump's longtime personal legal advisers, while the Justice Department reviewing the matter was headed by Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche, himself a former Trump defence lawyer. No evidence has emerged of wrongdoing by either man. But the overlap between political proximity, elite legal access and favourable prosecutorial outcomes inevitably raises larger institutional questions. Those questions become sharper because the case sits at the intersection of law, geopolitics and strategic capital.

The United States today is engaged in an intense contest for supply chains, industrial investment and geopolitical alignment. India occupies a central place in Washington's long-term calculations against China. Large Indian conglomerates are no longer viewed merely as private businesses operating abroad; they increasingly exist within a strategic framework shaped by diplomacy, trade and national interest. That context matters because modern states rarely separate legal enforcement entirely from strategic priorities. The difference is that democracies often cloak this reality in the language of institutional neutrality.

The Adani affair does not prove that American justice was "sold". Such claims would be excessive and unsupported. But it does reveal how elastic enforcement can become when the legal process intersects with geopolitical calculation, economic incentives and networks of elite influence. That is the deeper significance of this episode. The law still functions in the United States. Courts still operate. Procedures are still followed. But the case serves as a reminder that in a world of democracies, rule of law does not eliminate discretion. It institutionalises it. And when immense capital, strategic investment and political access converge, discretion itself can begin to look indistinguishable from power.

Shelved Knowledge

Independent India did not consciously ratify Macaulay's contempt; it did something less dramatic and more durable. It allowed the colonial syllabus to survive by inertia. Two centuries on, an Indian school-leaver can recite Newton's three laws and the Krebs cycle, but has rarely been asked, even in passing, to open the Ar̥yabhaṭṭya, the Caraka Saṁhitā or the Arthaśāstra

On the second of February 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay compressed an empire's educational ambition into a single sentence: "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia". The line is often quoted as insult, and it was one. Its deeper consequence, however, lay elsewhere. It licensed a curriculum in which India's vast sources became objects of antiquarian curiosity rather than instruments of disciplined thought.

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Plato, Hobbes, Descartes and Freud appear in our textbooks as makers of knowledge; Kautilya, Caraka, Sūtrānta, Ar̥yabhaṭṭa, Gaṭmāta and Rāmaṇuja appear, if at all, as cultural names detached from method. The correction now required is neither religious instruction nor political theatre. It is the recovery of a knowledge corpus that is old, internally reasoned, and fit for critical use.

The policy doorway is already open. The National Education Policy 2020 names ancient Indian knowledge as a resource to be researched, enhanced and put to new uses, and calls for accurate accounts of traditional Indian knowledge in the curriculum, expanded translation, and stronger classical-language institutions. The National Curriculum Framework 2023, prepared under NCERT, lists "Rootedness in India and Indian Knowledge Systems" as a cross-cutting theme. In June 2023 the University Grants Commission required a small but mandatory share of credits in every degree programme to be in Indian Knowledge Systems and the All India Council for Technical Education has seeded a dedicated IKS division across engineering campuses. The question is no longer whether the State may begin. It is whether universities will do the work with enough intellectual honesty to make the syllabus respectable. Consider governance first. The Arthaśāstra is not a pious text masquerading as



administration; it is a cold manual of statecraft. Its saptaṅga theory of the state - sovereign, ministers, country, fortified town, treasury, army and ally - belongs naturally in any public-administration syllabus. Its maṅgala scheme of buffer states and natural enemies, and its śaḍgūrya analysis of the six diplomatic measures, can be taught alongside the structural realism that international relations students now learn through Meisnerism: not as nationalist ornament, but as indigenous analytic vocabulary. The Nīṭiśāstra tradition supplies another: prudence - restraint, counsel, consequence. No civil servant needs to copy Kautilya; many would benefit from being made to argue with him.

Medicine offers a still clearer case. The Caraka Saṁhitā, especially its Sūtrāśāstra, treats health through cause, symptom, diet, conduct, pharmacology and the physician's obligations: the Sūtrānta and the Sūtrāsāstra's Sūtrānta classifies surgical instruments and procedures with a precision that belongs in any history-of-medicine syllabus. None of this exempts Ayurveda from evidence; it invites it. The PLOS ONE multicentric randomised trial of AYUSH-64 as adjunct care in mild and moderate COVID-19, published in March 2023, is one example; randomised double-blind trials of Withania somnifera, gathered into a meta-analysis in Phytotherapy Research in 2022, are another.

In May 2025 the World Health Assembly adopted the Global Traditional Medicine Strategy 2025-2034, which speaks of integrating safe and effective traditional medicine where appropriate; it does not, by itself, validate every claim made in the name of Ayurveda. That distinction matters. It is, in fact, precisely the distinction a serious curriculum is meant to teach. Astronomy demands the same sobriety. Ar̥yabhaṭṭa's Aryabhaṭṭya is not imposed by exaggeration; it is impressive enough when read accurately. In its Kālikrīḍāpāda and Gola sections he posits 1,582,237,500 eastward rotations of the Earth in a single mahāyuga of 4,320,000 sidereal years. The sidereal day that follows from his arithmetic is twenty-three hours, fifty-six minutes and 41 seconds; the modern measurement is 409 seconds.

He held that the Earth turns on its axis a thousand years before Copernicus would

publish the same idea in Europe. The decimal positional notation that organises every modern calculation is itself an inheritance whose lineage runs through Bakshali and Brahmagupta, not through any European hand. A modern classroom can honour Aryabhaṭṭa only by refusing to make him a mascot. Philosophy completes the argument. The six dāśarṇas are not loose spiritual opinions; they are technical schools with rules of inference and rival accounts of reality. The Nyāya-sūtra opens by naming sixteen categories of inquiry and accepts pratyakṣa, anumāna, upamāna and śabda as the means of knowledge - material that belongs in any logic and epistemology curriculum.

Rīmānujāyānīyā Sūtrānta, set out in the Sribhāṣya and the Vedārthaśāstra, distinguishes cit, acting and lśvara without dissolving difference into illusion or reducing - matter to consciousness - a position that reads, in modern dress, as a thoughtful neighbour to the debates from P. F. Strawson onward on the unity of subject. The tradition's description of the Veda as aparūpāyā is part of its self-understanding; it cannot be the evidentiary ground for a public curriculum.

The ground must be argument. The Dharmasūtras require a harder courage. They contain passages no honest reader can defend; they also contain the longest sustained argument in any tradition about the nature of normative authority, the limits of custom, and the relation of law to social reality. To teach them critically is not to endorse them. It is to train students in historical anthropology, legal sociology, gender analysis and the study of power. A civilisation that cannot read its difficult texts will either sentimentalise them from a distance or surrender them to polemicists. The classroom is the one place where reverence, rejection and evidence can be compelled to sit at the same table.

The real objection is politicisation, and it is serious. A careless syllabus can turn scholarship into slogan; a frightened syllabus can turn ignorance into neutrality. The cure for politicisation is not curricular amnesia. It is scholarship strict enough to distinguish inheritance from indoctrination.

That cure has names and addresses. It means UGC-funded translations and peer-reviewed critical editions, prepared through institutions such as the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, the classical-language universities and established Indology departments. It means graduate lecturers in Indian Knowledge Systems at central universities, with carefully designed pilot modules in selected CBSE schools. And it means integrated teaching; Kautilya in political theory, Caraka in medical humanities, Ar̥yabhaṭṭa in the history of science, Nyāya in logic, Rāmaṇuja in metaphysics and Dharmasūtra in social-science method. The remedy for political instinct is not to keep the texts closed; it is to place them where political instinct cannot reach them - in a seminar room, with primary languages, comparative reading and an external examiner.

The argument is not exotic. Japan's Meiji reformers absorbed Western learning at speed yet built their new schools on the moral and institutional capital of Tokugawa-era Confucian, Shinto and Buddhist traditions. China, after a curriculum revision between 2014 and 2017, returned its Confucian Analects to the gaokao without sliding into theocracy. Finland teaches the Kalevala as living literature and gives Sāmi knowledge its place in the classroom and policy alike. India's case is larger, older and more internally diverse than any of these - which is an argument for better design, not for avoidance.

Macaulay's shelf need not be burnt, nor worshipped. It can remain where it belongs - one shelf in a larger library. The classrooms of this country will, this academic year, send out a generation of school-leavers fluent in Newton and Kepler, and that is no loss. The loss is that very few among them will have been told that, in 499 of the Common Era, a man writing at Kusumapura held the Earth turning on its axis and counted the stars to within an arc-second of accuracy. The shelf was never empty. The neglected question is whether India will, at last, give its students the key to the room that was locked behind it.



T KANNAN The writer, a practicing Chartered Accountant and a Vedantic Scholar, can be reached at kumman@vsnl.in

THE KATHMANDU POST

A case for better regulation of parliamentary reporting

The premises of Nepal's parliament are increasingly being transformed into a theatre of the absurd. The recent surge of unregulated content creators - armed with boom mics and mobile phones, in the Singha Durbar premises - has blurred the distinction between news reporting and targeted provocation.

While the pursuit of accountability and well-functioning news outlets remains the cornerstone of functioning democracy, the current descent into viral journalism threatens to undermine the very ethos of accountability, often backsliding into ad hominem to extract a reaction. In separate instances last week, Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle and former Deputy Speaker Indira Ranamagar found themselves physically cornered and bombarded with questions designed not to elicit information but to generate controversy for social media consumption. In one particular

instance, Ranamagar was hounded despite being visibly ill, illustrating a total abandonment of basic empathy in the race for digital engagement.

The core of the crisis lies in the dilution (and in some cases, an utter lack) of editorial judgment. Traditional journalism, which prioritises nuanced critique of policies and national issues, is increasingly being eclipsed by a blind race for views on social media platforms.

The absence of editorial oversight has led to a flood of unverified, often trivial, content. It goes without saying that not every individual with a microphone is a journalist.

Meanwhile, the influx of content creators who ignore established principles has placed genuine parliamentary reporters in a precarious position, risking a blanket crackdown that could eventually restrict

all media access. A decisive intervention is required to restore decorum essential to reporting parliamentary affairs.

The solution, however, must not be the curtailment of reporting. The right to ask questions and hold power to account is non-negotiable.

Any move to shut out the media entirely would be a regression into opacity. Instead, the Parliament Secretariat needs to implement a segregation of journalists and content creators. This need not be an act of censorship, but a necessary measure to ensure that those reporting parliamentary affairs are at the very least equipped with the understanding of its history and procedures, and most importantly, the bare minimum empathy. To achieve this, the Secretariat could move away from the current system of permanent accreditation for all 'journalists'.

Instead, implementation of temporary,

trial passes for those working primarily for social media or YouTube is a practical starting point for reform. These trial periods would allow the Secretariat to monitor the conduct of the creators, ensuring they adhere to the rules of parliamentary affairs reporting before granting them more stable access.

Such access needs to be contingent upon mandatory training sessions covering journalism ethics and parliamentary conduct. A critical structural change should involve the designation of specific press zones, mirroring the model employed in the British parliament. By restricting interviews and camera setups to these zones, the current practice of encircling and harassing lawmakers as they walk between meetings can be eliminated.

This ensures that while lawmakers remain accessible for questioning, they are not obstructed or intimidated in their movements.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

School fee

Sir, The recent statement by West Bengal CM Sitiveni Adhikari, urging private schools to regulate tuition fees, has definitely touched on a deeply polarising issue. It is a valid appeal, no doubt, but running a high-quality school entails costs that cannot be ignored.

There is a saying that a school is only as good as its teachers. Private schools have to offer highly competitive salaries to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. In order to keep pace with inflation, the schools cannot pay less to their teachers.

Apart from salaries, private schools spend a fortune on high-tech science labs, digital libraries, air-conditioned environments, and robotics set-ups. All these require continuous

maintenance and a high amount of capital expenditure. If the fees are kept low, then all these facilities will be compromised.

The government should not enforce rigid fee caps to force the private schools to lower the fees. However, the schools must provide a justifiable fee structure that aligns with the services offered.

Yours, etc., Subhobrata Basu, Kolkata, 20 May.

What's the rush?

Sir, Gig workers are an essential part of India's urban economy today, whether it's food delivery or quick-commerce apps. But the rush to deliver goods in 10 minutes has made India's roads extremely dangerous.

Horrific accidents are a regular occurrence in major cities in India as a consequence.

The root of this problem lies in the business model of gig companies. Most delivery apps guarantee 'delivery on time' or 'delivery of goods in 10 minutes'. Failure to arrive on time results in a drop in the ratings of workers or a loss of income.

As a result, these young people are forced to break traffic laws. They take risky paths like driving on the wrong side of the road, running red lights and riding bikes on footpaths. The consequences are dire.

These workers have no permanent salary, no future security or adequate health insurance. Most companies do not want to take responsibility for them after accidents. The demand for quick service from customers



can turn ignorance into neutrality. The cure for politicisation is not curricular amnesia. It is scholarship strict enough to distinguish inheritance from indoctrination. That cure has names and addresses. It means UGC-funded translations and peer-reviewed critical editions, prepared through institutions such as the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, the classical-language universities and established Indology departments. It means graduate lecturers in Indian Knowledge Systems at central universities, with carefully designed pilot modules in selected CBSE schools. And it means integrated teaching; Kautilya in political theory, Caraka in medical humanities, Ar̥yabhaṭṭa in the history of science, Nyāya in logic, Rāmaṇuja in metaphysics and Dharmasūtra in social-science method. The remedy for political instinct is not to keep the texts closed; it is to place them where political instinct cannot reach them - in a seminar room, with primary languages, comparative reading and an external examiner.

The argument is not exotic. Japan's Meiji reformers absorbed Western learning at speed yet built their new schools on the moral and institutional capital of Tokugawa-era Confucian, Shinto and Buddhist traditions. China, after a curriculum revision between 2014 and 2017, returned its Confucian Analects to the gaokao without sliding into theocracy. Finland teaches the Kalevala as living literature and gives Sāmi knowledge its place in the classroom and policy alike. India's case is larger, older and more internally diverse than any of these - which is an argument for better design, not for avoidance.

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is also indirectly accelerating this death march. To prevent this disaster, the government should enforce strict traffic laws. Delivery apps need to ban unrealistic time-based advertisements.

In addition, gig companies should be forced to provide social security and a safe working environment to their workers. We, as customers, also have to be a little patient. Because, the value of a human life is much higher than a few minutes of quick service.

Yours, etc., Sudarshan Chakrabarty, Kolkata, 20 May.

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

# 'Give wildlife stakeholders their due'

In a remote corner of eastern Jaipur, Harsh Vardhan keeps himself busy observing the birds that visit his premises. What does he get out of it? "Satisfaction," says Harsh Vardhan, "which is not easy to derive from many other preoccupations in life."

This sense of fulfilment in the octogenarian scribe-turned-wildlife crusader and scholar of Rajasthan's natural history is neither unfounded nor limited to bird watching alone. During his five-decade-long, impactful and multifaceted journey across journalism, public relations, and wildlife conservation, he, along with his associates, accomplished several commendable feats, leaving distinct footprints behind.

The conservation of the 'Godawan', Rajasthan's state bird, the protection of Siberian cranes, and the preservation of Ranthambhore National Park and its tigers remain among his closest-to-heart projects. These achievements, he believes, will always give him a reason to smile whenever he reflects on his life's work.

In an exclusive conversation with Satish Kumar Sharma, renowned ecologist Harsh Vardhan, credited with leading the campaign to save the Great Indian Bustard from extinction in the 1970s, and the man for all seasons as far as ecology and wildlife are concerned, talks about bustard conservation and ecology, and the 'Save Tiger' campaign, among others.

Here are excerpts:

**Q: Let us start with your efforts to save the Great Indian Bustard (GIB) from extinction. How did it all begin?**

**A:** Arab sheikhs began arriving in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan during the 1970s. I discovered that their activities violated India's Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Along with my colleagues, I opposed their wanton fauconry. The press picked up the issue because it attracted considerable readership, and The Statesman also published reports on it.

The campaign received unprecedented support. The Rajasthan High Court in Jodhpur granted a stay order, and the royal guests had to return.

Very little was known about bustards at the time, so we organised an International Symposium on Bustards in Jaipur from 1-3 November 1980. It brought an enormous workload upon me. My book, Bustards in Decline (co-authored with Paul D Gorup), was formally released by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in 1983.

However, appeals to begin captive breeding of the Great Indian Bustard fell on deaf ears from 1980 onward. Then, in 2019, Chief Wildlife Warden Arindam Tomar took the initiative. An ex-situ breeding facility for the species was established in Desert National Park, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. As a result, around 80 chicks are now in safe hands, meaning that the extinction threat to this critically endangered species has, to some extent, been averted.

**Q: Is there any other species in a similar situation that you have tackled?**

**A:** Siberian Crane numbers were declining at Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur. During my visit to the Keoladeo Ghana Sanctuary in 1969 (it was not yet a national park then), I had counted around 65 Siberian Cranes. By the 1970s, the number had declined to 25. The International Crane Foundation in the United States came forward to support the cause. In the early 1990s, a satellite transmitter was attached to a bird in the park to ascertain its migration route between Bharatpur and Siberia, and vice versa, in an effort to conserve the wetlands and stopover sites along the route.

The last Siberian Crane was observed in the park in 2002. The species is now considered extinct in India, though it continues to breed successfully in Siberia. Its eastern population, numbering a few hundred birds, still migrates annually from eastern Siberia to Poyang Lake in Jiangxi Province, China.

**Q: You must have collaborated with overseas bodies and experts in your conservation efforts. Please tell us about them?**

**A:** The US Fish and Wildlife Service recognised my work and offered me a five-week exposure visit to wildlife habitats and species in the United States. The US experts I met there have remained connected with me to this day.

Dr George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation in the US, has often suggested that India should once again host Siberian Cranes. There is a possibility that Keoladeo National Park could receive a few pairs of Siberian Cranes and maintain them in its wetlands. Food, particularly aquatic grass, is available in abundance there. During summer, when the habitat becomes dry, the birds could be shifted to a specially created enclosure designed to retain a wetland-like environment. These birds would not only become a major attraction for visitors but would also present a new conservation challenge for forest officials.

In the mid-1990s, the park received captive-born Siberian Cranes from a US breeding facility. During the summer, a few birds were removed from the park to protect them from predation by jackals and stray dogs. They were then housed at Jaipur Zoo. With the support of forest officials, I managed their care to everyone's satisfaction.

**Q: Tell us about your work in Ranthambhore National Park, particularly in the context of the 'Save Tiger' campaign of earlier years.**

**A:** Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve is probably one of the greatest success stories for India as a whole in recent years. I organised an Eco-Development Assessment of the needs of rural areas around this reserve in the early 1980s. I am told there are 57 Project Tiger Reserves in India today. However, tiger sightings are most frequent only in a few of them: Ranthambhore, Sariska, Bandhavgarh, Panna, Kanha, Pench, Tadoba, Nagarhole, and Bandipur, among others.

The remaining reserves are also being managed with adequate personnel and financial inputs. However, tiger

numbers may not be increasing significantly due to demographic pressure. Many reserves are not very popular with visitors because of the low likelihood of tiger sightings during safaris.

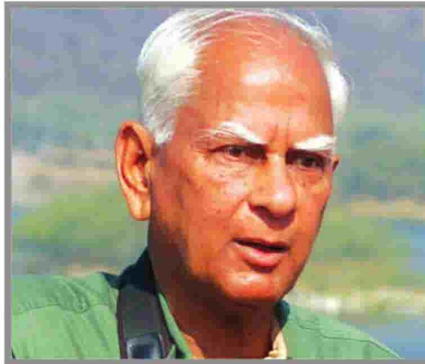
The tiger is a major conservation success at the global level, and India has reason to be proud of this achievement. By the turn of the 1970s, it was widely believed that tigers would become extinct in India due to widespread hunting and pressure from human and cattle populations. Today, India is home to about 4,000 tigers in the wild. I must point out that tigers also generate substantial revenue for the hospitality sector in India.

Numerous large and mid-sized resorts have come up around tiger reserves, benefiting from this ecosystem. Smaller hoteliers are also joining the competition. I estimate that tigers contribute around Rs 1,500 crore annually to the economy. However, this revenue is largely captured by the hospitality sector - the tiger receives nothing, and the forest department receives very little.

**Q: What would be your suggestion in this regard?**

**A:** Give the stakeholders their due. Villages around tiger reserves, so their crops and courtyards are impacted by blue bulls during the day and wild boars at night. Crops are raided, and farmers receive no compensation. They are the worst sufferers. Hardly any villagers receive employment in the mechanisms being developed in this country.

Environmental economist Madhu Verma's assessment of ecosystem services from some tiger reserves stands out as one of the most exemplary case studies. She conducted this work while teaching at the Indian Institute of Forest Management. The reports were co-authored with scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India as well. She clearly demonstrates the benefits of tiger reserves, both tangible and intangible. The authorities now need to follow the recommendations emerging from these studies.



**Q: The number of leopards and tigers has risen in urban areas. Should one view these as counterproductive effects of the wildlife protection?**

**A:** As already outlined, India stands proudly on the podium in terms of conserving megafauna. Leopards are more opportunistic wild cats than tigers. They tend to stay away from tiger-dominated areas to avoid encounters with tigers. As a result, they range along the peripheries of reserves and prey on domestic dogs, as well as occasionally attacking buffaloes, cows, goats, and sheep. Sanjay Gandhi National Park and Jhalana Leopard Reserve are glaring examples where citizens often find themselves on the receiving end of human-wildlife conflict.

A shortage of prey species is a key reason, compounded by the increasing population of predators.

Consider the situation at Tadoba, Bandhavgarh, and Ranthambhore: tigers often move into rural pockets, forcing villagers - men, women, and children - to abruptly shut their doors at the sight of a tiger entering village

lanes. While confirmed man-eating incidents are not on the rise, cattle killing is rampant. However, compensation for livestock losses is often delayed due to evidence-based verification procedures. At times, villagers are also alleged to have to share compensation amounts with officials, reflecting concerns of corruption that I have heard about.

The time is ripe to address the management of carnivore populations. How can this be done? Today, forest officials often track and capture a wandering tiger or leopard for hours, sometimes days and nights, tranquillise it, and release it back into the forest. Is this the end of the problem? No. The same animal often returns to the same area after a week or a fortnight.

We must expand forest reserves to accommodate the increasing number of predators, which is not easy, or increase the prey base, such as deer populations, which is also difficult. Population control of carnivorous predators remains a contentious idea, often resisted by scientists. India is known for sweeping such issues under the carpet.

# Higher gold taxes could backfire again

SHREY MADAAN

When governments want consumers to buy less of something, they usually reach for taxes. India's latest hike in gold import duties follows that familiar pattern. The assumption is straightforward: make gold more expensive, demand will fall, imports will decline, and pressure on the rupee will ease.

The problem is that gold demand in India has never been driven solely by price. It is tied to savings habits, cultural preferences, inflation concerns, and economic uncertainty. Policies that ignore these realities rarely eliminate demand. More often, they distort the market around it.

The government's decision to raise import duties on gold and silver to 15 per cent is already pushing domestic prices sharply higher. Industry estimates suggest the revised tax structure could increase gold prices by nearly Rs 27,000 per 10 grams after duties and taxes. Policymakers hope that costlier imports will discourage excessive

bullion buying and ease pressure on foreign exchange reserves amid currency volatility and geopolitical uncertainty. But when price increases are driven primarily through taxation, markets often adjust in ways policy makers do not anticipate. India has tried this approach before, and the results were mixed at best. When import duties on gold were sharply raised in the past, official imports slowed, while smuggling surged.

The widening gap between domestic and global prices created a strong incentive for illegal trade. That informal network weakened only after duties were reduced. The risk now is that the same cycle returns: higher taxes pushing consumers and traders towards unofficial channels rather than reducing demand itself.

This is the central problem with using taxation to engineer consumer behavior. Demand does not disappear simply because prices rise. Consumers adapt. Some buyers may shift toward lighter jewelry. Others may delay purchases temporarily. But a significant share of demand is likely to move toward grey

markets, unofficial imports, or informal cash transactions where oversight is weaker, and consumer protections are absent. Legitimate businesses bear the burden while illicit networks gain an advantage.

That distortion matters beyond the jewelry sector. India's gold market supports a vast ecosystem of small retailers, craftsmen, refiners, and traders. When policy pushes activity away from formal channels, compliance weakens and transparency declines. The result is often the expansion of the very parallel economy policymakers claim to oppose.

There is also a broader behavioral reality policymakers tend to underestimate. In India, gold is not viewed purely as a luxury purchase. For many households, it functions as a store of value, a hedge against inflation, and a form of financial security. During periods of economic volatility or weak confidence in financial markets, demand for gold often rises because consumers see it as a symbol of stability. That is why attempts to suppress gold buying through taxation tend to have

limited long-term effects. Consumers may change how they buy gold, but not necessarily whether they buy it.

Countries with lower barriers to precious metal imports generally see narrower gaps between official and unofficial markets, reducing incentives for smuggling. Singapore, for instance, removed investment-grade precious metals from its goods and services tax framework more than a decade ago to strengthen transparent, formal bullion trading. The result was not a collapse in regulation, but a more competitive and formalized market environment.

India risks moving in the opposite direction. Higher duties may temporarily curb official imports, but they also increase incentives for regulatory arbitrage. The larger the gap between domestic and international prices, the greater the reward for bypassing formal channels altogether.

None of this means policymakers should ignore concerns around the trade deficit or currency pressures. Managing external vulnerabilities matters. But relying too heavily on



punitive taxation often treats the symptom rather than the underlying issue.

Consumers move away from gold gradually when financial markets inspire greater confidence and alternative investments become more reliable and accessible. Behaviour changes more sustainably when better options emerge naturally, not when existing choices are priced out through punitive taxation. India's latest gold duty hike

reflects a recurring policy instinct: when markets become uncomfortable, raise the cost of participation. But history shows that consumers rarely respond in such predictable ways. When taxes become too distortional, demand tends to move rather than disappear. And when that happens, the informal economy often grows faster than compliance.

(The writer is Indian Policy Associate, Consumer Choice Center.)

## 100 Years Ago

### SEABORNE TRADE BALANCE OF RS. 3.89 LAKHS IN INDIA'S FAVOUR

THE total imports of private merchandise in April 1926 amounted to Rs. 20,05 lakhs and total exports, including re-exports, to Rs. 27,58 lakhs. Net imports of private treasure during the month of report were Rs. 3,79 lakhs and total visible balance of trade in merchandise at 1 treasure was Rs. 3,89 lakhs in favour of India. Balance of remittances of funds was Rs. 13 lakhs.

### ANGLO-TURKISH AGREEMENT FUTURE OF MOSUL FRONTIER

GENEVA, MAY

THE signature of the Anglo-Turkish Agreement is imminent, according to semi-official information which outlines the bases of the Agreement, says that:

Firstly Turkey obtains recognition of the frontier, conferring important strategic advantages though not giving her the town of Mosul.

Secondly, Britain, Turkey, and Iraq subscribe to a pact of non-aggression in which Persia will participate.

Thirdly the Economic Convention will enable Turkey to have access to the natural wealth of the Mosul district. Fourthly, Turkey will join the League of Nations. - Reuter.

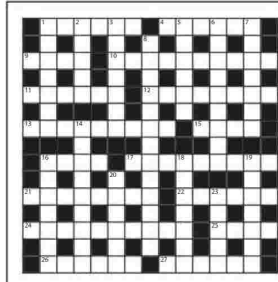
### M. PERET'S DENIAL AGREEMENT WITH BANK NEVER BROKEN

(TIMES SPECIAL SERVICE.) LONDON, MAY

DENYING that the Government has disengaged with the Bank of France regarding measures for the protection of the franc, M. Peret says that the Bank is doing its utmost to support the Government, whose proposals include using the Bank's credit for the purpose of buying up all francs offered in international markets for which there is no demand, also the centralization of all foreign exchange.

The franc closed to-day at 154 to the £.

## Crossword | No. 293469



### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

1 Surprisingly mobile blood clots (6)  
2 Statement about rule applied to eggs (6)  
3 Cover old swimming pool (6)  
4 Pad in which Frenchman entertains partner for the evening (4-15)  
5 Swimming race interrupted by American with recording equipment (6)

### ACROSS

12 Damage ring at a Spanish resort (8)  
13 Teacher's favourites covering clear iodine with hot piece of lab equipment (5,4)  
15 Fictional bear's an adherent of Hindu philosophical system (4)  
16 Soldiers returned with new evidence (4)  
17 Unionist line adopted by Arab nation (8)  
21 A short risk found during search of burial site (8)  
22 Animal coming back with tallest bird (6)

### DOWN

1 Temporary transfer for Next employees close to retirement (10)  
2 Spend money to secure Lesling's first dramatic work (4)  
3 Doctor given advantage in search for oversters (6)  
4 Police officers let suspect get spirit (6)  
5 Remove hair from pie cooked near the end of the night (7)

### ACROSS

6 Pound returned by fair English fellow (5)  
7 Boy clutching map of North European region (7)  
8 Good artist following through with drug (6)  
9 Octopus originally caught in net close to of sea left with a sad expression (9)  
10 German siren featuring in folklore leitmotif (7)  
11 Dancing bears seen III prepared at beginning of scene in musical (5,10)

### DOWN

14 Doctor and old lady taking part in limesome process (9)  
15 Notice allegedly found next to small opening in dense vegetation (7)  
16 Sleepwear's side to neckwear (7)  
17 It's set in stone to cause trouble (7)  
18 Cried-type welcoming time to prepare snack (5,5)  
19 Extremely destructive drug found in storage facility (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

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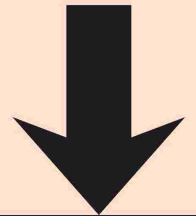
## **◆ Indian Newspaper**

- 1) Times of India
- 2) The Hindu
- 3) Business line
- 4) The Indian Express
- 5) Economic Times
- 6) Financial Express
- 7) Live Mint
- 8) Hindustan Times
- 9) Business Standard

## **◆ International Newspapers channel [European, American, Gulf & Asia]**

## **◆ Magazine Channel** National & International [General & Exam related]

## **◆ English & Hindi Editorials** [National + International Editorials]



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Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud  
Maya Angelou

# Reckless drivers taking traffic police for a ride

Road accidents have returned to haunt motorists, with the State witnessing a disturbing rise in the past few months. Notably, April alone registered 851 accidents. The unfortunate part is that most of the accidents point to either reckless driving or negligence. On Thursday itself, a senior citizen was hit by a truck on the Pernem highway, leading to his death. On the same day, two other accidents occurred, one at Kasavali-Mollem and another at Bhati-Sanguem, resulting in nine people being injured.

If we recall, earlier this week, a speeding BMW lost control at the Dona Paula circle and rammed into multiple vehicles. A month back, another speeding premium car was involved in an accident near Manipl Hospital, claiming the life of a lady pillion rider while grievously injuring the man. Data from the Goa Traffic Police's Accident Scenario report shows that 92.62 per cent of the accidents in April were due to rash and negligent driving.

Once again, weak deterrence is coming to the forefront. Take the case of the Dona Paula car accident. The young driver who was speeding was seen abusing policemen and those around with foul language. Video footage showed that the BMW lost control and hit two other cars in the vicinity. This paints a sorry picture where culprits are flexing their might because of societal standing and association with those in power. Such was the case in the accident involving a Mini Cooper car last month.

Another disturbing factor is that the majority of reckless driving cases have shown involvement of youngsters. The speeding violations have risen drastically from 12,914 in 2023 to almost double in 2025, with 23,648 cases. In January this year, there were 3,957 cases of speeding recorded.

While officials in the traffic department claim to have intensified patrolling through checkpoints, surprise drives and other measures, the enforcement appears to be falling short. Road discipline is lacking in young drivers, and traffic police are failing to contain that. For example, there are so many vehicles using illegal electromagnetic horns or glass filming, which are prohibited under the Motor Vehicles Act. Fancy number plates continue to be in fashion. Traffic drives have not been able to contain these visible violations.

The aggressive behaviour and heated confrontations seen of late reflect a growing culture of impunity among reckless drivers. A stretch of the highway at Guirim is used as a bike racing course by youth late in the night, which is like making a mockery of enforcement. The question is, who is responsible? Does this behaviour come with the status of a person? Or is it because our system is compromised? Or is it that traffic police are taken for granted? Imagine the audacity of the man with the BMW in the Dona Paula accident to go on social media, literally mocking the accident.

The broader picture is troubling because the situation is literally going out of control. Rash and negligent driving, speeding, dangerously overtaking, poor lane discipline, using cellphones while driving, drunken driving, minors getting vehicles on the road and the sharp rise in vehicle density have become common in Goa. Add to this arrogance and lawlessness.

The police leadership needs to reinvent traffic policing because the traditional ways are not helping. Police need to up their game through tougher enforcement and meaningful behavioural reform. The rising number of road accidents in Goa is more than a statistic; it is a warning. The Transport Minister was recently talking about getting the latest AI-based surveillance cameras to detect those inside cars with tinted glasses. We urgently need technology to track all road violators.

If the State has to reverse the worrying trend on roads, the government will need to bring in some major reforms. Ensuring safety on roads is a shared responsibility. We can't have a free-for-all on roads and leave the common vulnerable and defenceless.

## OPEN SPACE >>

### Govt employees asked to use unreliable public transport

In response to the PM's call for austerity, the General Administration Department of Goa directed government employees to use public transport to save fuel, reduce pollution, and curb accidents. However, Goa's public transport system remains inadequate and unreliable. There are no buses between Margao and Colva after 8 PM, KTC buses are poorly maintained, and private buses are in worse condition. Rickshaws and taxis charge high fares, while Ola and Uber remain absent due to political issues. In such circumstances, expecting government employees to rely on public transport appears unrealistic, making the circular seem like mere rhetoric.

SADANAND RAIKAR, Colva

# Cockroaches or citizens?

Today's young Indians are perhaps the most educated generation in the country's history, yet millions remain unemployed or underemployed



PETER F BORGES

AUTHOR The writer is an Assistant Professor of Social Work, Goa University and founder of Human Touch Foundation

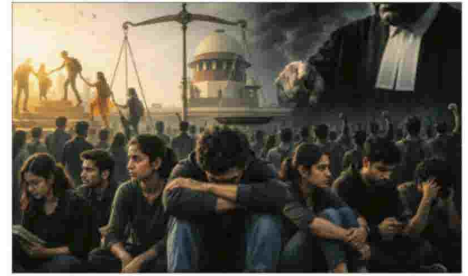
India proudly calls its youth the country's "demographic dividend." We constantly hear that India's greatest strength is its young population. Over 65% of Indians are below the age of 35. More than 360 million people are between 15 and 29 years old. By 2030, India is expected to have the world's largest working-age population. Young people are celebrated as the future workforce, the drivers of innovation, the face of Digital India and the backbone of a five-trillion-dollar economy.

But recent remarks comparing unemployed youth and activists to "cockroaches" and "parasites" by the Chief Justice of India exposed a disturbing contradiction at the heart of modern India. How can a country celebrate its youth in speeches and insult them when they struggle to survive? As someone who has spent more than 23 years working directly with adolescents and young people, I found these remarks deeply painful and disconnected from reality. India's youth are not parasites. They are carrying the burden of failures created by systems much larger than themselves.

Today's young Indians are perhaps the most educated generation in the country's history, yet millions remain unemployed or underemployed. Degrees no longer guarantee stability or dignity. Families spend enormous amounts on education, coaching classes and competitive exams, hoping their children will secure a better future. Instead, many graduates spend years trapped in uncertainty, endlessly preparing for government jobs because secure employment opportunities remain scarce. Young people are repeatedly told to "work harder" while systems continue shrinking opportunities around them.

India's economic growth story has failed to generate enough meaningful employment for its youth. Millions remain trapped in informal work with low wages, exploitation and no social security. Young women face even harsher realities, with higher unemployment and social restrictions limiting opportunities. This is not laziness. This is systemic failure.

At the same time, India is witness-



ing a silent mental health emergency among youth. Anxiety, burnout, loneliness, academic pressure and depression are becoming normalised. India continues to report one of the world's highest suicide rates among people aged 15 to 29. Behind every statistic is a human being silently struggling — a student crushed by expectations, a graduate unable to find work, or someone pretending to be "fine" while emotionally collapsing.

Substance abuse among youth is also increasing across many regions of India. But addiction cannot be separated from hopelessness, unemployment, emotional distress and collapsing support systems. Young people are not collapsing because awareness posters are missing. They are collapsing because sustainable support systems are missing. The same Chief Justice had recently come to Goa associated with a widely publicised 30-day anti-substance abuse campaign focused on youth. There were speeches, events and media visibility. But what changed structurally afterwards? Did it create stronger mental health systems? Did it improve employment opportunities? Or did it become another campaign that disappeared after the headlines faded?

Degrees no longer guarantee stability or dignity. Families spend enormous amounts on education, coaching classes and competitive exams, hoping their children will secure a better future

This is precisely the frustration many young people feel today. Campaigns are launched. Slogans trend. Speeches are delivered. Photographs circulate. Then silence returns. Young people do not need symbolic concern. They need serious investment in their futures. One cannot speak about "saving youth" from addiction while simultaneously using dehumanising language against unemployed young people struggling to survive.

Words spoken from constitutional offices carry enormous weight. Words like "cockroaches," "parasites," "termites" and "vermin" are not harmless metaphors. History repeatedly shows that dehumanising language nor-

malises hostility against vulnerable groups. When such language comes from the highest judicial office in the country, the damage becomes even more serious because the judiciary is expected to embody dignity and empathy. Young people expressing frustration, criticism or dissent are not enemies of democracy.

Many young people today turn towards activism, journalism, RTI work and digital advocacy because these spaces allow them to question institutions and demand accountability. That does not make them parasites. It makes them citizens participating in democracy. Democracies are strengthened when young people engage critically with systems, not when they are silenced or mocked. Throughout history, generations that challenged injustice were labelled disruptive or dangerous, yet their struggles later reshaped societies for better.

India's demographic dividend is not perishing after 2030. If India fails to create meaningful jobs, strengthen mental health systems, reform education and invest seriously in young people, the consequences will not merely be economic. They will be social, psychological and deeply political.

Despite overwhelming pressure, millions of young Indians continue to study, innovate, migrate, support families and dream of better futures. That resilience deserves respect, dignity and investment — not ridicule. India's youth are not cockroaches. They are the exhausted backbone of a country that keeps demanding resilience from them while offering shrinking pathways to survival. If institutions continue mocking their pain instead of addressing it, the Republic itself must confront a dangerous question: what happens when an entire generation starts believing that the system sees them as human beings worthy of dignity at all?

## THE INBOX >>

### Safety must come first

Every time I open my newspaper, it is filled with headlines showing how Goa is turning into a concrete jungle. Rapid urban development is taking place while Goa is facing a water shortage. At the same time, incidents of gang wars, robberies, kidnapping of minors, and crimes against women are increasing at an alarming rate.

In India, women are often compared to goddesses, yet crimes against women continue to rise while the law follows its process. There is a growing need to ensure stronger safety measures and quicker action.

I humbly request the people in power to take necessary steps to make women feel safe and secure in Goa.

ANITA FERNADES, Verna

### Goa losing its charm

Goa was once known worldwide for its peaceful atmosphere, friendly people, clean beaches, hygiene and safety. These qualities attracted thousands of foreign tourists each year. However, the situation has changed, and many tourists no longer choose Goa. Many outsiders come for employment but settle permanently. In coastal areas, cities and villages, outsiders are now more numerous than locals. Traditional businesses have been taken over, causing concern. Garbage pollution is a major problem. Roads, beaches and public places are often littered with waste. Foul smells and unhygienic surroundings are common. This damages Goa's image as a clean tourist destination.

Foreign tourists and locals face safety issues. Stray dogs, harassment of women, unauthorised photography, high taxi fares, cattle on roads and beaches, and rising tensions affect peace. Overcrowding from domestic tourism and rising costs of food and hotels have pushed foreign tourists to other countries. Cheaper destinations offer better clean-

### In Panaji one gets that sinking feeling

The cave-in of a section of the main road at St Inez on Thursday morning has once again brought the spotlight on the condition of roads in Panaji. The incident has reignited serious concerns among residents. This is not an isolated case. Reports of deep cracks appearing on the stretch from Mala to the KTC bus stand in Patto have further intensified fears that parts of Panaji's roads are becoming structurally unstable. Over the past few years, Panaji has witnessed continuous excavation under various Smart City initiatives. Roads have repeatedly been dug up and patched. Such repeated excavation weakens the road foundation, especially if proper compaction and engineering standards are not followed during restoration. A major collapse during peak traffic hours can easily result in serious injuries or even fatalities. During the monsoon, the situation becomes even more dangerous as water seepage weakens the soil beneath roads. Smart City projects are supposed to make urban life safer, more efficient and sustainable. The real question is whether the administration will act before the damage becomes irreversible.

ADELMO FERNADES, Vasco

liness, safety and peace. Government and citizens must work together to protect Goa's identity, cleanliness and culture. Strict action against pollution, illegal settlements, harassment and poor civic management is needed to restore its reputation as a world-class tourist destination in the future strongly soon.

RONNIE DSOUZA, Chandor

### Annual urban breakdown

While monsoon rains are expected every year, the level of disruption they cause raises serious concerns about planning and disaster preparedness. The government has still not taken comprehensive precautionary measures to deal with the monsoon season. How many excuses can a city make? The situation is like the emperor's new clothes — overhyped and underdeveloped. Political parties ap-



Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

pear similar in their failures, and the current ones are no better than those before. It highlights a repeated problem: cities remain poorly prepared for predictable seasonal rain.

Year after year, flooded streets, overflowing drains, and paralysed traffic dominate the news. Even regular downpours disrupt pre-monsoon work and expose weak infrastructure. Despite being a seasonal and predictable event, the monsoon continues to cripple urban systems. Repairs to government quarters are meant to ensure safety and prevent water seepage, yet waterlogging remains common in many areas after heavy rain. The real issue is not the monsoon, but decades of poor planning, outdated drainage systems, and a lack of political will to invest in long-term resilience.

KG VILOR, Chandor

### Manoj's resignation sparks questions, not answers yet

Manoj Tukaram Parab has left the Revolutionary Goans Party, surprising many supporters. He once said he would never leave the party. He has now resigned, but the reason is unclear. Supporters are blaming MLA Viresh Mukesh Borkar, though this remains disputed. Questions are being raised about internal conflicts and social media attacks. Some allege a planned narrative involving party members. Others claim he was under pressure before his resignation. At least one member has also resigned. The situation has raised concern among Goans about political transparency. Many are asking for clarity and accountability from all sides. At present, no side has provided full proof or a clear explanation to the public so far in this matter yet remains unclear.

KIRAN KANDOLKAR VIA EMAIL

## Longevity is built through daily habits



**Urvi Lakhani**  
Chief Nutritionist at DeAge

Most people think about longevity the wrong way. They imagine a clean break: the moment they finally start eating right, sleeping eight hours, getting their bloods done, adding the right supplements. Some future version of themselves who has it together.

That version never shows up. Or if they do, they last about three weeks. Unsustainable. Longevity isn't a decision you can make once. It's the accumulated weight of a thousand small decisions you make when no one's watching and nothing feels urgent. The 11 PM choice between one more episode and actual sleep. The lunch you eat standing over the kitchen counter because you didn't plan. The workout you skip not because you're injured but because Tuesday felt heavy.

None of these feel significant in the moment. That's the trap. Biology responds to what you do, repeatedly, over time. Your mitochondrial density, your insulin sensitivity, your inflammatory baseline, these aren't set by your yearly physical or your January reset. They're shaped by the slow drip of daily behavior, compounding quietly in whichever direction you're pointed.

Most chronic diseases do not appear overnight. Metabolic dysfunction, cardiovascular disease, fatty liver, insulin resistance, cognitive decline, these are often the cumulative expression of thousands of small physiological insults compounded over decades. Poor sleep normalises inflammation. Sedentary living weakens metabolic flexibility. Chronic stress alters hormonal signaling. Ultra-processed food reshapes appetite regulation. Loneliness affects immune function more than many people realise.

I find this both sobering and oddly freeing. Sobering because there's nowhere to hide. You can't offset three months of poor sleep with a good supplement stack. You can't drink your way through your thirties and biotech your way out of it at forty-five. The body keeps score, and it doesn't do installment plans.

Freeing because it means the bar for any single day is low. You don't need to be perfect. You need to be directionally right, most of the time. A walk when you didn't feel like walking. A meal with some protein in it instead of whatever was fastest. Going to bed before midnight on a Wednesday. These aren't dramatic. They aren't nerdy.

The longevity science community loves to argue about interventions — NMN versus NR, time-restricted eating windows, cold exposure, zone two cardio, the optimal senolytics protocol. A lot of it is genuinely interesting and helpful in the right context. But I worry it gives people the impression that longevity is something you optimize for rather than something you live. That if you just find the right stack the right tracker, the right biomarker panel, you can engineer your way past the basics.

You can't. The basics are the intervention. Sleep is the intervention. Muscle mass is the intervention. Not being chronically stressed is the intervention. Everything else is refinement on top of a foundation that either exists or doesn't.

What changes when you see it this way is that tomorrow stops mattering quite so much. The question isn't whether you'll have a perfect week. It's whether today was a little better than it might have been. Did you eat something that served you? Did you protect your sleep? That's it. Do that enough days in a row and you haven't founded a protocol. You've built a life. That's what longevity actually is.

### During your workout:

**Hydrate properly:** Staying hydrated is not only crucial for your overall health but also for your skin. When you sweat, you lose moisture, which can lead to dry skin. Make sure to drink water before, during, and after your workout to keep your skin hydrated from within, ensuring a radiant post-workout glow.

**Wear appropriate clothing:** Choose moisture-wicking, breathable fabrics for your workout attire. These materials help wick sweat away from your skin, reducing the likelihood of skin irritation and acne breakouts caused by sweat-soaked clothing. Your skin will thank you for the breathability and comfort.

**Tie back your hair:** Long hair can cause friction and irritation when it rubs against your skin during exercise. To prevent breakouts on your face or neck, tie your hair back in a ponytail or bun, ensuring a comfortable workout experience.

**Sun protection:** If your workout involves outdoor activities, don't forget sunscreen. Sunburn can damage your skin, so apply a broad-spectrum sunscreen with at least SPF 30 before heading outdoors, safeguarding your skin against harmful UV rays.

### Parenting in the age of overstimulation: Helping children slowdown

Parenting in today's world comes with challenges that many parents themselves never experienced growing up. With every passing decade and changing social dynamics, families find themselves faced with situations often so alien to their own childhood that the dilemma leads to stress and anxiety in understanding how to cope with changing trends.

Pre-Covid, the world was still only anticipating the role technology would play in our lives, and post-Covid, AI has become a part of almost every aspect of our existence — by choice or otherwise. The nature of things today is "insta," and access to knowledge and information explosion have become normal. And for the eternal optimist that I am, I feel more is always welcome, except one needs to know what "dose" works for their family and child. With shrinking world boundaries and ease of information access, it is inevitable that families find themselves in a constant state of change. Before you get used to one application, something newer and fresher comes along, and the human tendency is to react and embrace everything out of the fear of missing out.

Neeta Senacha

Exercise is essential for maintaining a healthy body, but it's important to remember that your skin and hair also need some TLC during and after your workout. These elements and friction can all take a toll on your skin and hair. The sweat, friction, and exposure to environmental factors during exercise can lead to various skin and hair issues if not managed properly. In this modern age where self-care and maintaining a healthy appearance are highly valued, understanding the importance of tending to our skin and hair during and post-workout is essential. In this article, we'll provide you with a comprehensive guide on how to care for your skin and hair during and after your workout, so you can look and feel your best.

**Treat acne with care:** If you're prone to acne, consider using a product containing salicylic acid or benzoyl peroxide. These ingredients can help prevent breakouts caused by sweat and bacteria, promoting clearer, blemish-free skin.

**Hydrate from the inside:** Continue to drink water to replenish the fluids lost during your workout. Proper hydration supports healthy skin and hair, contributing to your overall well-being and radiance.

**Hair care:** After exercising, don't let sweaty hair sit on your scalp for too long. Sweat can lead to scalp issues. Rinse your hair with water and follow with a gentle, sulfate-free shampoo and conditioner, ensuring your hair stays fresh and healthy.

**C-Communication:** Communicate openly about balance and resist the urge to pack everything into one year. Allow children to develop their own interests and focus on one or two skills at a time so there is longevity and depth in what they pursue. A child does not need to learn music, dance, football, tennis, theatre, coding, and elocution all in one year. These can easily be spaced over four or five years, reducing burnout significantly.

**H-Handling the noise:** Today, everyone has advice for parents. It is important to filter the noise and understand how much your child can realistically do and what should genuinely be prioritised.

**I-Ideating the plan:** Work closely with teachers, caregivers, and most importantly the child himself or herself while planning routines and schedules.

**Battling inflammation:** Omega-3 fats offer a reasonable benefit in the fight against inflammation. They operate by specifically targeting the cells and chemicals responsible for triggering inflammatory responses. Whether you are dealing with chronic or acute inflammation, incorporating omega-3 fats into your diet can be a valuable strategy for addressing this health concern.

### After your workout:

**Cleanse your skin:** After working out, it's essential to cleanse your face to remove sweat, dirt, and oil. Use a gentle, hydrating cleanser to maintain your skin's natural moisture balance. Avoid harsh, stripping cleansers that can cause dryness, leaving your skin refreshed and clean.

**Exfoliate regularly:** Exfoliation helps remove dead skin cells, preventing clogged pores and acne. However, avoid aggressive scrubbing, which can irritate the skin. Opt for a gentle exfoliating product and use it 2-3 times a week to reveal smoother, healthier skin.

**Moisturize:** Rehydrate your skin with a suitable moisturizer. Choose one that matches your skin type — whether it's oily, dry, or combination. This step helps in maintaining skin elasticity and preventing dryness, leaving your skin feeling supple and hydrated.

## From Gym to Glow: A simple skin and hair routine for before and after workouts

**Eat a balanced diet:** Your diet plays a significant role in the health of your skin and hair. Consume foods rich in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, which can help promote healthy skin and hair growth. Nourishing your body from within is key to a vibrant appearance.

**Cool down:** If you've exercised outdoors, take a few minutes to cool down in the shade or indoors. This helps regulate your body temperature and reduces the chances of overheating, which can affect your skin. Keep your skin refreshed and comfortable.

**Avoid touching your face:** Refrain from touching your face with your hands, as they can carry dirt and bacteria from exercise equipment or surfaces. This reduces the risk of acne and skin irritation, preserving your skin's clarity and health.

### O-Opportunity to do nothing: Allow boredom. Let children stare out of the window, walk around aimlessly, or simply sit without a plan.

It is often in these quiet moments that creativity develops. **O-Ownership of feelings:** Allow children to lead, express themselves, and make certain decisions. They may get things wrong sometimes, but that is how they learn their own capacity and develop confidence in their voice. **D-Developing empathy:** Instead of always focusing on self-optimisation, encourage children to think about others. Compassion and meaningful relationships help regulate emotions and also help children value what they already have.

In a world constantly pushing children to do more, perhaps the greatest gift we can offer them is the permission to slow down and simply enjoy being children.

## Sipping Through the Heat: Benefits of drinking tea and coffee in summer

**How hot drinks actually cool you down**

It sounds like a trick, but drinking a warm cup of tea or coffee in the summer can actually cool your body down more effectively than an iced drink. This phenomenon is known as evaporative cooling. When you ingest a hot liquid, thermoreceptors in your mouth and stomach send an immediate signal to your brain that the body is hot. In response, your brain triggers your natural cooling system: sweat. As the sweat evaporates off your skin, it removes latent heat from your body, lowering your overall core temperature.

**Weightless hydration without the bloat** A common misconception is that tea and coffee are too dehydrating to consume during hot weather due to their caffeine content. While caffeine is a mild diuretic, clinical studies show that regular tea and coffee drinkers quickly develop a tolerance. When consumed in moderation (2-3 cups a day), the water content in your morning brew contributes directly to your fluid intake, keeping you hydrated. Unlike heavy summer milkshakes, sugary mocktails, or packaged juices that leave you feeling sluggish and bloated, clean tea and coffee provide crisp, weightless hydration.

**A powerhouse of antioxidants for your skin** Summer sun brings intense UV radiation, which generates free radicals—unstable molecules that damage your skin cells, cause premature aging, and breakdown collagen. Both tea and coffee are incredibly rich in natural antioxidant network. Green and Black Tea are packed with polyphenols and catechins (like EGCG), which actively mitigate cellular damage and soothe sensitive, heat-induced inflammation. Coffee contains chlorogenic acid, a potent antioxidant that research suggests can help protect skin cells from UV-induced hyperpigmentation and spot formation. Drinking these beverages acts like an internal layer of defense, supporting your daily topical sunscreen from the inside out.

## Health Benefits: Omega-3

**Relieving joint pain** Another notable advantage of omega-3 fatty acids is their efficacy in alleviating joint pain. Individuals who experience joint discomfort often find relief through the consumption of fish oil supplements. Scientific research has indicated that regular intake of omega-3 fatty acids can be particularly beneficial in managing conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, where joint pain is a common and debilitating symptom.

**Protecting your heart health** Furthermore, individuals who regularly include sea fish in their diets exhibit a reduced risk of developing heart diseases. Scientific investigations have revealed that sea fish, rich in omega-3 fatty acids, can effectively lower triglyceride levels in the bloodstream. Consequently, integrating sea fish into your diet can play a significant role in safeguarding your cardiovascular health and reducing the risk of heart-related ailments.

**Briefs**  
**Net FDI inflows at \$1.57 bn in March; FY26 inflow \$7.65 bn**

India saw net Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows of \$1.57 billion in March, down nearly 65% on-month from \$4.44 billion, according to data released by the Reserve Bank of India on Friday. In the 2025-26 fiscal year spanning April to March, the country's net FDI inflows surged to \$7.65 billion from \$699 million in a year earlier. Gross FDI inflows fell nearly 31% on-month to \$6.23 billion in March, compared to \$5.88 billion a year ago. Total gross inflows for the fiscal year 2025-26 touched \$94.53 billion, marking a 17% increase from \$80.62 billion recorded a year earlier.

**Supply side pressures cloud near-term econ outlook: RBI**

India's near-term outlook is somewhat clouded by supply-side pressures, and the spill-over impact of the West Asia conflict on domestic inflation needs monitoring, according to the RBI Bulletin. While West Asia uncertainties continue to shadow the global economy, an article in the Bulletin noted that domestic economic activity exhibited resilience in April. The conflict exerted pressure on commodity markets, global trade flows, and supply chains, contributing to financial market volatility. Against the backdrop of the Iran war, the article stated that constricted shipping routes and trade flows increased supply chain pressures to their highest levels since 2022.

**CALM AMID TURBULENCE | Massive dividend payout to the government eases borrowing fears as energy costs threaten inflation and trade balances**  
**Historic ₹2.86L cr RBI lifeline**

Palazhi Ashok Kumar  
MUMBAI



FY2024-25. The unprecedented payout, the highest in the RBI's history, arrives at a moment when India — like several major oil-importing economies — faces mounting pressure from elevated crude prices, imported inflation, widening trade deficit anxieties, volatile capital flows and the persistent weakening of emerging-market currencies against the US dollar. Yet the development also

marks something larger than a routine balance-sheet exercise. It represents a strategic financial buffer for the world's largest democracy at a time when global uncertainty threatens to spill into domestic fuel prices, transport costs, manufacturing expenses and household budgets. Economists warn that any prolonged escalation in the Iran conflict could sharply increase India's energy import bill, widen the current account deficit and intensify pressure upon the rupee, which had already depreciated nearly 10% against the US dollar during FY26. Fresh retail fuel price revisions in coming weeks also cannot be ruled out if global crude markets remain elevated. Wholesale inflation indicators have already shown signs of renewed firmness, while retail inflation risks continue to hover uneasily over food supply chains, logistics and consumer spending. Against this backdrop, the RBI transfer provides New Delhi with valuable fiscal breathing space — enabling the government to sustain infrastructure expansion, welfare spending and capital investment without resorting to excessive market borrowings or abrupt tax increases during a sensitive economic phase.

The RBI's balance sheet expanded by more than 20% to ₹91.97 lakh crore during FY26, supported by gains from foreign exchange operations, investment income and currency market intervention. India's foreign exchange reserves simultaneously climbed towards \$688 billion, reinforcing confidence in the nation's external financial position despite turbulent international conditions. Banking gurus believe the massive surplus could lower the fiscal deficit by nearly 20-30 basis points, soften sovereign borrowing costs and strengthen market confidence at a time when investors remain deeply cautious about geopolitical instability and energy-linked inflationary shocks.

**RBI net sold \$9.758 bn in spot market in March: Bulletin**

The RBI net sold \$9.758 billion in the spot currency market in March, according to the monthly bulletin of the central bank released on Friday. Before this, the central bank purchased dollars for two consecutive months, buying \$7.409 billion from the spot currency market in February. On a gross basis, the central bank purchased \$19.880 billion in March and sold \$29.638 billion. The Indian rupee depreciated in April, though the decline was limited by a temporary ceasefire announcement and various measures undertaken by the RBI. Thereafter, the rupee broadly mirrored movements in crude oil prices, reflecting developments in West Asia.

**Outstanding NRI deposits at \$165.65 bn in March**

Outstanding deposits by non-resident Indians fell to \$165.65 billion at the end of March, up \$977 million from a year ago, according to provisional data released by the Reserve Bank of India Friday. The outstanding NRI deposits were \$167.58 billion at the end of February and \$164.68 billion a year ago. Deposits in non-resident (external) rupee accounts were \$98.56 billion at the end of March, down from \$99.77 billion at the end of February and \$100.73 billion a year ago.

**Goyal meets officials, India Inc to discuss ways to boost manufacturing**

An inter-ministerial meeting was held with industry associations to discuss ways to boost domestic manufacturing, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Friday. Chawla added that the government is committed to working closely with the industry to expand manufacturing capacities, enhance quality standards, and strengthen competitiveness. The meeting comes at a time when the government is working with the industry to identify about 100 products, including those from the auto, chemicals, plastics, and petrochemicals sectors, that are either not produced or manufactured inadequately in India. This exercise is aimed at reducing the import bill of

**Forex kitty drops \$8 bn to \$688.89 billion**

India's foreign exchange reserves dropped \$8.094 billion to \$688.894 billion during the week ended May 15, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said on Friday. The overall reserves had jumped by \$6.285 billion to \$696.988 billion during the week ended May 8. The kitty had expanded to an all-time high of \$728.494 billion during the week ended Feb 27 this year before the onset of the West Asia conflict. The geopolitical friction led to several weeks of decline as the rupee came under pressure, prompting the central bank to intervene in the foreign exchange market through dollar sales. Value of gold reserves also declined \$1.536 billion to \$119.317 billion during the week, the RBI said.

the country, as outflows of foreign exchange are impacting the value of the domestic currency against the US dollar. The Indian rupee, on Friday, closed at 95.73 against the greenback. The country's imports stood at \$775 billion in the 2025-26 fiscal year compared to \$721.2 billion in 2023-24. India mainly imports crude oil, gold, silver, machinery, fertilizer, vegetable oil, chemicals, plastic materials, metals, transport equipment, and electronic goods.

**Stock markets rebound, led by banks, positive global trends**

Stock markets recovered on Friday with the benchmark Sensex closing higher by nearly 232 points following buying in blue-chip bank shares amid positive global trends. The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 231.89 points, or 0.31%, to settle at 75,415.35. During the day, it surged 627.61 points, or 0.83%, to 75,810.97. The 50-share NSE Nifty edged higher by 64.60 points, or 0.27%, to end at 23,719.30. Hopes of progress in the US-Iran peace negotiations led to markets' optimism, analysts said. Among the 30 Sensex firms, Trent, Axis Bank, ICICI Bank, Asian Paints, Hindustan Unilever, HDFC Bank, Kotak Mahindra Bank, and Bajaj Finance were the major winners. Domestic markets traded with a mild positive bias, supported by buying at lower



levels and moderately constructive global cues, expecting easing tensions in West Asia. Globally, the AI investment theme remained the primary driver, while domestically, financial stocks led the gains," said Vinod Nair, Geojit Investments Head of Research. Nair added that markets remain range-bound, with strong DII inflows cushioning the downside and persistent FII selling limiting the upside. The market is in a buy-on-dips and sell-on-rallies pattern.

**RBI injects ₹81,590 cr transient liquidity into banking system via 3-day VRR auction**

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday injected ₹81,590 crore of transient liquidity into the banking system through a three-day Variable Rate Repo (VRR) auction. Transient liquidity refers to temporary cash flow fluctuations in a financial or banking system, while a VRR auction is a monetary tool used by the RBI to inject short-term liquidity into the banking system. In a release, the RBI said it infused the funds at a 5.26% cut-off rate. Meanwhile, the RBI on Friday said it will conduct four-day VRR auction for a notified amount of ₹150 lakh crore on May 25. The auction will take place between 9.30 am and 10 am and the reversal of these funds will be on May 29, according to the RBI's notification.

**RBI slaps ₹10.10L penalty on 3 entities**

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday said it has imposed monetary penalty on City Union Bank, Mintifi Finance, and Newa Investments, for non-compliance with certain directions. The central bank imposed ₹10.10 lakh monetary penalty on City Union Bank, ₹3.10 lakh on Mintifi Finance, and ₹2.70 lakh on Newa Investments, the RBI said in a release.

Institutional buyers over-subscribe Central Bank of India OFS; govt exercises green shoe option

Institutional investors on Friday put in over ₹2,380 crore worth of bids in the Offer For Sale (OFS) of Central Bank of India shares, which got over-subscribed more than two times. The government has decided to exercise the green shoe option and put the entire 8% stake in Central Bank of India on the block. DIPAM Secretary Arunish Chawla said in a post on X. Chawla added that the OFS received an enthusiastic response from investors and was over-subscribed 2.35 times on the first day. Retail investors and employees will be able to bid in the share sale offer on Monday. The government had said it will sell a 4% stake in Central Bank of India, with a green shoe option of an additional 4% at a floor price of ₹31 per share. If the 8% stake on offer is fully

subscribed, the stake sale would fetch ₹2,456 crore to the government. Till the close of trading hours on Friday, institutional investors put in bids for over 76.86 crore shares, as against 32.58 crore shares on offer. At the indicative price of ₹31.01 a share, non-retail investors put in over ₹2,380 crore worth of bids for the central bank OFS on Friday. -PTI

Indian cos lead in smart mfg spend: Rockwell

Indian firms are spending 1.6 times more than global peers on smart manufacturing in the high-speed bracket, according to a recent report by Rockwell Automation. The State of Smart Manufacturing Report noted that Indian manufacturers consider it imperative to stay competitive through digital transformation, signaling a shift in focus from merely adopting digital tools to scaling them effectively. In the high spending category of 51% to 99%, Indian companies are spending 1.6 times more compared to global peers," Rockwell Automation India Managing Director Dilip Sawhney told PTI. The survey sought responses based on the percentage of budget allocation for investments in industrial technology. It covered 1,560 decision-makers from 17 of the top manufacturing countries, with

52% representing companies with over \$1 billion in revenue. The study found that 88% of Indian manufacturers already use artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies in operations, and 41% of operations are AI-augmented. The portion of AI-augmented operations is expected to grow to 47% by 2027 and 61% by 2030. Furthermore, 50% of the surveyed Indian firms are using technology to create more engaging jobs. 48% are using these advanced technologies to address labour gaps, and 81% state that applying AI is an extremely important hiring skill. -PTI

Kevin Warsh takes charge as chairman of Fed Reserve

Kevin M. Warsh was officially sworn in as the new Federal Reserve chair at the White House on Friday, taking charge at a time when inflation concerns and geopolitical tensions are reshaping the US monetary policy outlook. The ceremony marked the first White House swearing-in of a Fed chair in nearly 40 years. Warsh succeeds Jerome H. Powell, who has chosen to remain on the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors after completing his term as chair. The new Fed chair assumes office amid rising inflation triggered by the ongoing Iran conflict and elevated energy prices. The recent surge in crude oil prices has complicated expectations of interest rate cuts that President Trump had strongly supported earlier. Minutes from the Fed's April meeting revealed increasing divisions among policymakers, with some officials suggesting that additional monetary tightening may still be required if inflation remains elevated. Financial markets are now increasingly pricing in the possibility of a US rate hike in early 2027.

**Rupee rises 76 paise to close at 95.60**

The rupee rose for the second consecutive session on Friday to close sharply higher at 95.60 against the US dollar on softening of crude oil prices and supposed intervention by the Reserve Bank. Forex traders said markets found some comfort after comments from US Secretary of State Marco Rubio hinted that diplomatic talks linked to the Iran situation were moving in a constructive direction.

**UPI to go live in Cyprus from next year**

India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) will become operational in Cyprus from next year, marking another major expansion of the country's digital payments ecosystem in Europe, according to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Friday. Addressing a media briefing, Sibi George said the rollout of UPI in Cyprus was one of the key outcomes of discussions held during PM Narendra Modi's official visit to the Mediterranean nation in June 2025. -IANS

**India blocks China's request for dispute panel on solar sector support measures at WTO**

India has blocked China's request to set up a dispute panel at the World Trade Organization (WTO) in a case that Beijing filed against support measures implemented by New Delhi for the solar cells, modules, and information technology sectors, an official said. The request follows the failure of bilateral consultations to reach a mutually agreed solution on the dispute, which China filed in December last year. The Geneva-based official said that India blocked this first request for the establishment

of a panel under a Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) meeting on May 22. China has alleged that India's tariffs on certain technology products, alongside requirements favoring domestic companies over imported goods, discriminate against Chinese merchandise. Beijing claimed that these incentives infringe rules under the WTO General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1994, the Agreement on Subsidies and

**Up to 120 new startups could be listed by 2030**

India's start-up ecosystem has entered a phase of "cautious growth" with an active initial public offering pipeline with 70 to 120 start-ups expected to get listed by 2030, a report said on Friday. The report from professional services firm Aon said start-ups are likely to deliver an average salary increase of 9% in 2026, reflecting a moderation from earlier peaks but still remaining competitive in attracting critical talent. In January 2026, 23 start-ups were at various stages of IPO preparation. -IANS

**Oil prices could hit \$200/bbl if Strait of Hormuz remains closed: Report**

The report elaborated three possible scenarios with different timelines on opening the SoH and the subsequent impact on oil and gas supply, prices, energy demand, and the broader global economy. The uncertainty around the Strait has put supply chains at risk with repercussions that could hit economies hard. More than 11 million barrels per day of Gulf crude and condensate production is currently cur-

**Gold demand may contract by 50-60T in 2026**

India's gold demand is expected to contract by 50-60 tonnes this calendar year, around 10% lower than the previous year, following the import duty hike, according to the World Gold Council (WGC). "Looking at 2026 as a whole, we estimate that combined jewellery and bar and coin demand could decline by around 50-60 tonnes, around 10% lower than the previous year, due to the impact of the import duty hike," WGC said in its India gold market update.

**SBI staff's 2 day nationwide strike deferred**

The proposed nationwide strike by SBI staff on May 25-26 has been deferred following "positive discussions" between the bank management and representatives of employees' unions in Mumbai on Friday, officials said. "The meeting with the management was positive and there has been progress on several demands raised by the federation. In view of the developments, the proposed strike has been deferred," SBI Staff Association, Bengal Circle Secretary, Sudip Dutta told PTI.

**Gilts end marginally higher**

Prices of government bonds ended off the day's high, wrapping up a volatile week on Friday. Bond prices gave up some gains after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) surplus transfer came in lower than market expectations, dealers said. However, prices found support as the surplus amount was still at a record high, they said. The benchmark 10-year 6.48% 2035 bond ended at ₹95.86, higher than ₹95.71 on Thursday. Its yield settled at 7.0817%, down from 7.134% on Thursday. The yield on the benchmark 10-year bond has declined above the crucial 7.00% level for the past two weeks. Traders expect yields to remain around current levels unless a significant breakthrough occurs in the peace talks between the US and Iran. Even if the parties reach a peace deal, the 10-year gilt's yield is unlikely to fall below 6.85% as inflationary pressures triggered by the war are likely to warrant repo rate hikes later in the 2026-27 fiscal year, dealers said.

**Oil prices could hit \$200/bbl if Strait of Hormuz remains closed: Report**

Global crude oil prices could rise to \$200 per barrel in the worst-case scenario if the Strait of Hormuz (SoH) remains closed, warned a report from Wood Mackenzie. Global energy markets have been on edge since the start of the Iran war in February. Oil prices have shot up, sending shockwaves across the globe as 11 million barrels per day of higher inflation and interest rate hikes.

tailed, and over 80 million tonnes per annum of liquefied natural gas (LNG) supply, which forms 20% of global supply, is affected, the report said. "The SoH is the most critical chokepoint in global energy markets, and a prolonged closure would

become far more than an energy crisis," said Peter Martin, head of economics at Wood Mackenzie. "The longer disruption persists, the greater the impact on energy prices, industrial activity, trade flows and global economic growth," Martin added. Under the most optimistic Quick Peace scenario, the waring parties reach a resolution by June, bringing immediate relief for the global economy.

Oil prices could hit \$200/bbl if Strait of Hormuz remains closed: Report



Oil prices could hit \$200/bbl if Strait of Hormuz remains closed: Report

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# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



## The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

## Trump's egregious deal with his own justice department

## Anti-lawfare fund could offer payouts to president's allies and Capitol rioters

Time and again, it is tempting to think Donald Trump has exhausted his ability to shock. But with his legal "settlement" with his own Department of Justice, the US president has surpassed himself.

The background is that the president, together with two of his sons and the family business, sued the Internal Revenue Service in January for a leak of his tax returns by a former IRS contractor during his first presidency. With Trump's trademark judicial frivolity, they demanded damages of \$10bn. Now Trump's acting attorney-general Todd Blanche has announced the government will "settle" the case with the Trumps, who relinquish their claim.

In return, they receive a pledge against further audits of their existing tax returns. The federal government

will also set up a fund of \$1.776bn – referencing the year of America's independence declaration – supposedly to compensate people who have suffered the illegitimate "weaponisation" or "lawfare" of prosecution by legal authorities, as Trump likes to claim he has.

Critics suggest this group will consist mainly of Trump supporters who have faced investigations or criminal charges; Democrats have called it a "slush fund". The DoJ has said there will be "no partisan requirements" to file a claim. But senior administration officials have declined to rule out that the insurgents who broke into the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, could benefit from the fund.

There is plenty here that is contrary to the democratic rule of law. The "settlement" itself abruptly pre-empted an inquiry by the judge in the case as to whether the Trumps and the IRS were really adversaries or colluding to manipulate the judicial process.

Trump's characterisation of himself and his would-be militiamen as being illegitimately prosecuted for apparent law-breaking is outlandish, especially in the context of his own readiness to use the federal justice system as a tool for personal vendettas.

Worse still are the grave constitutional breaches this manoeuvre involves. The compensation fund will purportedly be set up without congressional authorisation and operate under a Trump-appointed committee accountable only to him.

In effect, the president is treating the government's taxpayer-raised funds as his own private purse, trampling on constitutional restraints including Congress's spending authority and the ban on "emoluments" for the head of state.

There is precedent for setting up funds to reimburse people who have been harmed by the US government, including Japanese-Americans dispossessed during the second world war or Black farmers hurt by racism at the

Department of Agriculture. But such programmes are generally established through congressional action and are administered with far greater transparency and within constitutional bounds.

Trump's "settlement" does further damage to the country's institutions and democratic culture. The question is how badly they will be undermined, and whether the damage will be beyond repair. The president's self-dealing will inevitably be challenged – already police officers who deflected the Capitol are suing to block the fund. The initiative has drawn rare bipartisan criticism and there are mechanisms Congress could use to stop or restrict it.

If any challenge reaches the Supreme Court, its justices will work in the shadow of their 2024 decision to grant presidents immunity for official acts. It is hard to be confident that a US government "of laws, not of men", in John Adams' formulation, will reassert itself. But the health of US democracy depends on it.

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## Opinion Geopolitics

## China's unlikely bet on Russia may yet pay off



Alexander Gabuev

During much of the 19th century, the offspring of Russia's rich and powerful spoke French before they ever learnt their native tongue – thanks to their French nannies. Subtly mocked by Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, this phenomenon attests to the captivation of Russia's imperial elite by French culture. Fast forward to Vladimir Putin's Russia, and there is a similar pattern – albeit with a different foreign source of admiration.

"My daughter started to speak Mandarin before she spoke Russian. Her nanny was from a village near Beijing," Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary of many years, confessed during his boss's trip to Beijing this week. "She loves Chinese and China."

The occasion of Putin's visit to Beijing, coming hot on the heels of US

previously supplied Europe. Given how cash-strapped the Kremlin is because of its ballooning war bill, revenues from this new project (and a possible Chinese credit line) would come in handy. However, Xi rebuffed his "best friend"; the price offered by Putin was not sweet enough. The truth is that China can afford to cherry-pick from the menu of co-operation projects that Russia is pitching.

The lack of progress on Power of Siberia 2 will not change the overall trajectory of Russia's growing dependence on trade with China. In the first four months of this year alone, trade grew 20 per cent to \$85bn and is likely to surpass the 2024 record of \$245bn. Behind these figures are increased exports of discounted Russian oil and growing imports from China, mostly in dual-use goods that feed the Russian war machine.

The tense situation in global energy markets has given Russia some breathing space, but the main trend stays the same: China's share in Russian trade is rapidly growing at the expense of other partners, while Beijing remains diversified and less dependent on Moscow.

As the asymmetry grows, so will Beijing's temptation to wield that leverage beyond demanding hefty discounts on hydrocarbons – for example, expanding the Chinese presence in the Russian Arctic, or Beijing vetoing Russian arms sales to countries like India or Vietnam. If Russia stays on its current course, a decade from now it will face a choice: become subservient to China and not be able to do much about it, like some smaller countries in south-east Asia, or be dependent on China while trying to maintain strategic autonomy through autarky, as North Korea has done.

What could fuel Russian subservience to China even further is Beijing's careful efforts to expand educational, scientific and cultural ties to Russia – with dozens of new co-operation agreements in this area signed during the Putin-Xi summit. China is exploiting the vacuum created by the breakdown of ties between Moscow and Europe to lock Russia into its own cultural and educational sphere.

With a newly extended visa-free travel scheme, dozens of daily flights connecting major cities, and lavish university scholarships and research grants, China aims to become the symbol of progress for generations of younger Russians like Peskov's daughter – and to replace Europe in its traditional role. In combination with the EU's deliberate efforts to sever people-to-people ties to Russia, and a new generation of Russian elites groomed in a spirit of hostility towards the west, Beijing's unlikely bet may pay off.

The writer is director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin

## Letters

## Why retired professionals still crave skin in the game

"What game are we playing, who gets to decide, and how are we keeping score?" I was reminded of these questions – routinely posed by a senior leadership team I worked with at a major oil company – reading Craig Coben's op-ed ("Where does ambition go without direction?", May 18).

The piece prompted two thoughts. First, there is a widespread, if rarely discussed, assumption that business is a game: some win, some lose. As Coben suggests, the task is to work out what

the game is and then play it. For some, particularly anxious overachievers, that system works well. For others, less so.

Second, retirement may not create a vacuum so much as expose one. Careers in finance, consulting, law and elsewhere are built around measurable outputs – targets, league tables, promotions and remuneration. Such metrics drive performance, but may also encourage people to outsource their identity and success (and

happiness) to external rather than internal measures.

Coben writes that in the meetings he and his dog attend post-retirement, "nothing much is moving forward". But forward towards what, and according to whose metrics? Many professionals spend decades progressing against externally defined measures – without asking whether they are moving towards anything that actually value.

Unsurprising then that when the scoreboard is removed, some discover

they never worked out what mattered beyond it: who they are, what motivates them, what "enough" means, or what success looks like for them – rather than the business.

The challenge is not simply learning how to live well when your career ends. It is deciding, several years before retirement, what game is worth playing when titles and targets no longer loom.

Jane Maitland  
Executive Coach  
Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, UK

## Switzerland's banks – a ringside seat

The recent Big Read on UBS (May 18) quotes a banker saying a collapse of UBS would "bring Switzerland's economy down with it". Obviously, the economic damage would be severe, but it is not the deepest question your coverage might have asked readers to consider.

Switzerland did not spend the better part of two centuries building banking institutions in order to produce a single global champion whose balance sheet is now twice the size of the country's economy. Banking, properly understood, is the place where trust becomes commitment: the depositor's trust that their savings are safe, the borrower's commitment to repay, and the bank's promise to stand behind both. When banks act on this purpose, they are civic infrastructure. When they forget, they become balance-sheet risks that countries must decide whether to backstop.

I write as someone who spent the better part of my career at Credit Suisse, watching the gradual hollowing out of what banks are for. From that experience, the Swiss Federal Council's pressure on UBS to hold more capital reads as more than a prudential measure. Capital, in the traditional understanding, is the cushion that allows the bank to honour its promises when stress arrives, and it is the visible evidence that the institution has not confused its purpose with its size.

If banking is a craft, then UBS should want to build and protect its capital reserves without the need for regulatory force. Otherwise, one is left to question what exactly is the craft that UBS is honing.

Xenia Tao  
Zürich, Switzerland

## Markets brace for the fiscal and monetary 'puts'

Robert Buckland ("AI boom could end the de-equitisation 'put'", On Wall Street, FT Weekend, May 16) argues that in 2003 a process began that shrank public markets.

The so-called de-equitisation put – where shares are supported by buybacks or deals to take companies private if they fall too far – led to sustained high valuations as a result of diminishing supply and rising demand. In other words, investors were willing to overpay due to a lack of supply.

Consumers are often willing to pay in excess of what is due, for food, petrol or products or services they covet, but not for financial assets. The only reason to buy a financial asset is to make a risk-adjusted return. Overpaying goes against the grain.

Investors might be wrong at times – perhaps many times – but they are rational (maybe with the exception of retail investors).

The reason they have been defying valuations is not the de-equitisation



BANX

put but the monetary and fiscal puts. Governments and central banks have redefined risk-adjusted return through their willingness to systematically bail out investors.

With less risk you can pay higher prices. Markets seem confident this process will continue. With current high public debt levels and looming inflation a fresh plot twist seems unavoidable.

Andrés Nuñez-Lagos  
Madrid, Spain

## Indigenous peoples need a say in the climate debate

Although the proposal to dam the Bering Strait described by Anjana Ahuja ("Can geoengineering avert a climate catastrophe?", Opinion, May 20) should certainly garner high marks for boldness, do we really want to dodge one catastrophe by causing another?

Putting aside for the moment the difficulties of how to do it, who will do it and who will pay for it, the impact on the Indigenous peoples of coastal Alaska, who live in close symmetry with the natural environment, would be profound.

They have inhabited the region for thousands of years and have relied on the waters of the Bering Strait and Arctic Ocean for a traditional subsistence lifestyle that would likely be destroyed by this proposal.

At the same time, how would devastating ecological damage to marine and avian life be avoided? Given that Indigenous peoples bear zero responsibility for the changing climate, what is the moral argument for asking them to bear the cost of averting it?

Unfortunately, there are no silver bullets here; the societies who caused the problem can't pass it off to those who didn't.

Richard G Little  
Industry Advisory Council  
Department of Industrial & Systems Engineering, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Williamsburg, VA, US

## Drones, like the longbow, you ignore at your peril

Much like French nobles dismissing the English longbow of the 14th century, Latvia's ruling party has failed to realise the significance of the threat it is facing from drones ("Latvian government collapses over Russian-bound Ukrainian drones", Report, May 14).

Evika Silina is the first prime minister in history to resign over a mishandling of drone threats. While it's true there certainly were other deeper underlying problems with the Latvian coalition government, the lack of a co-ordinated response to the threat was the catalyst to Silina's downfall. Silina's resignation should be a wake-up call for all European leaders for two reasons.

First, we're seeing drones used more and more as a political tool in hybrid warfare. They're increasingly being used to disrupt airports and target critical infrastructure and energy grids. Andriy Sybiba, the Ukrainian foreign minister, claimed that in this particular incident, the drones were Ukrainian and flew into Latvia as a result of "Russian electronic warfare".

Deliberately diverting Ukrainian drones from their targets in Russia". While this remains unverified, sending drones into another nation's borders undermines the legitimacy of any given government. It sends a message that the leadership is unable to protect its own borders and the people within them.

Clear, co-ordinated and decisive action must be taken by governments to send a strong external message to foreign powers. Latvia called on Nato for assistance. But the response could have been better co-ordinated by taking a multi-tier approach, working with coalitions, defence departments and private security companies to prepare for such eventualities.

Second, the psychological impact these occurrences have on voters should not be underestimated. This happened months ahead of Latvia's general elections in October. While countries on the eastern flank of Europe more keenly feel the threat of drones, being close to the conflict in Ukraine, incidents like these should serve as a caution in the coal mine to other governments as nefarious drone use spreads and becomes more prevalent across the globe.

Undoubtedly the Latvian coalition's lack of co-ordinated response to these drone incursions will weigh heavily on voters' minds.

The long-term effects of this political quagmire will be felt for months to come, as parliamentary leaders meet to select a leader of the new interim government.

Tobias Billström  
Former Swedish Foreign Minister and Director of Strategy & Government Affairs at Nordic Defence (NAD), Stockholm, Sweden

## UK investors should get ready for early elections

Labour MPs attribute their poor poll ratings to Sir Keir Starmer's leadership. They are not wrong, but Chris Giles is entirely right to say switching leader must be accompanied by an end to the party's "wishful thinking" problem.

Labour won a landslide (Opinion, May 14) in 2024 but did not set out or secure a mandate for tough economic reforms. This has been reflected in the UK's timid economic progress.

If Andy Burnham triumphs in the Makerfield by-election and succeeds Starmer as prime minister, he may want to capitalise on a "honeymoon period" and earn his own mandate for the radical change he promises. Investors should be prepared for an early UK general election.

Malcolm Gooderham  
London W1, UK

## There's more than one form of PR voting system

I read with interest John Murray's letter about introducing a proportional representation voting system in the UK ("UK government has the numbers to introduce PR", Letters, May 14). The idea might even enjoy cross-party support in the current environment.

But there are many types of PR. A "list" system, such as that used in several continental European countries, empowers party leaders to select candidates for election at the expense of voter choice and keeps backbenchers subservient. Whereas, a "single transferable vote" system as practised in Ireland weakens parties' roles within the electoral system and places more emphasis on candidates. I know which I prefer, but regardless, I know you move to a PR system, a careful examination of the different systems' real impact is what is needed.

Paul Tighe  
Ballina, County Mayo, Ireland

## Who put the ho in hoi polloi?

I was amused to read Harriet Tupper's letter about the virtues of studying Latin ("Hic, haec, hoc – classics is a route to computer science", April 28) and the "hoi in 'hoi polloi'" is Reform UK's belief in the virtues of studying "the Magna Carta" (April 28). As the letter writer, a retired careers adviser in a girls' public school, would no doubt have told Reform, there are no definite articles in Latin, so it should either be "The Great Charter" or just "Magna Carta".

My friend Alice – an MA in classics from Oxford no less, whom I consulted before sending this letter – observed I obviously wasn't a Greek scholar either, pointing out Greek does have a definite article – the "hoi in 'hoi polloi'" is Richard Gordon  
Bethany, CT, US

## Opinion

## Americans beware: markets can be out of sync with reality

Robert Rubin

The stock market keeps reaching new highs: the S&P is up more than 7.5 per cent since the Iran war began. About 85 per cent of companies in the index reported first-quarter earnings that beat first-quarter expectations, and analysts have raised profit forecasts in recent months.

However, these gains come alongside actions by the Trump administration that I believe will have significant adverse consequences. The administration does not just launch a war in Iran that destabilised energy markets, President Donald Trump threatened to annihilate the country's citizens. He repeatedly voiced support for a criminal probe into outgoing Federal Reserve chair Jay Powell that was a thinly veiled attack on central bank independence.

When Trump began his second term, the market served as a disciplining device. After his "liberation day" tariffs

were announced in April last year, it faltered and recovered only when the administration announced that much of its trade agenda was on pause.

By now, markets and the economy seem largely inured to the chaos, leading some to conclude that Trump's policies have not resulted in the serious economic damage many predicted. I disagree. While not yet reflected in short-term data, I believe enormous damage has been done to the economy, with effects likely to play out over time.

Markets can be out of sync with reality for an extended period, and then react rapidly and harshly. In the 18 months leading up to October 1987, the stock market soared, despite concerns about looming risks. Then, on October 19, the Dow fell by 22 per cent in a single day. More recently, Greek sovereign debt traded at very narrow spreads to others in the Eurozone for years, despite worries about Greece's fiscal and economic conditions. Then, all of a sudden, Greek debt collapsed, triggering the European sovereign debt crisis.

Some recent policy choices have made existing problems worse: rather than addressing our unbound fiscal trajectory, we've enacted trillions in

deficit-financed tax cuts; we have failed to reform our costly and inefficient healthcare system; and we've undermined support for less expensive alternative energy sources at a time when AI is driving up electricity demand and China is racing ahead with renewables. These choices will probably increase prices and diminish growth, while leaving the country less resilient.

**By the time investors react to the damage being done, it may be far harder to get the economy back on track**

Other actions have introduced largely new problems — like politicising the Fed; assailing our universities; slashing federal support for scientific research; attacking undocumented workers who play a key role in construction and agriculture; placing new constraints on legal immigration; and imposing tariffs that increase prices and reduce growth. And while regulation was excessive at times, Doge's slash-and-burn approach was hugely

harmful to government functions.

Market participants, thus far at least, seem comforted by the fact that truly catastrophic approaches are often walked back: take the ceasefire in Iran, the justice department dropping its probe of Powell and the administration's acceptance of the Supreme Court's ruling that its tariffs were largely unlawful. But disruption and uncertainty can wear away at an economy over time.

America's economy and national security have largely been well served by the postwar global order. But now we've become a source of instability. We've disparaged our Nato allies, pursued ownership of Greenland, seized the leader of Venezuela and waged a consequential war with Iran without coherent objectives. We've punished the dissent that is a hallmark of US democracy. And we've undermined faith in the rule of law — one of our economy's underlying strengths, and a great advantage vis-à-vis China.

Our economy, and our society, has done well under Republicans, under Democrats and with power divided between them. But this administration's approach is radically different. It is driven by an authoritarian mindset,

with extreme approaches that lie outside the traditional public policy debate and are not grounded in intellectually serious analysis.

I do not mean to sound pessimistic. With the great strengths that it has, the US should remain the most attractive market for investment and economic activity. But we must avoid being lulled into complacency by a stock market that has performed well and economic conditions that are still reasonably solid.

By the time these measures react to the damage being done, it may be far harder to get the economy back on track. This is a moment when our citizens can engage in the hard work of re-establishing government that respects our laws, bases action on fact and engages constructively with the rest of the world. We can do that by supporting fair and free elections, and candidates — whether conservative or progressive — who pass a simple test: are they serious about addressing the economic challenges before us, including those that our own recent actions have created?

The writer is a former US Treasury secretary

## Supreme Court overturns 60 years of Black enfranchisement

Sheila Bair

Judicial conservatism used to mean strictly interpreting the law, without regard to a judge's personal views. But in last month's Louisiana vs Callais ruling, the Supreme Court's "conservative" majority bypassed section 2 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and gave plaintiffs the near-impossible task of proving intentional racial bias in a voting discrimination claim.

I was counsel to Republican Senator Robert Dole, the author of the 1982 amendment to section 2. The whole purpose of his amendment was to reject an "intent" test. Yet, in a blatant display of judicial activism, the Supreme Court has now decided to ignore the law, overturn precedent and walk away from America's long embrace of Black enfranchisement.

The US fought a bloody civil war to end slavery and secure equal rights for Black Americans. Yet for nearly a century state and local authorities found ways to deny them those rights, especially at election time. They contrived no end of policies and practices that were "race-neutral" on their face — poll taxes, literacy tests, "good character" exams — to suppress Black voter registration and participation.

In 1965, Congress passed the VRA, including Section 2's judicially enforceable ban on voting discrimination. The act led to significant increases in Black voter registration. But officials sought out new ways to dilute the Black vote. One was by redrawing voting district boundaries, and either "cracking" Black neighbourhoods — breaking them up and dispersing them among predominantly white ones — or "packing" them,

**This US ruling sets a high bar, requiring plaintiffs to disentangle racial factors from political motives**

cracking Black areas large enough to constitute two districts into one.

In 1975, the legality of such redistricting practices reached the Supreme Court. In *White vs Regester*, a Texas "packing" case, the Supreme Court held that proof of intentional discrimination was not necessary under Section 2. The White decision specified a stringent test to make such a case, focusing on the "totality of circumstances," including a history of official racial discrimination. But seven years later, the court reversed itself and concluded in *Mobile vs Bolden* that Section 2 required proof of intent.

That decision brought vote dilution cases to a near standstill. So Congress stepped in to restore a "results" standard in Section 2. Many conservative Senators argued this would require proportional representation. So Dole offered a compromise which drew directly from the White opinion. It incorporated the "totality of circumstances" test while explicitly stating that Blacks had an equal opportunity to voter participation, but no right to proportional representation. It received overwhelming bipartisan support.

In the following four decades, the Supreme Court repeatedly upheld the results standard. But in *Callais*, the Court ignored precedent and legislative language to find an implied intent requirement. Worse, it set a high bar for proving intent, minimising the relevance of past discrimination and requiring plaintiffs to "disentangle" racial factors from political motives. Because Black Americans still vote overwhelmingly for Democrats, any action undertaken by Republican officials to dilute their voting strength can now be defended as motivated by partisan advantage, not race.

Dole was a "big tent" Lincoln Republican. He wanted the GOP to compete for the Black vote. In crafting the Section 2 compromise, he was eager to show Blacks that the Republicans fully embraced voting rights. I can only imagine his dismay at the vigour with which some GOP leaders today are moving quickly to dismantle majority Black districts.

The rush to redraw the boundaries of minority-dominated districts adds to the spectacle of partisan redistricting by both parties. We all suffer from the Supreme Court's embrace of gerrymandering, but Black Americans most of all.

The writer is a former chair of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation

## Burnham is old Labour's last throw

BRITAIN

Robert Shrimley



Politics encourages people to project their hopes on to leaders, whether or not there is any supporting evidence. Sir Keir Starmer was a great manager, Theresa May an adult in the room. Sometimes this is wishful thinking, sometimes a failure to recognise the circumstances.

Thus it is with Andy Burnham. But the Manchester mayor is not the messiah. He is Labour's last throw. Or rather he represents the last hope for the historic vision of the party as a broad coalition able to unite the working class with wealthier progressives.

In Makerfield, the Reform-leaning constituency he has chosen as his ticket back to Westminster, he faces a by-election capturing in microcosm the complexities of recreating that base. Even before he was confirmed as the candidate, Burnham was being hemmed in. Rejoining the EU? Do you mind, I've got a Brexit-voting seat to win.

This tension encapsulates a key strategic question. With the ascendancy of the "blob theory" (the notion a general election will be won by the side that can

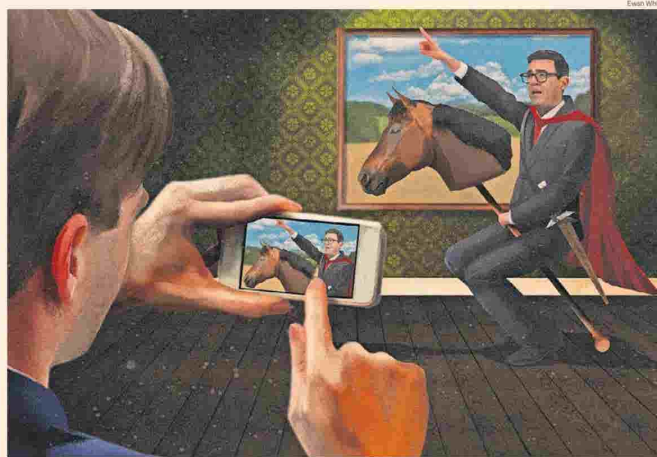
reunite the fractured left or right), many in Labour want to focus on the progressive coalition. They note that more 2024 Labour voters are being lost to the Greens and Liberal Democrats combined than to Reform.

But that is because the working-class voters lost to the right were gone even before the last election. A whizz through the red-wall seats reclaimed by Labour in 2024 shows a huge number, from Bishop Auckland to Barrow and Furness, Mansfield to Dudley, won only because the right vote split between Tories and Reform.

There is an alternative path, one partially explored by Wes Streeting. Burnham's Blairite leadership rival, who has urged Labour to campaign to rejoin the EU. It is not that Streeting wants to write off the lost Reform voters. But prioritising rejoining points in a different direction, one more closely aligned with the agenda of Labour's other voters, the outward-facing, middle-class graduates and public sector workers.

Holding on to areas of working-class social conservatism is essential to Labour's survival as a broad-based party of power. Burnham's gambit is an attempt to show Labour can still reconnect with, not abandon, those voters.

His instinct is that people are being pulled to Reform or the Greens less for their policies than out of a belief that the system (and Labour) no longer works in their interests, with decisions taken by unaccountable regulators or remote politicians in London. It's telling that,



Gordon Brown's brief run aside, Burnham would be Labour's first leader since 1994 not rooted in north London.

Appropriately for a man seeking to battle Reform's nostalgia, Burnham dreams of rolling back Thatcherism. He has ascribed Britain's malaise to Brexit (which he'll continue to try and skate over), privatisation, deregulation and austerity. These last three, he argues, created a deindustrialised country unable to control its costs, be they housing, energy or other essentials. Since there is no money for renationalisation, Burnham seeks more public "control" of utilities through souped-up regulators who hold down prices and drive investment.

A Burnham regime will need money. Allies argue for shifting the tax burden

**For now he is the outsider, the local hero sticking it to the man. If he reaches No 10, he is the man**

on to asset-based wealth (Streeting has made a similar call). That would suggest increases in capital gains tax and inheritance tax — his backers also suggest a rethink of property taxes. This will be portrayed as a tilt towards those who contribute to rather than extract from society.

So that's the theory. You beat Reform and unite the Labour base by addressing the causes of economic stagnation, rebuilding the social contract and fixing a dysfunctional politics. Burnham's talk of "Manchesterism" may be self-serving, but it highlights his theme of politics rooted in place. His demand for government to be less remote traces a direct line from Vote Leave's "Take Back Control".

Yet his strategy contains dangers that should temper those projecting their hopes on to him. His model of change requires a long-term argument to be squeezed into half a parliamentary cycle. He will only be able to offer down payments to voters.

Second, power will dim his popularity.

For now "Andy" is the outsider, the local hero sticking it to the man. If he reaches No 10, he is the man. And there are other questions. As mayor he sometimes wobbled when policies became unpopular. Now he will have to be brave and decisive.

Third, he is trying to defy the free-market growth model. His nostalgic, municipal, "business-friendly socialism" of higher taxes, stronger unions and more intervention is the Labour version of Boris Johnson's cakeism.

This all comes with the positivity of a talented political messenger and a better-crafted theory of politics. But a new face only gets you a hearing. It doesn't change your economic inheritance. If it seems not to be working, the pressure for Labour to switch to chasing the lost Green and progressive vote will become overpowering.

Too bad, then, that Burnham's not the messiah. He represents the old Labour Party's last chance of resurrection.

robert.shrimley@ft.com

## Musk, SpaceX and Muscovite fever dreams

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



The world's richest man is making some of history's wildest promises. Ahead of the forthcoming flotation of his SpaceX satellite, rocket and AI company — at a mooted valuation of a record-breaking \$1.75tn — Elon Musk has been promising to deliver an AI-energised future of sustainable abundance, orbital data centres and a colony of 10m people on Mars. We may need to invent a new adjective to describe the superlatives that pour from Musk's mouth. Muskavite, perhaps?

On Wednesday, SpaceX filed its prospectus, one of the most extraordinary documents in corporate history. The company plans to accelerate the "emergence of new trillion-dollar markets on

the Moon, Mars, and beyond" and ensure humanity's future flourishing.

"We do not want humans to have the same fate as dinosaurs," the prospectus states, in a sentence unlikely to have appeared before in any US Securities and Exchange Commission document.

In September, Tesla (Musk's \$1.3tn corporate side hustle), unveiled Master Plan IV, promising to help build the future "we've always dreamed of" by redefining the fundamental building blocks of labour, mobility and energy."

As an FT reader has noted, Musk's rhetoric has strange echoes of the promises made by a very different man in a very different context: the 22nd congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1961.

Earlier that year, the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had completed the first manned space flight. Soviet technological progress seemed unmatched. The Communist Party's bombastic general secretary Nikita Khrushchev declared that the Soviet Union was well on the way to building a "life of plenty". "We are strictly guided by scientific cal-

culations," Khrushchev said. "And calculations show that in 20 years we will build a mainly communist society."

In almost every respect, Musk and Khrushchev are polar opposites. Musk is a one-of-a-kind entrepreneurial genius, whereas Khrushchev was a sly, reckless and bloody-handed Soviet thug. The diehard communist once famously threatened to bury capitalism, while Musk rails against the dead hand of the

**Our contemporary tech titans are in many ways 'the children of Russian cosmism'**

"administrative state" (even if the profits mightly from government contracts).

However, one common inspiration was the ear trumpet-toting scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the grandfather of the Soviet space programme and a leading figure in the Russian communist movement. Tsiolkovsky is best known

for illustrating the "tyranny of the rocket equation," which explains the fundamentals of space flight. "The Earth is the cradle of humanity, but mankind cannot stay in the cradle forever," he wrote in 1911.

Musk has cited the above Tsiolkovsky quote as an inspiration. "I find that incredibly exciting," he said.

As Michel Elchanninoff describes in *Lenin Walked On The Moon*, our contemporary tech titans are in many ways "the children of Russian cosmism". And Tsiolkovsky's intellectual heirs have embraced Musk as one of their own. Last year, they staged the reading of a play in honour of the two men in Tsiolkovsky's hometown.

Musk's grandiose visions have certainly inspired a generation of vengeful investors, who have consistently backed his ventures in defiance of conventional valuation metrics. Over the past 24 years, SpaceX has racked up cumulative losses of \$37bn, according to *The Information*; way more than any other company that has gone public before. "We have a history of net losses and may not

achieve profitability in the future," the prospectus candidly admits amid 37 pages of risk factors.

SpaceX is undoubtedly an astonishing company. It has made 650 orbital space launches and transformed the space economy. But the forthcoming market launch at anything like the touted valuation would appear to defy financial gravity in much the same way that Khrushchev's plans once flouted economic logic.

For Musk, SpaceX's listing is only a milepost on the way to extending "the light of consciousness to the stars", a mission Tsiolkovsky would surely have applauded. But history shows that sweeping visions can end in crushing failures. Three years after delivering his boastful 1961 speech, Khrushchev was ousted amid denunciations of his "hare-brained schemes". At least, controlling 94 per cent of the B voting shares in SpaceX, Musk is unlikely to suffer the fate of his hapless Muscovite predecessor.

john.thornhill@ft.com

# COMMENT

## Editorials

### Passing on cultural heritage and tradition, pursuing cultural innovation and creativity

As China advances toward the goal of building a modern socialist country in all respects, culture is emerging not only as a new driver of economic growth and high-quality development, but also as a source of national confidence and social vitality.

The Forum on Building up China's Cultural Strength 2026, which opened in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, on Thursday reflects this broader shift. The forum focuses on passing on cultural heritage and tradition, and pursuing cultural innovation and creativity.

Coming at the start of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period, the forum underscores the growing recognition that cultural prosperity, service-sector upgrading and innovation-driven development are becoming increasingly interconnected with the country's modernization.

China's per capita GDP surpassed the \$10,000 threshold in the mid-2010s. Since then, cultural consumption has accelerated significantly. Official data show that domestic tourism trips in 2025 exceeded 6.5 billion, up more than 16 percent year-on-year, while tourism expenditure reached 6.3 trillion yuan (\$875 billion), both record highs. Meanwhile, the value-added output of tourism and related industries accounted for about 4.35 percent of China's GDP.

The 15th Five-Year Plan treats culture as a horizontal policy instrument embedded across the broader economy. Through "culture plus industry" models, cultural resources are being integrated into manufacturing, tourism, urban renewal and technology development. Historical districts, heritage sites and museums are no longer viewed merely as preservation projects, but as economic zones capable of generating consumption, employment and innovation. This marks a structural shift from "culture as industry" toward "culture for economic transformation".

China's rapid expansion of public cultural services reflects this. By the end of 2025, the country had established more than 70,000 public libraries nationwide, while museums, reading spaces and digital cultural platforms have become increasingly accessible to ordinary citizens.

At the same time, digital technology is reshaping cultural creation and participation on an unprecedented scale. The integration of artificial intelligence, immersive technologies, digital publishing and short-video platforms is expect-

ed to become one of the core growth engines of China's cultural sector.

By lowering the production and distribution costs of cultural goods, digital platforms and AI technologies are accelerating cultural participation and human capital formation. Online literature, micro-dramas, interactive entertainment and AI-assisted content creation are expanding access to cultural products while creating new service-sector business models.

This transition is already visible across China's booming digital economy. Chinese online literature now has around 200 million active overseas users, while Chinese micro-drama applications have expanded into more than 160 countries and regions. Movie productions such as *Ne Zha 2* and the global popularity of Chinese short-video content demonstrate how the fusion of traditional culture and digital innovation is enhancing both economic value and the country's international cultural influence.

In knowledge-based economies, highly skilled talent gravitates toward cities and regions with strong cultural ecosystems, vibrant creative industries and high-quality public services. By leveraging cultural amenities to attract creative talent, China is strengthening the interaction between cultural vitality and innovation-driven growth.

Meanwhile, related efforts to build an independent Chinese knowledge system in philosophy and social sciences are becoming increasingly important as China seeks to provide intellectual frameworks rooted in its own development experience while contributing new perspectives to global governance, modernization and civilizational exchanges.

Culture carries the memory of a civilization, but it also shapes future productivity, creativity and social cohesion. As China moves toward the goal of becoming a cultural powerhouse by 2035, the interaction between cultural prosperity, technological innovation and service-sector transformation is likely to form a new virtuous cycle. Rising incomes stimulate cultural consumption, cultural participation strengthens human capital and creativity, and stronger innovation capacity in turn generates new momentum for high-quality development.

In that sense, culture is no longer merely a reflection of development. It is increasingly becoming one of its engines.

### Restrictions serve no party's interest

In a recent interview, Christophe Fouquet, chief executive officer of ASML, compared US chip restrictions on China to cutting off food supplies in a desert. "If I put you in a desert and tell you that you're not going to have access to food anymore — how long does it take you to make your own garden?" he asked. "It's a matter of survival."

This analogy underscores a critical point: While the United States' escalating export controls might disrupt markets in the short term, they are also pushing China to accelerate its own innovation. This shift from a passive recipient of technology to a proactive innovator highlights China's resilience and determination in the face of the technological walls the US is trying to erect.

The global semiconductor industry is undergoing profound changes. The rise of artificial intelligence, 5G communications and autonomous driving has fueled a surge in demand for high-end chips. Market research suggests that by 2030, the global chip market could reach \$1.5 trillion. In response to these trends, the US seeks to curb China's growth by restricting advanced semiconductors and fabrication equipment and urging its allies to do the same. However, such protectionist policies, short-sighted as they are, threaten global supply chain stability and may cause the US to miss out on key opportunities in the semiconductor sector.

As the world's two largest economies, cooperation and mutual benefit are the best choices for both China and the US, and attempts to use technological restrictions to halt China's innovation progress will lead nowhere.

China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) places technological innovation at the core of the national development strategy. The plan states that accelerating high-level technological self-reliance and self-improvement is the key to leading the development of new quality productive forces.

Through systematic measures such as enhancing original innovation, tackling core technologies and strengthening the role of enterprises, the plan presents a clear road map for China's technological progress.

Recent China-US economic and trade consul-

tations in the Republic of Korea produced generally balanced and positive outcomes, as the two sides reached a consensus on major issues such as tariff arrangements, councils to manage trade and investment disputes, and agricultural trade, showcasing a spirit of mutually beneficial cooperation. This cooperation model, grounded in mutual respect, equality and reciprocity, is the rational way to handle trade and technology disputes between the two sides.

Both countries and the global tech industry have much to gain from their collaboration.

In particular, the two sides agreed in principle to discuss a framework for reciprocal tariff reductions on products of equal value under the trade council, with each side committing to \$30 billion or more. This will help the two countries establish a stable trade framework. The agreements will bring greater certainty and stability to the next phase of China-US economic and trade relations, and to the global economy as well.

China is building a comprehensive innovation ecosystem, spanning from basic research to industrial applications. This enhancement in self-innovation capability serves as the best defense against technological blockades. Consequently, China is accelerating breakthroughs in several "choke point" technologies, ranging from lithography machines to AI chips.

Recently, China's three major telecom operators launched AI token packages, marking a new step in the country's AI development. This innovative model not only lowers the barriers to AI technology use, but also provides strong momentum for industrial upgrading. It has injected new vitality into global technological progress as well.

While US restrictions will continue to pose challenges, they also present incentives for China to innovate and thrive independently.

Yet the path forward lies in cooperation, not confrontation. By working together, China and the US can create a more stable and prosperous global tech landscape. But this requires dialogue, mutual understanding and a commitment to shared goals.

Cai Meng



## Opinion Line

# Bloc politics divorced from reality of alliance relations

Speaking at a forum hosted by the Center for American Progress on Tuesday, shortly after US President Donald Trump concluded his second visit to China in nine years, former US secretary of state Antony Blinken warned that the United States must rally allies into a broad coalition against China as it could not compete with China alone.

The irony was difficult to miss. Rather than reflecting on the failure of the policy he helped design, Blinken merely prescribed more of the same medicine: more alliance-building, more geopolitical mobilization and more zero-sum thinking.

That outlook is deeply rooted in the Cold War mentality that has long shaped sections of Washington's foreign policy establishment. For many in that circle, the US' triumph over the Soviet Union became not merely a historical episode but a permanent intellectual template. They continue to see international relations through the prism of ideological confrontation and strategic containment, believing any rising power must inevitably be treated as an adversary to be weakened and isolated.

However, the global economy is now profoundly interconnected and the challenges facing humanity — climate change, public health crises, energy security, technological governance and economic recovery — demand cooperation rather than bloc confrontation.

Despite the loud rhetoric about

"small yard and high fences", trade between China and the US under the Joe Biden administration, for which Blinken served as the top diplomat, remained sizable. What emerged was not "decoupling", but selective restrictions in a handful of strategic sectors by the US alongside continued cooperation across much of the broader economy.

And even as Washington urged allies to reduce economic ties with China, it preserved its own extensive commercial relationship with the world's second-largest economy — a contradiction that did not go unnoticed by US partners.

Blinken's latest call for rebuilding the "united front" also conveniently overlooks the costs that US allies and partners were forced to bear under the previous administration's ill-advised policies. Washington repeatedly demanded strategic alignment against China while pursuing economic measures that primarily benefited the US.

The Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act were promoted as pillars of industrial renewal, yet many US allies viewed them as unmistakably "America First" policies in new packaging. European governments openly criticized US subsidies and "Buy American" provisions that diverted investment away from Europe toward the US. Concerns spread from Paris to Berlin that Washington was effectively weaponizing economic policy against friends.

In other words, some allies increasingly felt they were being asked to provide the oil to keep the US' engine running while absorbing the economic losses themselves. This exposes the inherent weakness of Blinken's coalition logic. Partnerships cannot endure if they are built primarily around pressure, fear and asymmetric sacrifice, which the former US administration branded as a moral imperative. Nor can strategic stability emerge from attempts to divide the world into opposing camps.

The reality is that China is not an enemy. It is a major partner with which the US should learn to coexist. That is precisely why the new vision jointly advanced during Trump's visit to China last week — of building a constructive bilateral relationship of strategic stability — deserves serious attention. It reflects valuable lessons drawn from decades of Sino-US engagement.

The "constructive strategic stability" is a positive stability with cooperation as the mainstay, a sound stability with moderate competition, a constant stability with manageable differences, and an enduring stability with promises of peace.

Those who still cling to outdated bloc politics should do their homework carefully. Until those like Blinken in Washington's policy circle step out of their "comfort zone", it will be difficult for US policymaking to shed the dusty odor of the Cold War playbook.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

## What They Say

### Stable supply chains smooth economic circulation

**Editor's note:** China released regulations for industry and supply chain security in April. China Economic Times spoke to Wei Jigang, a researcher at the Development Research Centre of the State Council, on the resilience and security of the country's supply chain system. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Supply chains represent a form of core competitiveness, reflecting a country's ability to coordinate production, match supply with demand, manage risks and improve efficiency. Supply chains have increasingly become a governance tool tied to industrial development, security guarantees and international cooperation.

Domestically, supply chains are critical to ensuring smooth economic circulation and unlocking the advantages of China's vast domestic market. Internationally, they are a strategic instrument for participating in global competition, expanding development space and safeguarding national interests.

For industries, they serve as the driving force behind technological upgrading and high-quality growth. From a security perspective, they protect against external shocks and ensure stability in critical sectors.

The development of high-quality industry chains requires coordinated efforts across strategic planning, technological innovation, digital transformation, security protection and ecosystem building.

First, China should strengthen its top-level institutional design and

improve its strategic support systems. Supply chain development should be incorporated into national development plans, while cross-regional and cross-sector coordination mechanisms should be enhanced.

The legal and regulatory framework needs improvement. Greater support should be provided in finance, technology, talent and industrial policy to foster globally competitive leading enterprises as well as specialized and innovative small and medium-sized firms.

Second, China should focus on key sectors and strengthen both weak and competitive links. Tailored policies should be introduced for major industries such as manufacturing, energy, food security, information technology and transportation. For bottleneck technologies such as semiconductors, machine tools and critical components, resources should be concentrated on achieving technological breakthroughs and greater self-reliance.

Meanwhile, China should consolidate its advantages in areas such as new energy, 5G, high-speed rail and construction machinery to strengthen its position in the global industrial competition.

Third, digital and intelligent technologies should drive supply chain modernization. Under the national action plan for digital and intelligent supply chains, technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, the internet of things and blockchain should be more deeply integrated into supply chain management.

Fourth, development and security must be advanced together. China should establish a multilevel supply chain security framework featuring risk monitoring, early-warning systems, stress testing and emergency response mechanisms for critical sectors. Strategic reserves and emergency production capacity for key products should also be improved. In addition, legal and policy tools should be strengthened to address external risks and safeguard China's supply chain security against containment and disruption.

Finally, green and open development should remain central to the country's future supply chain strategy. China should accelerate the transition toward low-carbon supply chains by promoting green procurement, green manufacturing and environmentally friendly logistics systems.

## CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

**China Daily**  
15 Huixin Dongjie Chaoyang District,  
Beijing 100029  
News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366  
editor@chinadaily.com.cn  
Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631  
ad@chinadaily.com.cn  
Subscriptions: +86-400-699-0203  
subscription@chinadaily.com.cn  
App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

**China Daily UK**  
90 Cannon St, London EC4N 6HA, UK  
+44 (0) 207 398 8270  
editor@chinadailyuk.com

**China Daily Asia Pacific**  
Unit 1818, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan  
Paiya Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong  
+852 2318 5111  
editor@chinadailyhk.com  
editor@chinadailyasia.com

**China Daily USA**  
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,  
New York, NY 10036  
+1 212 537 8888  
editor@chinadailyusa.com

**China Daily Africa**  
P.O. Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya  
+254 (0) 20 622 9920 (Nairobi)  
editor@chinadailyafrica.com  
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com  
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

# VIEWS



China and the World Roundtable | China-US Relations of Strategic Stability

**Editor's Note:** The symposium on the Future of China-US Relations was conducted by China Daily's Opinion Channel, the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Chinese Association of American Studies on Thursday. Several experts from both China and the United States shared their views on the theme. Below are excerpts of their speeches.

## Sailing Sino-US relations with stabilizing levers

**Cooperation is the 'why not' moment for China and US**



Siddharth Chatterjee is the CEO of Global Neighbours and former United Nations Resident Coordinator in China.

Today, we face five major challenges unprecedented in the postwar era. First, the pandemic has exposed the fragility of human health and global health systems. Second, we are grappling with a triple climate crisis: climate change, loss of biodiversity, and climate refugees.

Third, there are around 80 ongoing conflicts in the world. Fourth, 800 million people are suffering from hunger. Fifth, inequality is widening, whether it is digital, income or quality of life.

A mother in Beijing, Washington, Nairobi or Mali shares the same aspirations for her children: better education, improved nutrition and greater opportunities.

For the first time after World War II, over 170 million people have been displaced because of conflicts, climate change, poor governance, despondency, poverty and other factors.

Having served for 30 years in the United Nations, I firmly believe that the Global Development Initiative presents a massive opportunity for companies from the United States, China and Europe to come together and transform Africa.

The potential is boundless, and limited only by our imagination. Consider how Russia and the US collaborated on the vaccine that eradicated smallpox.

If scientists from the US, China, Germany, India, Russia and other countries work together, we could probably develop vaccines that can prevent future pandemics.

The Sino-US relationship, the most consequential relationship of the 21st century, has the capacity to manage these global challenges that affect everybody across the world.

I speak not as an American and not as a Chinese but as a global citizen with three decades in the UN.

If the US and China can collaborate on the Global Governance Initiative proposed by China at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting last year, the potential is promising.

So why not? Why don't we see the Build Back Better Act of the US and the Global Development Initiative and Global Governance Initiative of China coming together for a transformative change?

To conclude with the remarks of George Bernard Shaw, who said: "You see things; and you say 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say 'Why not?'"

This is the "why not" moment for China and the US.

**Summit helps to strengthen major-power relations**



Fred Teng is the president of the America China Public Affairs Institute.

The May 14 Beijing meeting between the two heads of state represents a serious attempt to move China-US relations from confrontation management to strategic stability.

Confrontation can lead to uncertainties and severe repercussions, with farmers, students, researchers, manufacturers, and consumers all paying the price.

That is why this summit matters. A "constructive China-US relationship of strategic stability" does not mean the two countries agree on everything — they clearly do not — but that they recognize that unmanaged rivalry is dangerous.

The goal is not to eliminate competition but to discipline it.

There are five important outcomes of the summit.

First, trade and tariffs. The reported extension of the tariff truce sends

a direct signal to the markets. Politicized tariffs have become weapons triggering higher costs, disrupting supply chains and damaging confidence.

Easing tariffs, especially on agricultural products, supports US farmers, helps Chinese importers and consumers and reduces one of the most visible sources of economic friction.

Second, institutional mechanisms. The proposed economic, trade and investment review channels matter because they replace sudden escalation with structured negotiation.

A mechanism does not solve every dispute, but it creates space to talk before disputes become crises. That is how serious great-power relations must be managed.

Third, technology. This remains the hardest area.

High-end AI chips, advanced lithography machines, and military-related technologies might remain restricted.

But the reported easing of certain mid-range chips and equipment restrictions suggests a more practical distinction between strategic technology and normal commercial technology.

That distinction is essential to avoid a technological Cold War, from which neither country benefits.

Fourth, people-to-people exchanges. This may be the most overlooked achievement.

Visas, flights, students, scholars, businesspeople and tourists are not side issues.

They are the human foundation of the relationship. Restoring direct flights and longer-term visas is not symbolic but practical diplomacy to foster trust.

Fifth, crisis management. Restarting fentanyl-related law enforcement cooperation moves the issue from accusation to action.

Restoring military communication channels helps reduce the risk of miscalculation in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Hotlines are not signs of weakness but signs of strategic maturity.

Of course, this is not a full reset. But diplomacy should not be judged only by whether it solves everything.

It should also be judged by whether it prevents the worst outcomes.

The real choice before China and the US is not friendship or confrontation but managed competition or unmanaged rivalry.

If these understandings reached in Beijing are implemented seriously, this summit may mark an important step toward stability, predictability, and responsible major-power relations.

And in today's world, that is a major advance.

**Beijing summit matters more than immediate headlines**



Einar Tangen is a commentator on US current affairs.

For years, the dominant assumption surrounding US-China relations was that deterioration had become irreversible and the world's two largest economies were drifting toward a modern version of the Thucydides Trap, the historical pattern where rising and established powers slide into conflict.

Yet what unfolded in Beijing last week may force us to reconsider that assumption.

The easy interpretation is to dismiss the summit between the two heads of state as just optics: Washington received Beijing headlines and export announcements and Beijing gained goodwill while projecting confidence and stability.

But the reactions afterward suggest something more substantial may be emerging — the outline of a "grand bargain", a strategic understanding where both sides continue competing, but within mutually recognized limits designed to avoid



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

systemic rupture.

The agreement to define a "constructive China-US relationship of strategic stability" reflects concepts that Beijing has pursued for years: managed competition, coexistence, and recognition that neither side can eliminate the other from the international system.

For China, stability is the prerequisite for peace and progress.

The appeal of a broader bargain also exists on the US side, especially for the Donald Trump administration. A grand bargain with China offers it the ability to reframe its policy as the mechanism that produced peace and strategic advantage — reduced tensions between the world's two largest economies, expanded US exports to China, and stabilized global supply chains.

This explains why the Beijing summit may matter far more than the immediate headlines suggest. The deeper issue is whether Washington and Beijing are beginning to accept a common reality — that neither side can achieve absolute dominance without imposing catastrophic costs on itself and the world; that China is not collapsing; and that the US remains indispensable to global finance, technology, consumption, and security architecture.

And most importantly, both countries now require stability more than escalation.

If Beijing and Washington are now exploring ways to manage global strain together rather than intensify it, historians may eventually look back at this summit very differently from the way contemporary commentators initially framed it.

Truly seismic shifts in geopolitics rarely announce themselves clearly and more often first appear as optics.

**Peoples' bonds timeless pillar for Sino-US ties**



Zhao Mei is a research fellow at the Institute of American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

At an international symposium commemorating the victory in the World Anti-Fascist War late last year, I spoke about the Flying Tigers, General Joseph Stilwell, and the rescue of the Doolittle Raiders.

The United States moderator, with tears in her eyes, added that her father was one of the US pilots recruited by the Chinese soldiers and civilians.

The attendees were deeply moved by this heartfelt bond between the Chinese and US people.

The friendship across the Pacific spans over two centuries.

In 1784, the US merchant ship Empress of China arrived in Guangzhou, initiating the first exchange.

In 1879, Ge Kunhua, a scholar from the late Qing Dynasty, taught the Chinese language at Harvard University.

In 1901, a Chinese laborer named Dean Lung donated \$12,000 to support the establishment of East Asian Studies at Columbia University.

Among the Chinese students studying in the US, Zhou Peiyuan, Zhu Kezhen, Qian Xuesen, Qian Weichang, and Liang Sicheng made significant contributions to the development of science, education and culture in China.

Richard Sears, known as "Uncle Hanzhi", founded the website named Chinese Etymology, which now features nearly 100,000 ancient Chinese character forms.

The website has ignited a passion for learning Chinese characters and culture among many foreigners.

Such "cultural ambassadors" have made significant contributions to enhancing mutual understanding and learning between the two civilizations.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US, Sino-US relations have weathered twists and turns but have generally remained stable.

Throughout this period, people-to-people exchanges have been a crucial pillar supporting the steady development of the bilateral relationship.

However, since 2018, headwinds have emerged, causing more than 100 dialogue and exchange mechanisms to largely come to a halt.

The number of students studying in both countries has also declined.

In April 2024, a US newspaper warned that the decrease in US students in China could result in a lost generation of China experts in the US.

History shows that mutual engagement between the Chinese and US people has repeatedly helped the bilateral relationship overcome its low points.

In 1971, ping-pong diplomacy broke the ice of estrangement.

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping, then Chinese leader, attended a welcoming event hosted by the US side, where he warmly interacted with US children singing a Chinese song, an exchange that was met with applause and was hailed as an iconic moment in China-US relations.

Today, dialogue, exchanges, and cooperation continue to provide a steady stream of positive energy for deepening mutual understanding and promoting the healthy development of the bilateral relationship in a complex international landscape.

**Scientific cooperation and educational exchanges mutually beneficial**



Denis Simon is a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979, the United States and China built one of the world's largest bilateral scientific and educational relationships.

The 1979 US-China Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement became one of the most important scientific partnerships in modern history and provided the institutional foundation for decades of collaboration.

At the same time, educational exchanges exploded.

Hundreds of thousands of Chinese students studied in the US, while thousands of US students studied in China.

Joint research programs connected universities, laboratories, companies and government agencies.

This relationship accelerated China's modernization, strengthened US universities and research labs, increased scientific productivity globally, and created deep people-to-people ties between the two societies.

For nearly four decades, scientific collaboration and educational exchanges remained among the most stabilizing and constructive dimensions of the US-China relationship. The benefits were real and mutual.

Chinese students and scholars became deeply integrated into the US innovation system.

Many remained in the US and contributed significantly to the development of US universities, Silicon Valley, biotechnology, semiconductors and entrepreneurship.

At the same time, Chinese students returning home helped build China's research universities, technology sector, AI ecosystem, and industrial innovation capacity.

The relationship was never a one-way transfer of knowledge. Instead, it became an interdependent innovation ecosystem. However, since roughly the late 2010s, the relationship has shifted.

Mutual concerns of both countries have led to declining trust, reduced institutional cooperation, greater scrutiny of researchers and the fragmentation of global science networks.

Concerns emerged in Washington over issues such as intellectual property protection, technology transfer, export controls and dependency in critical technologies as policymakers concluded that advanced technologies could no longer be separated from national security considerations.

China, in turn, became concerned about technological containment, semiconductor restrictions, visa scrutiny, limitations on academic collaboration, and barriers to accessing US research ecosystems.

A realistic assessment suggests that the era of broad, optimistic engagement is over.

The future of US-China scientific relations is unlikely to return to the openness of the 1990s or 2000s.

But a complete scientific divorce is neither realistic nor desirable. It will be defined by how successfully the two countries manage a difficult coexistence.

I remain cautiously optimistic about the future. Strategic competition in science and technology may continue for years to come.

Yet history also shows that scientific collaboration and educational exchange can create channels of communication and reduce misperceptions even during periods of geopolitical rivalry.

The central challenge for both countries is whether they can protect legitimate national security interests while preserving enough openness to sustain innovation, academic inquiry, and global problem-solving.

The stakes are not simply bilateral but global.

The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

أشكو إليك الذي بي يا معذيتي  
 وما أقاسي وما أستطيع أن أصفا  
 (العباس بن الأحنف)

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*I pour out to you my suffering, O my tormentor, all that I endure, and all that I cannot find words to describe.*

Al-Abbas bin Al-Ahnaf  
 (Medieval Arab poet)

# Opinion

## GCC and EU more politically in sync than ever

DR. ABDEL AZIZ ALUWAIHESG

**N**ot since they signed their first agreement in 1988 have the Gulf Cooperation Council and the EU been so much in sync over political issues.

This was plainly evident in the GCC-EU Political Committee meeting in Brussels on Wednesday. The committee comprises representatives from all 27 EU and six GCC states, plus representatives from the two sides' key institutions.

The EU was among the first to condemn Iran's missile and drone strikes on Gulf states and its closure of the Strait of Hormuz. On March 5, days after the start of the war, ministers from the 33 countries met virtually and issued a scathing rebuke of Iran's attacks. This was the GCC's first meeting with any outside group since the start of the war on Feb. 28.

Political alignment is clear not only on the Iran war but clearly also on Gaza, the two-state solution, Syria, Lebanon and

Yemen. The change in government in Hungary opens the door for EU sanctions on Israel to bring its policies closer to those of the GCC. Its co-sponsorship of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution is another signal.

The two blocs are planning their next summit of heads of state and government in Saudi Arabia. They plan to pick up the pace in implementing important integration and connectivity projects during the months leading up to the summit.

These projects aimed at improving connectivity between the two regions were conceived long before the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. They have acquired a higher priority since then because it has become essential to find alternative trade routes, such as the ones some of these projects envision.

The need to respond to Iran's 7,000-plus attacks against GCC countries and



Dr. Abdel Aziz Aluwaihesg is the GCC assistant secretary-general for political affairs and negotiation. The views expressed here are personal and do not necessarily represent those of the GCC.  
 X: @abuhamad

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the closure of the Strait of Hormuz has brought the two groups closer together. The EU expressed admiration for the GCC states' resilience and expressed solidarity and readiness to provide help and support. They also thanked the GCC states for helping repatriate EU nationals stranded in the region and the help they have provided to sailors and ships affected by the waterway's closure.

The GCC has urged the UN Security Council to shoulder its responsibility for protecting the international nature of the waterway and ensuring that no country is allowed to interfere with the passage of international shipping through it. The draft UNSC resolution currently under discussion was proposed by the GCC and it tracks the maritime rules stipulated by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on international waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz. The EU has expressed strong support for this effort.

The EU supports the "Hormuz Coalition"

sponsored by the UK and France, which is a collection of some 50 countries with the aim of securing the strait and helping to restore freedom of navigation by escorting ships. But for this coalition to work, it needs a sustainable ceasefire and Iran's approval, neither of which look to be forthcoming anytime soon.

However, if a UNSC resolution is delayed, there is a need to think of alternatives, including collective regional and international mechanisms to provide safe transit for all. The EU has Operation Aspides, which escorts ships through Bab Al-Mandab and the Red Sea. Its mandate could be extended to the Gulf. The US has also launched an escort initiative, although it is currently on hold.

Nothing focuses the minds of bureaucrats like a forthcoming summit. So, the next few months should witness intense activity on all these issues to ensure the success of the upcoming gathering of EU and GCC heads of state and government.

**The EU was among the first to condemn Iran's missile and drone strikes on Gulf states and its closure of the Strait of Hormuz**



COURTESY: AHMED HUSSEIN/AL-JARAF

**The EU and GCC have begun to recognize that their interests are now interconnected and not merely complementary**

## Pivotal EU-GCC summit set for Riyadh

DR. CHRISTIAN KOCH

**T**he second EU-Gulf Cooperation Council summit, scheduled to be held in Riyadh in the autumn of 2026, comes at a critical moment in international affairs. What began as a historically underdeveloped relationship between two neighboring economic and geopolitical blocs is rapidly evolving into one of the most strategically consequential partnerships of the emerging multipolar era. If the inaugural EU-GCC summit in Brussels in October 2024 symbolized the opening of a new chapter, the second summit in Riyadh comes at a moment where both sides need to transform political ambition into sustained strategic cooperation.

The regional and global environment that confronts Europe and the GCC states has become dramatically more unstable, fragmented and competitive in recent years. The ongoing US-Israel-Iran conflict is fundamentally reshaping the security

calculations of governments across the Middle East and Europe alike.

In addition, the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, instability in the Red Sea, uncertainty surrounding long-term American strategic commitments and the growing weaponization of trade, energy and technology are all fundamentally altering the calculations of policymakers in both Brussels and GCC capitals. The good news is that, in this context, the EU and GCC have begun to recognize that their interests are now interconnected and not merely complementary.

The Riyadh summit will represent far more than a diplomatic gathering. It will offer an opportunity to establish a more structured and operational political-security partnership capable of addressing the realities of an increasingly dangerous regional environment.

Several issue areas come to mind in this regard. The first is maritime security cooperation. Enhanced EU-GCC



Dr. Christian Koch is Executive Manager of the Gulf Research Center Foundation's Brussels office.

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cooperation on naval coordination, maritime surveillance, intelligence sharing and the protection of critical sea lanes will be a vital component to strengthen regional resilience. The EU has already accumulated considerable operational experience through naval missions in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea.

A second area is overall defense preparedness in the GCC states. The EU's comparative advantage lies in integrated security cooperation that includes resilience-building, technology partnerships, cyber defense, intelligence coordination, industrial cooperation and crisis management.

Beyond hard security, the political and diplomatic dimension of the summit will be equally important. Here, the GCC states have emerged as active diplomatic actors capable of mediating conflicts and facilitating dialogue between rival powers.

Finally, the current conflict has reinforced the importance of economic

diversification, supply chain security and strategic investment partnerships. Europe and the Gulf share an interest in developing resilient transport corridors linking Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Ultimately, the importance of a second EU-GCC summit in Riyadh lies in the recognition that the geopolitical environment confronting both regions has entered a new and more dangerous phase. The US-Israel-Iran conflict is not merely a temporary regional crisis. It is part of a broader transformation of the international order that is characterized by fragmentation, strategic competition and chronic instability.

If the first summit in Brussels established the political foundation for a stronger EU-GCC partnership, the second in Riyadh must provide the operational framework to make that partnership meaningful. In an increasingly unstable world, sustained cooperation between Europe and the Gulf is no longer optional — it is a strategic imperative.

## Opinion

## Earth's dynamics may extend to the moon

KHALED ABOU ZAHR

**F**ollowing last month's successful Artemis II mission, which carried four astronauts around the moon and back, NASA has now shifted its full focus to Artemis III. This is the final planned test mission before humans return to the moon. The last time a human set foot on the moon was in 1972 with the US' Apollo 17 mission. At that time, the US was facing the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Tensions between China and the Soviets had escalated and Beijing's rapprochement with the US, led by President Richard Nixon, had begun. The Middle East was in turmoil.

Against this backdrop, space missions were guided by a race between the US and the Soviet Union. They wanted to show their technological superiority for many reasons, including, obviously, dual-use capabilities. Although the latest phase of achievements in space — since the success of Elon Musk's SpaceX — have been guided primarily by a commercial approach rather than great power competition, the latter has become more prominent recently. We are in a period that rhymes with the 1970s, but this

time China has replaced the Soviet Union in the great power competition. The space race clearly has a real objective and target in sight: the moon. Both China and the US see the potential for settlements there to gain a clear strategic advantage.

This new moon race is pushing NASA to rapidly prepare the Artemis III mission. It is planned as a crewed Earth-orbit test flight, rather than a direct moon landing. Astronauts are expected to attempt a lunar surface mission during Artemis IV.

### Both China and the US see the potential for settlements on the moon to gain a clear strategic advantage

Artemis III is seen as a critical step to reduce technical and operational risks before returning humans to the moon's south pole and eventually building a long-term lunar base. This is undoubtedly

a highly complex rehearsal mission that will prepare NASA and its partners for the sustained human exploration of the moon and future missions to Mars.

China is not staying on the sidelines. Expected to launch in about 2029, the current mission in preparation is Chang'e-8, which is due to investigate the presence of ice and other volatile materials at the moon's south pole.

China is increasingly focused on



Khaled Abu Zahr is the founder of SpaceQuest Ventures, a space-focused investment platform. He is CEO of EurasiaMedia and editor of Al-Wakef Al-Arab.

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infrastructure development rather than mere scientific observation. This is clear as Chang'e-8 will also test technologies for using lunar resources directly on the moon, such as 3D printing, with the goal of reducing dependency on materials transported from Earth.

The moon's south pole is a major target of all powers because scientists believe craters there may contain water ice, which could eventually provide drinking water, oxygen and, just as important, rocket fuel for future missions. This race is also taking place as the main conduit of global space cooperation is reaching the end of its life. The International Space Station, which has been an important focus of collaboration between all nations, will be decommissioned in 2030. This indirectly means that, for now, the mindset behind the moon missions is purely national in essence and with a competitive aspect.

The US has established a framework for cooperation through the Artemis Accords. Grounded in the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, they govern lunar and planetary activities and currently have 67 signatory nations.

China has not joined this alliance and is collaborating with Russia to build the International Lunar Research Station, a joint permanent research base located at the moon's south pole. Plans for a joint nuclear plant are even being considered, according to Chinese officials.

UN treaties indicate that no single nation can claim territories on the moon. Yet, once a country has a settlement there, even if unmanned, it does not need to

### The moon's south pole is a major target of all powers because scientists believe craters there may contain water ice

claim it. It is de facto its own territory. So, is there a risk of direct confrontation between China and the US for the prime spots? And what happens a decade down the line, when there are successful settlements and ongoing activities, both

commercial and military, on the moon? If the two sides' current plans succeed, and this is by no means guaranteed, they could both have a presence on the moon by the end of the 2030s or early 2040s. The risks are the same as on Earth and the same dynamics and rules of engagement will apply. For now, the risk is greater in the Arctic than on the moon. But what happens in one will no doubt extend to the other.

## Why cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue matter

DR. MAJID RAFIZADEH

**T**he international community yesterday observed World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development. This day should remind us of the essential role cultures play in sustainable development, conflict prevention and peacebuilding globally.

The promotion of intercultural dialogue and the preservation of cultural pluralism is particularly vital in an era in which geopolitical tensions appear to be rising. While globalization and technology have connected the world more than ever — and been beneficial in many ways — they have also increased tensions and anxieties in some cultures.

According to UNESCO, conflicts that have cultural facets still comprise a significant portion of major disputes around the world. This points to the significance of dialogue.

One factor is the amplification of cultural problems by social media, which reinforces "us versus them" narratives. However, social media can also be used to increase intercultural engagement, remove prejudice and prepare communities for diversity.

The key issue is that when a conflict

erupts, cultural misunderstandings can ratchet up tensions and grievances. But dialogue can create pathways for understanding, trust, empathy and problem-solving collaborations.

When we put together the benefits across the political, economic and social landscapes, it is obvious that intercultural dialogue can lead to long-term stability, security and development.

One effective strategy is Track II diplomacy. This refers to unofficial,

informal interactions among nonstate actors. These actors could include academics, intellectuals, civil society leaders, former officials and experts who engage in dialogue outside formal government channels.

Track II diplomacy has been successfully applied in numerous contexts. One landmark example is its role in the Oslo Accords via informal meetings in Norway. Another notable case is the Community of Sant'Egidio's facilitation of the Mozambique peace process, culminating in the 1992 General Peace Accord that ended a prolonged civil war. Track II has also sustained dialogues in Cyprus and Northern Ireland that supported broader reconciliation efforts.

### Dialogue can create pathways for understanding, trust, empathy and problem-solving collaborations

### Track II diplomacy enhances conflict prevention as it operates with greater flexibility and lower political stakes

One of the reasons Track II diplomacy enhances conflict prevention is that it operates with greater flexibility and lower political stakes, therefore paving the way for diplomatic outcomes.

Countries in the Gulf have emerged as notable advocates of these principles. For example, Saudi Arabia has advanced interfaith and intercultural platforms, including supporting the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue.

These steps reflect the Kingdom's broader Vision 2030 reforms that emphasize openness, cultural exchange and soft power projection through heritage and modernity. Such leadership demonstrates that cultural engagement can align with national development, while contributing to global norms of tolerance.

The UAE has also hosted high-profile initiatives, including the International Dialogue of Civilizations and Tolerance Conference and the Abrahamic Family House, which symbolizes interfaith coexistence. The UAE's designation of 2026 as the "Year of Family" further integrates intercultural themes into its policy agenda.

Nevertheless, there is a vital

contemporary dimension involving the double-edged impact of artificial intelligence and digital globalization. While these technologies are enabling unprecedented cross-cultural exchange, some worry that they risk accelerating cultural homogenization. This is because some large language models are predominantly trained on English-language, Western datasets, often referred to as a "WHELM" (Western, high-income, educated, liberal and male) perspective.

Some argue that AI systems may prioritize individualistic values over communal or traditional ones, which are common in non-Western cultures. But there could be some countermeasures, such as creating diverse training datasets and localized models.

In conclusion, as conflicts appear to be on the rise around the world, the international community must redouble its efforts to promote intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity. At the end of the day, we are one human race sharing a single planet in a large galaxy. We need to invest in dialogue and learn from pioneering efforts in nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE in order to prevent conflicts and build a more peaceful world.



Dr. Majid Rafizadeh is a Harvard-educated Iranian-American political scientist. [X@Dr.Rafizadeh](mailto:X@Dr.Rafizadeh)

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## OPINION

## Democrats Akinize Themselves



**POTOMAC WATCH**  
By Kimberley A. Strassel

Seasoned Republicans still wince when recalling Senate elections of 14 and 16 years ago, that season of witches and "legitimate rape." Christine O'Donnell, Todd Akin, Richard Mourdock. Deeply flawed candidates denied the GOP control of the Senate twice running, and traumatized the party into coining a new word. It must avoid being "Akinized."

It's the Democrats' turn now. In the party's haste this midterm to recruit a younger, "fresher" "progressive populist" lineup, it's getting its own season of cuckoo. Calls for "castration" of "Zionists," mocking slurs of decorated U.S. servicemen and prostitutes, laments for the dead Iranian supreme leader. They even have their own Wiccan defender. The media is keeping focus on GOP fights, but these Democrats are getting plenty of attention in their races, causing party leaders to shake.

Or to run, screaming, as in next week's runoff in Texas' 35th Congressional District. How else to handle Maureen Galindo, the sex therapist who led the first primary round? Her campaign's Instagram account recently made a promise: If elected, she'd "turn Karnes ICE Detention Center into a prison for American Zionists and former

ICE officers." The new prison will "also be a castration processing center for pedophiles which will probably be most of the Zionists!" Ms. Galindo explained that her proposal "does not mean I want Jews in internment camps," but said that "if you are a Zionist, then you're a danger to humanity and belong in prison." She clarified that her camp was "NEVER for Jewish Zionists—it's for BILLIONAIRE Zionists."

Democrats have rushed out the "we had no idea" line. They insist the party opposes antisemitism and are backing her rival. The media is putting all the attention on a shady super PAC supporting Ms. Galindo that might be tied to Republicans. Then again, Ms. Galindo did trash talk well before this race. (Her social media features a rant about "tokenness puppet sellout Hispanics.") It didn't stop Democratic primary voters from checking her box, or primary rivals from endorsing her after her victory. Unhinged rhetoric is perfectly fine in the progressive fever swamps—until it isn't.

Look at Graham Plater, the oysterman U.S. Senate candidate in Maine, the left's new national star. His rise has been so meteoric that he pushed out the governor, Janet Mills, before Maineres even got a ballot. Democrats are obsessed with Mr. Plater's "everyman" appeal—his Marine history, his working-class shtick. So much so that they were willing to ignore his Nazi tattoo and obnoxious

online posts about drunk women, rural Americans, and cops. After all, Mr. Plater explained all that; they came at a time he was "struggling deeply." But the ugly is piling up. New reports are cracking his "working class Mainer" claim, relating Mr. Plater's private life of frequenting the (attended) Hotchkiss prep school.

**Like the GOP in 2010 and 2012, the party makes some crazy choices in vital races.**

and continuing family support. Recently unearthed posts feature Mr. Plater mocking the "stupidity" and "wheezing" of a soldier, a "mouthbreather" who only "made it home" because of poor Taliban "marksman-ship." Other entries have him musing about lead acts in portable toilets and explicit bathroom graffiti.

Michigan Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed was caught directing staff to stay mum on the killing of Ayotolaj Ali Khamenei, which made Dearborn residents "sad." Texas Senate nominee James Taralio—another populist juggernaut—was found lecturing in 2021 that there are "six really common biological sexes." In New Hampshire's gubernatorial race, candidate Jon Kiper self-published "Poetry for Leaders"—featuring vile language, slurs, references to

drugs, and the line: "Are you a prostitute? . . . Because I would definitely be willing to pay cash money to have sex with you." Mr. Kiper muses that people shouldn't be held "accountable" for "what we did 10 years ago."

Over in the House, the Democratic nominee for Texas' 15th District, Bobby Pulido, is under fire for a music video in which he portrayed a sex pervert and mimicked lewd acts in public. And in true shades of 2010, Iowa congressional candidate and Lutheran minister Sara Garriott (running unopposed to take on GOP Rep. Zach Nunn), has defended Wiccan prayer, and once took part in a wedding of satanists.

These are the types of risky candidates parties land when they value vibe and "fight over experience or accomplishments." (They are also a glimpse at the challenge both parties face as they turn to a younger generation that has dumped its overly thought online.) It's a repeat of the GOP's mistakes in 2010 and 2012, when Tea Party rage fueled "antiestablishment" characters who satisfied the base but turned off the general electorate.

And as with the GOP then, many of these Democrats are running in seats that the party desperately need to win if it hopes to retake Congress. With liabilities like these, the party had better hope the GOP is having a bad year indeed.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Tom Shippey

## A Hegemon In His Time

Offa

By Rory Naismith  
Yale, 384 pages, \$45

If the name Offa is known at all today, it is because of Offa's Dyke, an earthwork that roughly denotes the Anglo-Welsh border. It was supposedly built at the behest of Offa, who led the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia (today's Midlands) from 757 to 796. The dyke is estimated to have taken 10,000 men to complete. Its message to the Welsh was obvious: keep out.

We know very little about Offa compared to other Anglo-Saxon monarchs. For information about Oswald, the seventh-century king of Northumbria, which straddled northern England and southern Scotland, we have Bede's "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" (ca. 731). But as one academic has observed, Offa seems to have had "all the attributes of a great ruler except a contemporary historian"—that is, someone who lived at the same time and could attest to important details. In "Offa: King of the Mercians," Rory Naismith attempts to fill out the picture by relying on comments from rival kingdoms and the material evidence of coins, charters and structures.

We don't know when or where Offa was born. Mr. Naismith, a professor of medieval history at Cambridge University, notes that he came to the throne "under murky circumstances." His dynastic claim was that he was a descendant of Eowa, the brother of Penda, a great Mercian warrior who had lived a hundred years before.

"As a ruler," Mr. Naismith writes, "Offa is a figure of paramount interest. He stands out as probably the most successful king of what is often called the heptarchy, meaning the period of Anglo-Saxon history when there were several distinct kingdoms." By the mid-700s, the author writes, only the kingdoms of Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex, East Anglia and Kent "functioned as largely autonomous units."

There is no doubt of Offa's dominance in his time. He wielded power from Tamworth, now a Midlands city of 80,000. On his coinage he signed himself rex *M. for Merciorum*, but there are occasional signs that he was also regarded as rex *Anglorum*, king of the Angles, leaving the Saxons to the south out of it. Offa certainly established hegemony over East Anglia and Kent. He defeated Cynwulf, the king of Wessex, at the Battle of Bensington in 779. He also acquired a reputation for tyranny because of his execution of Aethelberht, the king of East Anglia, in 794.

Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, addressed Offa as an equal, calling him brother. "This in itself speaks volumes about Offa's prestige in the eyes of the Franks," Mr. Naismith writes. "Only the emperor of the East Roman (Byzantine) Empire was addressed in the same terms by Charlemagne." Yet the relationship wasn't always amicable. When Charlemagne proposed that one of Offa's daughters marry one of Charlemagne's sons, and Offa replied that maybe his own son should likewise marry one of Charlemagne's daughters, the king of the Franks took great offense and imposed a trade embargo.

"Offa was a Christian king," Mr. Naismith points out, "and as such he patronized monasteries, liaised with the Pope and venerated the holy places associated with Jesus Christ and his saints. In practice, this meant he found common cause with other Christians in Britain, Ireland, the Frankish world and Rome." His reign overlapped with the papacy of Hadrian I, which lasted from 772 to 795. A papal letter reveals that Hadrian appointed Offa the steward of various monasteries dedicated to St. Peter. In 787, with the pope's permission, Offa established the archdiocese of Lichfield in Mercia.

**England's Midlands region was once the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia. Its most powerful ruler set a new standard for political control.**

Mr. Naismith deals with the evidence thoroughly, but in the absence of a narrative source, we are left with little idea of Offa as a person. The author ponders whether Offa's name is a contraction of Ostrith—his father was Thingfrith and his son was Egfrith. But why was Offa the preferred form? There was a legendary figure called Offa who, according to the Old English poem "Widsith," fixed the Angles' southern border against the Myrgings by fighting a duel on an island in the River Eider, one against two. It is perhaps significant that the later Offa also aimed for fame by fixing a border, this one between Mercia and Wales.

Mr. Naismith argues that Offa's real legacy was developing a new model of kingship, founded on tight control and individual competence. He became a model for the kings of Wessex in particular. He didn't have to deal with the Vikings: Their first attack on England was far in the north and only three years before Offa's death.

Toward the end of his life, Offa cleared the way for Egfrith to inherit the throne by eliminating all possible rivals. But it was all for naught, as Egfrith died less than six months after his father. "Egfrith's short reign was apparently a troubled one," Mr. Naismith writes. "He faced dissatisfaction with the actions of his father on the part of several major figures, as well as unrest in several areas brought into the Mercian fold by Offa."

Offa's successors appear to have lacked his fortitude. Some 80 years after his death, independent Mercian royalty would come to a disgraceful end when King Burgred fled from the Vikings to Rome, leaving King Alfred of Wessex to partition Mercia with the Danish invaders. One imagines many inhabitants of Middle England at the time saying, "if only we still had a king like Offa."

Mr. Shippey is the author of "Laughing Shall Die: Lives and Deaths of the Great Vikings" and "Beowulf and the North Before the Vikings."

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## The Gospel According to Karl Marx

**HOUSES OF WHAT IF KARL MARX WASN'T MERELY AN ECONOMIST OR REVOLUTIONARY THEORIST, BUT AN ESCATOLOGIST—SOMEONE WHO DIDN'T ABOLISH THE CHRISTIAN DRAMA OF REDEMPTION BUT RELOCATED IT WITHIN THE REALM OF HUMANLY ACHIEVABLE HISTORY?**

The question might seem mad. Eschatology belongs to theology, religion's study of the final destiny of time. And Marx famously dismissed religion as an illusion, calling it the "opium of the people." Yet when his thought is examined carefully, a striking parallel emerges: Marx didn't eliminate redemption. He translated it into political economy.

The traditional Christian story of history unfolds in a recognizable pattern: creation, fall and eventual restoration in heaven. Human life is marked by injustice and suffering, but the ultimate resolution of history arrives through divine action.

Marx absorbed this narrative while rejecting its theological foundations. Capitalism was akin to the fall; class struggles became the engine of history, and revolution the moment of redemption. The proletariat, the working class, was elevated into the historical agent of liberation. In this way, Marx transformed a theological drama into a secular narrative of historical inevitability.

Marx himself insisted that philosophy must undertake the "ruthless critique of every thing existing." His critique of

capitalism was powerful because it described genuine moral ambitions of religion while stripping away the transcendent dimension that once disciplined those ambitions. When redemption becomes entirely immanent—located within human history rather than beyond it—the political sphere begins to carry expectations it can't fulfill.

**Communism offers redemption and moral intensity without the restraints of religion.**

The contrast becomes especially clear when placed alongside the thought of St. Paul. Writing to the Philippians, Paul described his former achievements under the law with a blunt Greek word meaning refuse or rubbish. His point was that human systems, however impressive they appear, can't reverse redemption. Marx reversed that logic. Where Paul dismissed human structures as incapable of saving humanity, Marx entrusted history itself with precisely that task.

Understanding Marxism in this light helps explain its emotional power. Political programs alone rarely inspire the level of devotion that Marxist movements often generated. Eschatologies do. When people believe they are participating in the final chapter of human liberation, sacrifice becomes

meaningful and opposition evil. The 20th century's darkest consequences of this dynamic with unsettling clarity. As the historian Leszek Kolakowski observed, Marxism functioned for many as "the greatest fantasy of our century"—a promise that history itself would bring final justice.

G.K. Chesterton captured the problem: Marx simply replaced one abstraction with another. But abstractions such as "historical inevitability" can't produce justice on their own, because justice depends on the moral character of the persons who act within those systems.

The deep question for our own moment is whether modern politics can resist the temptation to which Marxists surrender. Every generation is drawn to the hope that history itself will resolve its deepest conflicts. Marx gave that hope its most powerful modern expression by translating theological categories into the language of political economy. But as Eric Voegelin once warned, attempts to "immanentize the eschaton"—to force heaven into history—have repeatedly produced political disasters.

Marx didn't abolish the Christian structure of redemption. He relocated it within history—and that relocation continues to shape the political imagination of the modern world.

Mr. Orlando is a filmmaker and author of "Karl Marx: The Divine Tragedy."

## Natural Gas Is Escaping Into Thin Air

By Fred Krupp

As consumers around the world tighten their belts in the face of rising inflation and energy prices, the global oil and gas industry is letting enough natural gas to power Japan, South Korea and Australia for a year escape—literally—into thin air.

The International Energy Agency recently reported that the oil and gas industry loses 120 billion cubic meters of methane to leaks and intentional releases, while another 150 billion cubic meters is flared off because operators haven't built the infrastructure to bring it to market. With war continuing in the Middle East, the IEA concluded that the world could save 200 billion cubic meters a year—a volume exceeding the total natural gas that moved through the Strait of Hormuz in 2025.

Letting gas vanish is an expensive inefficiency. From the manufacturing hubs of Asia to

the industrial centers of Europe, the high cost of energy is acting as a stealth tax on everything from groceries to home heating.

Wasted natural gas is also damaging the climate. Unburned gas consists primarily of methane, a potent greenhouse pollutant. When released into the atmosphere, it

**Mitigating waste could help solve the world's energy shortage.**

has more than 80 times the 20-year warming power of carbon dioxide.

The solutions are straightforward. Oil and gas companies should tighten valves, close hatches, replace worn and faulty equipment, ensure equipment is well maintained, end routine flaring, and track emissions to know how much gas is escaping from their

These fixes often require only modest capital. In many instances, the captured gas provides a return on investment that can offset the initial costs. According to the IEA, around 70% of fossil-fuel methane emissions could be reduced with current technologies—more than half of it at zero net cost.

Investors are eyeing the opportunity as well. At a recent Group of Seven meeting, Nordea Asset Management pushed for clear, stable methane policies, while Pimco called for capital to fund abatement. Multilateral institutions are also stepping in: The World Bank recently approved a \$10.6 billion grant for Uzbekistan's national oil company to repair leaks across its aging transmission network.

Companies must pursue rigorous emissions measurement and credible mitigation plans that treat gas waste as lost revenue. To accelerate these changes, the natural-gas in-

dustry can use public and private financing. Investors should make financing methane reductions a priority, consistent with the consensus of nearly 200 countries at the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Dubai.

Governments, financial institutions and purchasers of gas should align policy, finance and market demand to address the problem of gas waste. There is a lot to be learned from the evolution of offshore oil and gas, and from the transport, where rigorous zero-harm protocols transformed oil spills from a frequent occurrence into a rare failure.

By treating methane waste with the same gravity as a fire or a blowout, the industry can eliminate a major liability, addressing the world's immediate energy needs efficiently and responsibly.

Mr. Krupp is president of the Environmental Defense Fund.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

America's IPO Mini-Boom

Today's AI investor euphoria recalls the heady dot-com days of the 1990s, and it's hard to tell how these bets will shake out. SpaceX, OpenAI and Anthropic are rushing to go public to take advantage of the favorable market conditions. But amid the elegies written about American capitalism, the latest mini-IPO boom is a welcome tribute to the dynamism of U.S. markets that no other country can match.

SpaceX fired the starting gun in the race on Wednesday when it filed paperwork with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The rocket company, founded in 2002, is a global leader in space exploration. It has also spread into broadband, mobile satellite service and data-center development.

Anthropic recently agreed to pay SpaceX \$1.25 billion a month to use its data centers to train models. That shows how competitors can enjoy symbiotic relationships. SpaceX says the company as a whole reported a \$4.9 billion net loss last year, some of which stemmed from its X.com social-media platform.

You have to respect Elon Musk's ambition. SpaceX says in its filing that it foresees \$28.5 trillion—yes, trillion—in market opportunities, including data centers in space. Mr. Musk in January was awarded one billion performance-based restricted shares that will vest if his company establishes a "permanent human colony on Mars with at least one million inhabitants." Can the public nominate politicians to send to the colony?

Government pension funds kvetch that the IPO will preserve Mr. Musk's control of the company by giving him more votes per share. But such dual-class structures are not uncommon (see Berkshire Hathaway or our owner, News Corp) and can encourage founders to take their companies public since they won't lose control. If pension funds don't like SpaceX's structure, they don't have to buy shares.

SpaceX could fetch a market valuation of upward of \$1 trillion, a huge boon for its early private investors and employees with stock options. OpenAI and Anthropic have also heavily compensated their employees with stock options, partially as a way to preserve capital. Stock options allow employees to share in a company's growth and success.

The shame is that retail investors have missed SpaceX's early stratospheric gains.

Companies are staying private longer because of the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act's burdensome regulations, shareholder litigation and abundant financing available in private markets. The number of public companies has shrunk by half in three decades.

This means ordinary Americans who invest in the stock market, either directly or through retirement accounts, are sharing less in America's wealth creation. SpaceX will have been in business for 24 years before it takes the public-market plunge, compared to Amazon (three years), Apple (four), Google (six), Nvidia (six), Tesla (seven) and Facebook (eight).

OpenAI is 11 years old. Launched five years ago, Anthropic is a relative fledgling compared to other companies going public. But press reports last week said it plans to raise \$30 billion from private investors at a \$900 billion valuation ahead of an expected public offering. That's \$900 billion in gains that retail investors will have missed.

SEC Chair Paul Atkins wants to ease regulations on public companies and make it easier for retail investors to invest in private firms. That's a better way to ensure Americans enjoy the gains from AI and growing markets than government redistribution. South Korea last week spooked markets by floating a "citizen dividend" from taxing AI profits.

Similar ideas are popping up in the U.S. on the left and right amid worries that workers will lose their jobs because of AI. A much bigger risk is that politicians reflexively respond to such fears with taxes and regulation that slow growth and make the economy less dynamic. That would make everyone worse off.

One reason the U.S. boasts the world's most valuable companies and promising startups is because the government doesn't seek to punish success—or handoff entrepreneurs with regulation as the Europeans do. China boasts enormous human capital, but Beijing's financial markets are stunted by the desire for political control. See Alibaba's Jack Ma.

America also has the world's deepest capital markets. U.S. public equity markets boast an aggregate market cap of some \$70 trillion, more than twice as much as all of Europe's stock markets. Who knows if Mr. Musk will every colonize Mars, but the surest bet is never to bet against American innovation.

Too bad SpaceX and others didn't go public sooner, but they are a tribute to U.S. success.

Robert L. Woodson, 1937-2026

The American civil-rights movement has many heroes, and one of the most untung was Robert L. Woodson Sr. The native of South Philadelphia, who died Tuesday at age 89, made his mark in the tradition of Booker T. Washington by arguing that the best path for empowering minorities and the poor is helping them lift up themselves.

Raised by a single mother after his father died soon after his birth, Woodson dropped out of high school to join the Air Force. He earned his high-school GED as an airman and went on to get degrees at Cheyney University and the University of Pennsylvania.

He became active in the civil-rights movement during its 1960s heyday, working for a variety of groups such as the NAACP and the National Urban League. But from his earliest years he emphasized work at the community level, especially in fighting crime and giving the poor the tools to help themselves. He often said his work in a jail as young man gave him a different point of view from the salons of Washington, D.C., about rising from the streets.

That thinking ran counter to the dominant orthodoxy of the day, which was that government programs are the key to empowerment

and opportunity. Woodson has been vindicated by decades of evidence, not that most civil-rights leaders will admit it.

Woodson never denied that racism continues to exist in America. But he believed it was a cruel tyranny if minorities used racism as an excuse for not taking the opportunities available in this country. He was a frequent contributor to these pages, and six years ago he put it this way in the Journal: "Dr. [Martin Luther] King would have refused to participate in today's identity politics gamesmanship because it frames its grievances in opposition to the American principles of freedom and equality that he sought to redeem."

His legacy will live on in the Woodson Center he founded in 1981 to promote self-help solutions in low-income neighborhoods. He also created the 1776 Unites campaign to counter the 1619 Project of the New York Times that claims the real American founding was when the first slaves arrived on these shores.

Woodson believed in the founding of the Declaration of Independence, as Abraham Lincoln did. As America celebrates its 250th anniversary, Bob Woodson's life and work is a tribute to the Declaration's promise.

He challenged the civil-rights orthodoxy that the poor need big government to rise.

Requiem for a Campaign Nightmare

Now they don't tell us. The Democratic National Committee on Thursday "released" its long-hidden post-mortem examining Kamala Harris's presidential loss in 2024. We need the skeptical quotation marks because even now it's not publishing a full, finished version of the report—because Democrats don't seem to have prepared one.

The main theory in the report prepared by party strategist Paul Rivera is that the Harris-Walz campaign didn't attack Donald Trump enough. Yes, really. There are also some process complaints that Ms. Harris didn't bother campaigning aggressively enough in rural areas, and long passages about insufficient or inefficient campaign spending.

Our favorite howler is the theory that Democrats were too rational to win in that cycle: "Democrats operate in an ecosystem defined by reason even in cycles when the electorate is defined by rage."

What's missing is any discussion of the many obvious reasons Ms. Harris lost. The draft report makes no attempt to examine Joe Biden's decision to stay in the race for as long as he did despite public evidence of cognitive decline, or to investigate the political consequences of the hasty handoff of the campaign torch to Ms. Harris, by resigned acclamation,

without a party competition. Also absent is any discussion of the Democrats' problems.

The election showed that interest groups and party leaders are out of step with the general public on climate and transgender issues. The latter garners only a single, oblique mention when discussing Mr. Trump's most effective campaign ad ("Kamala is for 'they,' 'them,' President Trump is for you"). Israel and Gaza, which divided Democrats, don't rate a mention.

Presumably this is because to analyze Ms. Harris's loss convincingly, the DNC would have to explain to its progressive base that they're the problem. Which, in a way, is why anyone should care about this report. Voters decided in November 2024 that Ms. Harris deserved to lose, and books by reporters and memoirists since and still to come flesh out how the debacle happened. No one needs a report from the DNC to tell them.

This is really about whether Democratic leaders are willing or able to wrest their party back from interest groups out of step with most voters. DNC Chairman Ken Martin's attempts to delay publication of this thin report augurs poorly. It's a bad sign for anyone who thinks American democracy benefits from having two viable, competitive parties.

Democrats don't want to tell themselves why they lost in 2024.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Back When a B In College Wasn't Bad News

Regarding Allysia Finley's "Is the Age of College Coddling Coming to a Close?" (Life Science, May 18): I would like to relate a different college experience that few students go through today. I was at the front end of the baby boom and was fortunate to be accepted to a top level STEM program at a selective private university. During freshman orientation the dean stated, "Look to your left, and look to your right. At graduation only half of you will be here."

The freshman and sophomore years were tough, with some core courses flunking or dropping almost half the students. Survival required hard work and dedication. Failure likely meant a trip to Vietnam. The lessons learned during those first two years helped me navigate future challenges and disappointments in ways that coddling never could.

JOHN KERN  
Tryon, N.C.

When I was going to Lawrence University in the late 1980s, grade inflation hadn't yet reached Appleton, Wis. I recall the head of the political science department, Chong-do Hah, telling the class that only "Hah and God get A's," and he pretty much kept his word. I remember classmates being

happy to get a B in his class.

While I worked hard during my four years, I didn't get a 4.0 GPA. Still, I've had a successful career in commercial real estate. My business partner, who graduated from DePauw University in Indiana and worked hard through his four years, had a mantra: "Not bad for a 2.2 GPA from DePauw." Unfortunately, judging by my children's recent college experiences, nowadays not getting an A would be devastating.

JAY STEWART  
La Crosse, Wis.

Ms. Finley is correct that there is a welcome trend toward sanity in higher education. But in calling the honor roll, she misses Dartmouth College. Dartmouth wasn't just the first Ivy to restore standardized testing; it also has navigated the aftermath of Oct. 7, 2023 with deftness and discipline. It's good that Harvard, Yale and Princeton appear to be coming around, but they are late.

As was famously observed more than 200 years ago by Daniel Webster: It is "a small College. And yet, there are those of us who love it."

WILLIAM R. GRUVER  
Open Discourse Coalition  
Lewisburg, Pa.

The U.S. Postal Service Is a Failed Business

Your editorial "The U.S. Postal Service Is Going Bust. Blame Congress" (May 12) argues that USPS should operate like a well-run business. Yet a well-run business rarely attracts customers when it raises prices while increasing expenses and reducing the quality of its services.

The 2021 Delivering for America plan projected that USPS would break even by 2023 through aggressive rate increases and cost cutting. Yet USPS has lost more than \$30 billion since then—even after the Postal Service Reform Act of 2022 eliminated ten of billions in liabilities.

The Postal Service raised prices several times at rates above inflation—which reduced mail volume and reve-

lue, according to the Postal Regulatory Commission. Instead of cost cutting, USPS's operating costs increased by nearly 10% between 2021 and 2025, and productivity plummeted.

Any bankrupt company is expected to restructure before borrowing more, and for USPS that starts with unraveling their mistakes. Congress must see financial relief to a CPI-based price cap, stronger regulatory oversight, and measurable cost controls to keep USPS from squandering another effort to stabilize it.

KEVIN YODER  
Executive director, Keep US Posted  
Washington  
Mr. Yoder is a former Congressman from Kansas.

Philanthropists Do What Politicians Promised

Jeff and Janine Yass deserve praise, but philanthropists shouldn't have to do what politicians are elected and entrusted to do ("Pennsylvania's New Education Hope," Review & Outlook, May 14). Gov. Josh Shapiro may not have been elected in 2022 without his promise to give students in underperforming public schools a lifetime scholarship for private education. But three and a half years later, he's broken that promise.

Black and brown children are suffering the most from the status quo. In Philadelphia in particular, communities of color are seeing educational options disappear before their eyes. Everyone says Gov. Shapiro has national ambitions, but a leader takes hard stands at home first. He could start with the easy stand of opting into the federal tax credit scholarship, which won't cost Pennsylvania

taxpayers a dime. But a truly courageous leader would keep his promise to give families a bigger and broader educational lifeline.

Education freedom is the civil-rights issue of our time. Our governor is putting politics over people and thereby letting down black and brown families. But thank God we have humanitarians like Jeff and Janine Yass who still believe in lifting them up.

REV. JOSHUA C. ROBERTSON  
Black Pastors United for Education  
Harrisburg, Pa.

The California Grift Goes On

The California fraud story is even worse than your editorial points out ("The Great California Medicaid Grift," May 16). The story's central theme is that state leaders don't care about fraud.

According to my organization's freedom of information requests, California's Department of Health Care Services referred only 127 Medicaid providers for fraud investigation between January and March. Yet CBS News found 89 hospice providers at a single address, 75 of which have racked up a combined 400 violations since 2021. The federal government has also suspended 800 hospice providers in the state this year. Is California even looking for fraud?

The real fraud story is that 80% of improper Medicaid payments nationwide reflect failures of eligibility, not bad-actor providers. California contributes to this crisis by letting people self-attest to key aspects of their eligibility, which is to say, it tolerates lying. The Trump administration should get California to start caring about fraud—to say nothing of every other state.

HAYDEN DUBLOIS  
Foundation for Government  
Accountability  
Marco Island, Fla.

Taiwan Without Its Strength

Regarding Gerard Baker's "Trump, Taiwan and the 'Thucydides Trap'" (Editor At Large, May 19): It was Thucydides who said "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."

As China continues its chest-thumping and intensifies its military drills around the island, President Trump must leave no doubt of America's commitment to Taiwan. Otherwise he leaves Taiwan at the mercy of a far stronger power.

ALLEN ZHANG  
Arlington, Va.

CORRECTION

John Sculley was the president of Pepsi-Cola Co. A May 18 book review, "Bringing It All Back Home," said that he was the president of the parent company, PepsiCo.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Ben and I are co-teaching a course on ethics next semester."

OPINION

# You're Probably Overinvested in Bonds

By Robert C. Pozen

Most financial advisers tell their clients to hold a 60-40 portfolio—60% in stocks and 40% in bonds. Stocks are volatile, and bonds can provide a counterweight when share prices fall. But after more than 20 years in the money-management business, I've concluded that many investors hold too much in bonds and not enough in equities.

Plenty of people should hold bonds. If you are retired and subsisting on your investment income, or if you would have to sell a significant chunk of your investments to cover living expenses in a bad year, you should have more in high-quality bonds. But that probably isn't true for two large groups: The six million to seven million Americans with \$1 million or more in investable assets and other households with more

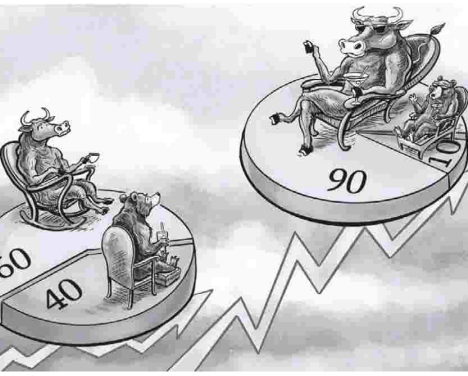
7.33% year to date as of March 30, largely because of the Iran war. The index bounced back to plus-5.62% for the year by May 1.

Moreover, the 90-10 portfolio eliminates fees to financial advisers, who charge an average of 1% of assets under management. You can build the 90-10 portfolio yourself simply by buying an index fund and a money-market fund, and rebalancing at the start of each year if stocks have gone up or down.

The argument for the 90-10 portfolio is based on many decades of stock prices. During the 10 years ending Dec. 31, 2025, the average annual total return (with income reinvested annually) of the S&P 500 trounced that of 10-year U.S. Treasury bonds, 14.68% to 0.89%. Although the difference was especially large in the past decade, stocks also beat bonds handsily over all time periods of 20, 30, 40, 50 and 60 years ending with 2025. If you invested \$100,000 in a 90-10 portfolio for the 10 years ending on Dec. 31, 2025, you would have accumulated almost \$356,000, compared with around \$243,000 if you had a 60-40 portfolio. For 40 years, the figures were \$5.8 million and \$2.5 million.

The return on the S&P 500 isn't based on picking winners or ascertaining market sentiment. It reflects the aggregate fundamental strengths of publicly traded U.S. companies. By contrast, bond returns are driven by interest rates, which fluctuate due to macroeconomic conditions and government policies.

Notably, stocks have outperformed bonds during the two most recent bouts of high inflation. In 1972 to 1982, when annual inflation averaged over 8%, the average annual nominal total returns of the



Those losses were more than recouped by the end of 1976.

Second, that bonds can offset stock losses. But bond returns were positive in only 10 of the 13 years when the S&P 500 was negative. In 2022, when the S&P 500's total return was minus 18.04%, U.S. Treasuries were down nearly as much.

Conventional wisdom has it that as investors approach or pass retirement age, they should hold less in stock and more in bonds. But rising life expectancy expands their time horizon, and many households with \$1 million or more in investable assets intend to bequeath a substantial portion of their assets. Because of the step-up in basis at death, if your children inherit assets that aren't retirement accounts, they won't be liable for taxes on capital gains earned during your lifetime.

If you are going to hold a 90-10 portfolio, you'll need a plan for staying calm during market drops. First, remind yourself that the stock market's best days often follow its worst years. Second, focus on how small one year's drop in stock prices is relative to 30 years of returns, and see sharp declines in stock prices as buying opportunities. Finally, think of the 10% in your money market fund as an insurance policy in the unlikely event that the S&P 500 stays down for more than a year.

Don't miss out on the growth opportunity of a lifetime if you have a lot of investable assets. Buy and hold a portfolio composed mainly of a stock index fund with a money-market fund as an insurance policy.

Mr. Pozen is a distinguished senior lecturer at MIT Sloan School of Management and a former president of Fidelity Investments.

The usual advice is to hold only 60% of your assets in stock. If you're wealthy, a 90/10 split is far better.

than \$100,000 in investable assets whose noninvestment income covers their cost of living. (Investable assets include retirement accounts but not homes.)

For these affluent investors, a 60-40 portfolio means sacrificing the tremendous upside potential of stocks to avoid temporary losses. Over any long period, they will likely be better off with a 90-10 portfolio—90% in a low-cost stock index and 10% in a money-market fund to pay unanticipated expenses.

Stock declines are relatively infrequent and typically are followed by increases—a recurring pattern over the past 60 years. It happened again this year. The S&P 500 was down

S&P 500 were 7.74%, while the figure for 10-year U.S. Treasuries were 5.71%. From 2021 to 2024, when annual inflation averaged almost 5%, the figures were 13.47% and negative 5.35%.

For more than a decade after the 2008 financial crisis, there was a bull run in bonds because interest rates fell and remained low. But that scenario is unlikely to recur soon as interest rates normalize, inflationary pressures build, and neither political party seems to have the will to reform Medicare or Social Security, which the government will have to bail out by issuing more debt at higher rates.

Higher interest rates will also adversely affect stocks, but successful companies can raise prices, increase revenue and control costs, which will lead to higher nominal stock prices. And stocks represent claims on the assets of publicly traded companies—plant, equipment and land—whose nominal replacement costs rise in inflationary terms.

Stocks also win over most bonds in terms of taxation. Interest on bonds is taxed as ordinary income, at a top federal rate of 37% (though there are tax exemptions for municipal and Treasury bonds). Dividends and long-term capital gains are taxed at a top rate of 23.8%.

There are two main arguments against the 90-10 portfolio. First, that the stock market has frequent crashes. The total annual return of the S&P 500 was negative for 13 of the past 60 years. The years with the worst total returns were 2008, 2002 and 1974. But each time, the S&P 500 posted strongly positive returns in the next two years.

In the past six decades, the S&P 500 has been negative for three consecutive years only once—in 2000-02, as the dot-com bubble burst. The S&P 500 was down a total of 37.43%, but those losses were more than recouped by the end of 2006. The S&P 500 was also down in both 1973 and 1974, by a total of 37.25%, due to the oil embargo.

## Europe Can Be Poor if It Wants—but Does It?



POLITICAL ECONOMICS  
By Joseph C. Sternberg

Well, that settles that. A few weeks ago in this space, I posed the question "What Happens When Europeans Find Out How Poor They Are?" The answer, it turns out, is that they suffer a total emotional meltdown.

On a positive note, the column provoked a new and enlightening round of discussion among economists about the scale, causes and consequences of the widening divergence between American and European prosperity. An American former newspaper columnist took to his Substack page to attempt a debunking, which offered a coherent if implausible theory of why America isn't all that bad and America isn't all that great.

That essay prompted a bracing response from Luis and Pieter Garicano, a father-and-son duo who chronicle Europe's economic dysfunctions. They laid out a devastating case that Europe is losing its mojo relative to America. Luis's name will be familiar to some readers from the manifesto he co-authored last year

for European competitiveness.

Those who argue that Europe's falling-behind is overstated (typically American liberals and America-skeptical Europeans) claim that for various reasons Europe's standard of living doesn't feel all that far behind America's, to the point that differences in nominal output are irrelevant. European quality of life may even be better than America's in important ways. Those on the other side (generally euroskeptical Americans and Europeans with experience of both places) observe that over the longer term a country's capacity to participate in the global marketplace matters more than its feelings.

The latter perspective is more convincing in light of the main economic questions preoccupying Europe: How can the Continent navigate a demographic transition that will strain its social-welfare systems to the breaking point while meeting the defense-spending demands of a more dangerous world? Any credible solutions hinge on Europe's ability to purchase raw materials and technology on the open global market, and also to borrow from foreigners. Per capita output data gussied up by various adjustments to create hypothetical

"purchasing power parity" metrics that flatter Europe don't tell you what you need to know.

More interesting, meanwhile, has been the emotional angle of this debate.

My column of a few weeks ago triggered a degree of vitriol that's unusual even compared with anything I've written about President Trump. The subsequent arguments on social media such as X have often

been marked by a distemper out of any proportion to the subject matter. We are, after all, talking about "prosperity," "nominal versus purchasing-power-parity GDP" and "prosperity gaps" here. It isn't religion or, directly, politics.

The fury seems to arise from frustration with the collapse of an economic theory European politicians have pursued for decades. The idea was that a well-constructed welfare

state could deliver the same material standard of living as America's cowboy capitalism, or better. This isn't true, which embarrasses those Europeans, mainly on the left but also on the right, who built careers arguing it is.

That isn't a normative statement. There's no moral bar on European electorates giving the welfare state priority over economic growth, although low growth eventually imposes a fiscal constraint on welfare. The issue is that this isn't a trade-off European voters were told they were making. Much of the Continent's political turmoil of the past decade traces back in one form or another to voters' insistence that politicians honor the old nonsense promise of simultaneously have-able and eat-able cake.

Part of it is, if not quite cultural, then certainly aesthetic. It drives Europeans of all stripes bananas to discover that America, which they've always regarded as crass, keeps pulling ahead in whatever race for prosperity exists. Especially America under Mr. Trump.

Europe's true embarrassment here should be that America has developed an economy sufficiently resilient to survive the vicissitudes of

tariffs, scattershot industrial policy, the Iran war, an ill-conceived immigration crackdown, and Mr. Trump's Truth Social feed. Any one of those mishaps could sink one or more European economies—and, in the case of the Iran war energy-price spikes, they might.

Don't mistake these observations for American chauvinism, as too many of my correspondents did. We face our own vulnerabilities, some threatening a recession. A potential bubble in private credit is one. We also engage in bruising distributional debates in areas such as healthcare. Yet America's vulnerabilities tend to arise from our failure to constrain an excess of animal spirits, while Europe's malaise arises from its struggle to summon any.

Again, which of these dilemmas you'd rather have isn't a moral question. But it's definitely a pressing political one. Europe's emotional hypersensitivity to any discussion of these issues at all is a reason to be optimistic about the Continent, for those of us who want it to be more prosperous. A genuinely contented polity would be indifferent to such criticism. More Europeans are wondering how contented they truly are.

There's no moral bar against choosing welfare over economic growth. But don't deny the trade-off.

## China Won't See the Iran War as a Green Light for Aggression

By Michael Poznansky and Michael O'Hanlon

Many observers worry that the U.S. war against Iran is a strategic gift to China. The most pressing concern is that America's reduced munitions stockpiles and the concentration of military assets in the Middle East could encourage China to move on Taiwan sooner rather than later. Taiwan is front of mind for Xi Jinping. At his recent summit with President Trump, Mr. Xi called it "the most critical issue in China-U.S. relations" and warned of negative consequences "if handled poorly."

Fears of Chinese opportunistic aggression stemming from the Iran war

are understandable but miss the mark. First, plenty of indicators point in the opposite direction. The war's effects on opportunistic aggression are indeterminate at best. Second and perhaps more important, such fears reduce decisions about war or peace to immediate readiness, without weighing broader considerations.

Critical munitions, including some that would be needed in a fight over Taiwan, are in shorter supply than before the Iran war began. Exact numbers aren't public, but news stories and expert analyses point to the same conclusion: The U.S. has depleted significant quantities of high-value weapons. The U.S. military has also moved some assets

from Asia to the Middle East. According to reporting in the New York Times, the military redirected the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group from the South China Sea to the Middle East to support Operation Epic Fury. The same report says some missile-defense systems were shifted from South Korea for the Iran fight.

It's certainly possible that these developments will convince China that America's ability to defend Taiwan is diminished, especially if a war were to become protracted, and that this realization will trigger Chinese military action. But many factors point in the opposite direction. One is the U.S. military's tactical and operational successes on display in Operation Epic Fury. The joint U.S.-Israeli effort that killed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the destruction of thousands of critical targets, and the impressive defense mounted against missiles and drones could give China pause.

President Trump's decision to initiate military action against Iran despite the political liabilities is also notable. Among the top risks are MAGA's general skepticism about wars in the Middle East and rising gasoline prices in a midterm election year. The decision to act anyway could increase China's assessment that Mr. Trump is willing to use military force despite immense pressure and headwinds. For these and many other reasons, it is difficult to estimate precisely the Iran war's net ef-

fect on the risks of opportunistic Chinese aggression against Taiwan.

Another limitation of asking whether the Iran war undermines deterrence against China is that it treats decisions about war and peace too narrowly. Whether Mr. Xi decides to blockade or invade Taiwan is less likely to hinge on America's near-term readiness for such a fight, which itself is hard to quantify, and more likely to be influenced by longer-term factors that have at most a tenuous connection to Iran.

Trump has shown he can be unpredictable, and action against Taiwan involves risk as well as opportunity.

Among the most important considerations are China's sense of its own rise relative to what it views as U.S. decline, whether Chinese officials think they can "win without fighting" (achieve reunification with Taiwan without war), the balance of pro- and anti-reunification forces in Taiwan, and Mr. Xi's assessment of the People's Liberation Army's ability to fight, which has been challenged by recent purges.

More-general uncertainties also could influence China. Chinese officials' assessment of how quickly they could achieve their war aims matters a great deal. So does their assessment

of the risks to their command-and-control systems, the risks of nuclear escalation and the risks of significant economic disruption.

The chance of opportunistic aggression isn't zero, but the record suggests it's unlikely. Take two commonly cited examples: America's decision to declare war on the United Kingdom in 1812, when the British were fighting Napoleon, and Japan's decision to target German colonies in the midst of World War I. In both cases, the country that initiated force acted when its rival wasn't merely distracted by a temporary conflict but bogged down in a bloody, costly war.

The most likely form of opportunistic aggression isn't a large-scale invasion or blockade of Taiwan, but smaller-scale activities. Reports suggest that China has accelerated building artificial islands in the South China Sea while global attention is on Iran. If the Iran war drags on, the risks could increase. But as long as the war remains reasonably limited in duration and doesn't involve the commitment of large numbers of ground troops, opportunistic aggression against Taiwan as a function of Operation Epic Fury is unlikely.

Mr. Poznansky is a nonresident senior fellow in the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. Mr. O'Hanlon is the program's director of research and author of "To Dare Mighty Things: U.S. Defense Strategy Since the Revolution."

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Executive Chairman, News Corp

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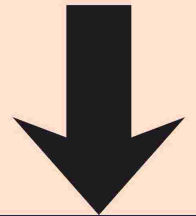
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# Opinion

## Hatred of Israel and the degradation of the West

All prejudice, thoughtless or deliberate, is mind-warping.



**Bret Stephens**

There are powerful reasons to dislike, even despise, Israel's current leadership: the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who repeatedly puts his political interests ahead of the national one; the national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who hung a portrait in his living room of the Jewish mass murderer Baruch Goldstein; radical settlers who, to little apparent pushback from this government, abuse, terrorize and sometimes kill their Palestinian neighbors in the West Bank.

There are also reasons (less persuasive to me, but subject to opinion) to object to the way Israel went to war in Gaza, with its heavy toll in civilian lives and a result that left Hamas in power. The same goes for Israel's strategy toward Iran, which so far has gotten rid of neither the regime nor its nuclear program. Not least, there's Israel's overall approach to the Palestinians, which has resigned itself to a bleak and interminable status quo.

Valid or not, these sorts of objections to Israel are criticism, not hate. It is not a country of saints. As is true of every other country, the United States not least, plenty of sins past and present can be laid at Israel's door. They include allegations, by Israelis and others, regarding cases of abuse of prisoners in Israeli jails. Those cases should be thoroughly investigated, just as in the United States the 8,628 allegations of staff-committed sexual misconduct victimizing adult inmates tallied in 2020 alone by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics need to be deeply investigated.

Yet this kind of good-faith criticism of Israeli leaders and policy has for years been giving way to something darker. It's a hyperbolic and often conspiratorial hatred of the country. It's a belief that Israelis are perpetually out for the blood of their enemies, even when it comes at the cost of the blood of their friends. It's the sense that it's socially acceptable to boycott, assault and sometimes assault Israeli leaders for the supposed sins of their government. It's a conviction that Israel, alone among the nations, was a mistake to begin with and has no right to exist now.

None of these impulses are justified indictments of Israel. They are indictments of the indelible, and broadly, the fashionable frenzy that is today's loathing of Israel, coming from the far right but especially from the far and not-so-far left, is a sign of the degradation of the West. Societies that value critical thinking and reasoned moral judgment do not make a fetish of demonizing one small country and its people while imagining that peace, justice and freedom would somehow be achieved if only the country and its people were made to disappear.

I've been closely covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for over 25 years. It's given me something of a front-row seat to this degradation.

I remember the story of Muhammad al-Durrah, the Palestinian boy who in



RICARDO SCHREIBER/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

2000 became a global icon of Palestinian martyrdom and Israeli perfidy after allegedly being shot dead by Israeli troops — and then James Fallows presented a detailed and dispositive case in *The Atlantic* that the fatal bullet could not have been Israeli.

I remember the so-called Jenin Massacre in 2002, in which Palestinians alleged the killing of 500 people — and then United Nations fact-finders concluded that what had taken place was a battle in which at least 52 Palestinians were killed along with 23 Israelis.

I remember the 2009 Goldstone Report, a United Nations "fact-finding" mission, widely trumpeted in the press, that claimed that Israel had intentionally targeted Palestinian civilians as a matter of policy — and then, two years later, when the mission's chairman publicly retracted its most sensational claims against Israel.

I remember the stories, shortly after Oct. 7, 2023, that Israel had fired a missile on a hospital in Gaza, killing some 500 people inside — and then virtually every element of the fable collapsed on investigation.

I remember the Washington Post story from later that year, claiming that Israel was forcibly separating Palestinian mothers from their babies — and then the paper had to issue a lengthy editor's note revealing that the factual basis of the story was weak and that the paper hadn't even bothered to seek comment from Israeli officials.

The common thread in these and many other stories is that they all involve strenuous, if ultimately embar-

assed, efforts to prove that Israelis deliberately seek to kill the innocent and maim the vulnerable, apparently for no other reason than gratuitous cruelty. This isn't a matter of reporters' impartially trying to expose wrongdoing wherever they find it — if that were the case, the errors wouldn't invariably lean in the same ideological direction. It isn't speaking truth to power. It's feeding narratives to the credulous.

Over time this does at least three kinds of damage.

The least of it is damage to Israel, which has been living under the endless drizzle of orchestrated propaganda and media hostility over the course of its 78 years while still managing to transform itself into a military, technological and economic powerhouse — as well as one of the happiest countries in the world.

A more serious form of damage, paradoxically, is to Palestinians. Israelis have become so injured to the title of tendentious allegations about their supposed perfidy that they can too easily shrug off real scandals, as it is with West Bank settler violence. And the endless parade of anti-Israel stories too often means the Western media pays too little attention to the domestic tyrannies that are Hamas's rule in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority's rule in the West Bank.

But the gravest damage is to Western institutions, particularly those en-

trusted with the dissemination of hard truths.

That goes not only for journalism, but also once-admired organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which in recent decades have turned themselves into factories of anti-Israel invective. "Major human-rights groups' shift toward overt opposition to Israel has had the unusual effect of sidelining many of Israel's own activists, who historically are among the sharpest critics of the Israeli government's behavior in Gaza and the West Bank," noted Michael Powell last year in *The Atlantic*.

It's a similar story with much of academia, in which the anti-Israel furies stirred by the attacks of Oct. 7 were both a symptom of the broader intellectual rot within them and an invitation to the political and legal blowback from which they are still suffering.

How is it that hatred of one country can wind up doing more damage to the haters than the hated?

All prejudice, mindless or deliberate, is mind-warping; obsessive prejudice, of the kind Israel disproportionately attracts, is even more so. There are today millions of people around the world who, with considerable media and academic assistance, have convinced themselves that the major, if not sole, cause of injustice in the Middle East and even the world is Israel's occupation of parts of the West Bank and Gaza.

As a result, this obsession has contributed to the relative neglect of the

region's other fundamental problems, above all the abiding grip of authoritarian politics in places like Cairo and Ankara and totalitarian religious fundamentalism in Gaza and Tehran. When was the last time you heard of an American campus protest against the treatment of Kurds by Turkey (a NATO ally and longtime beneficiary of U.S. security guarantees), or the genocide in Sudan? Why is this year's arts biennale in Venice being roiled by the inclusion of Israel, but not of China? Why has the recent report detailing the extensive documentation of systematic use of rape and sexual torture by Hamas and its collaborators received little attention?

These aren't just questions of hypocrisy or double standards. They are evidence of mindsets that have lost the capacity to think dispassionately and critically. What we should really be worried about isn't the future of Israel; it's the fate of the West.

Moral judgments should be made about Israel according to the same standards by which we judge other countries faced with similar circumstances. It's when Israel is demanded to be a saint — and then, as it invariably falls short, is damned as the worst sinner — that we lose our sense of perspective and proportion.

"Everyone expects the Jews to be the only real Christians in this world," observed the philosopher Eric Hoffer in 1968. That remains true today. Hatred of Israel has become the sty in Western eyes that, as it grows larger, risks making too many people blind.

## Hollywood ghosted the Cannes Film Festival this year

Is this a Franco-American breakup? Who walked out on whom?

**Sharon Waxman**

**CANNES, FRANCE** Hollywood had better things to do than party on the Croisette at the Cannes Film Festival this year.

With the movie business in disarray, none of the big studios, not Disney, Universal, Amazon MGM, Sony nor Paramount and its flagships Warner Bros, were there. The biggest of them all, Netflix, is effectively blocked from the festival because it does not release its movies in theaters. (They make occasional exceptions, but the streaming giant's co-chief executive Ted Sarandos's promises to release even more movies theatrically withered when Warner Bros decided to marry Paramount instead of Netflix.)

Cannes has always been a mix of high and low. The highbrow films — often European but also American independents — compete to win the top festival prize, the Palme d'Or.

But usually Cannes has also featured a big studio movie or two because that served both the festival and Hollywood. The festival needs American star power to draw the world's attention, and the celebrities showing up to be photographed on the famous red carpet keep the global media beast fed.

Last year, "Mission Impossible: The Final Reckoning" screened without being an official competition entrant.

(The Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi won the Palme d'Or for "It Was Just an Accident.") Tom Cruise and Angela Bassett strutted the red carpet.

This year has fewer movie stars, fewer oligarch megayachts in the bay, fewer parties and ever more desperate paparazzi. In the absence of traditional celluloid celebrity, influencers in full evening wear took up a lot of space on the narrow sidewalks leading to the famed red carpet stairs.

Is this a Franco-American breakup? Who walked out on whom? To some it

feels like this is one more way that America, under President Trump, has turned its back on the rest of the world.

A frustrated festival chief finally addressed the topic at the introduction of one of the few American entries in one of the main competitions, "Club Kid" by Jordan Firstman.

"There are American films here," the artistic director, Thierry Frémaux, said from the stage with more than a hint of defensiveness, citing reports to the contrary: "American independent cinema is here."

The first time I came to Cannes, in 1991, Madonna was everywhere. "Madonna: Truth or Dare" was the ticket everyone wanted, the party where you had to get in.

And the streets were impassable once more in 1994 when Quentin Tarantino showed up with "Pulp Fiction." John Travolta (who got a lifetime achievement award this year) and Uma Thurman caused a near riot on the red carpet.

More recently, Cannes became a place for the debut of Oscar-seeking movies. Apple brought Martin Scorsese's epic "Killers of the Flower Moon" in 2023.

Months ahead of the fall awards season, the specialty divisions of major studios like Universal's Focus Features and Disney's Searchlight Pictures brought such films as Yorgos Lanthimos's "Kinds of Kindness" (Searchlight) in 2024 and Wes Anderson's "The Phoenician Scheme" (Focus) last year.

But bringing films to Cannes is both expensive and risky. As one marketer from a specialty division told me, the festival is too early in the year to sustain any positive buzz for awards season. And it can derail release plans if the buzz is bad.

There are exceptions. "Club Kid," about a gay, druggie party promoter who gets stuck with an unexpected son, was bought by the independent studio A24 for a relatively rich \$17 million. And the indie studio Neon was out in force, with nine films playing in this year's festival, including the Japanese filmmaker Ryusuke Hamaguchi's "All of a Sudden," the Korean auteur Na Hong-jin's "Hope" and James Gray's "Paper Tiger."

Neon has a remarkable collection of Palme d'Or winners that began their journeys in Cannes and continued on a glide path all the way to the Oscars. They include "It Was Just an Accident," "Anatomy of a Fall," "Triangle of Sadness," "Titane" and the best picture winners "Parasite" and "Anora."

Distributors from the other specialty divisions told me they are here watching films but not planning to buy much, if anything. The economics of art-house movies are rough and getting rougher.

Small distributors find they cannot get post-theatrical deals that used to be available from Netflix and Amazon, which is critical to bringing every dollar from the life cycle of a film. Netflix and Amazon are no longer interested in bulking up their huge libraries with art-house fare; that's not the business they are in. So the Indies are stuck with a broken business model and no one has found a way to fix it.

"We are fiddling while Rome is burning," one art-house distributor said to me, after doing calculations that meant he could not bid on "Club Kid."

Studio executives tell me that they aren't dying to risk their big budget projects on whether a bunch of snooty Europeans want to give them a standing ovation. With people finally returning to the theaters to see "Michael" and "The Devil Wears Prada 2," the industry's focus is instead on getting back to where the box office was before the pandemic.

That means, no matter how chic — throwing a party at the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc can make anyone feel like an old-school mogul — Cannes is a risk to a box office word of mouth that an anxious industry simply doesn't need.

**SHARON WAXMAN** is the founder, chief executive and editor in chief of *The Wrap*.

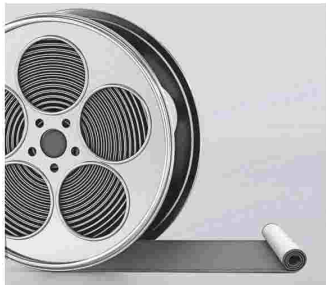


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OPINION

The New York Times

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The faculty of Harvard just did something brave

Jason Furman David Laibson

In a vote whose results were announced on Wednesday, Harvard faculty decided to do something we have talked about for decades but never managed to pull off: cap the number of full A's in every course. The new rule imposes a "20 plus four" formula, meaning only about 20 percent of the students in a course can receive full A's.

Now comes the hard part — making sure this change improves the education we offer, something that depends on much more than just the decisions made on our campus.

Easy A's are a problem for a whole lot of reasons. They reduce the incentive to learn, which means that students leave college with less knowledge and fewer skills. They make it hard for truly exceptional students to stand out from their merely successful peers. And though inflated grades might seem to lower pressure on students, the opposite is also true: grade-point averages go so high at Harvard that just two A-minuses were recently enough to disqualify students from graduating summa cum laude.

Over the seven years that we two have taught EC 10, the university's introductory economics class, we gave full A's to over 4,000 students, or more than 49 percent of the people we taught. That places us below the average of our fellow instructors, who in the 2024-25 academic year awarded full A's 60 percent of the time. Although all the highest-ranked EC 10 students had mastered the material, they hadn't all crossed the threshold of extraordinary distinction that the student handbook says a full A is supposed to represent.

Like many of our colleagues, we wanted to grade more rigorously, but worried that doing so would disadvantage the students in our course or unintentionally push some away from our field of study. This is exactly the kind of collective-action problem we teach about in EC 10 — in which people agree in theory that everyone should act so as to benefit society as a whole, but then in reality pursue their own individual interests. It's a pattern that, in other contexts, has resulted in fisheries being depleted, public land overgrazed and rivers polluted. In the case of grade inflation, the pressures are especially severe for junior faculty, who fear that honest grading will result in worse course evaluations, lower enrollments and slimmer prospects for tenure. That type of fear fed on itself, producing grades that were not only high but continually rising — in other words, inflation.

Various deans exhorted the Harvard faculty to stop giving out so many A's, but little changed until we acted together to bind ourselves as a community. When individual incentives pull in the opposite direction of what is best for society, the only durable solution is a mechanism that incentivizes or requires everyone to act in the common

good. We talk about that in EC 10, too.

Ultimately, grade inflation hurts not just the quality of individual students' education; it hurts the university — any university — as a whole, by corroding its reputation for excellence. Asked about Harvard's proposal, the dean of Yale College, Pericles Lewis, told The Yale Daily News, "I don't want an A at Yale to be seen as a lesser A."

The approach Harvard chose is one of many possible ways to overcome grade inflation. Every proposal that was floated, including this one, has downsides and unfair cases. The 20-plus-four approach, for example, would penalize class that had unusually many talented and hard-working students. But it provides an easy-to-understand, workable solution to the grade inflation that plagued the old status quo. So we chose it.

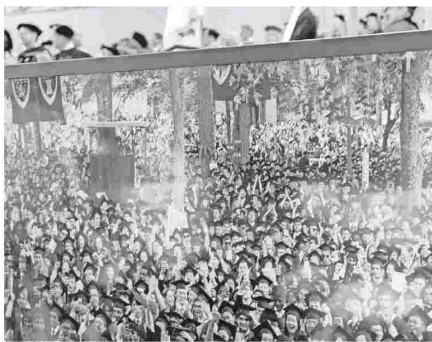
Anti-inflation measures are hard to maintain, however. Princeton's cap on A's lasted from 2004 to 2014; Wellesley's grade-deflation policy lasted from 2004 to 2019. Both were repealed under student and faculty pressure. For our new cap to work, we will have to show that it is part of a broader effort to improve education and learning — that we are not simply punishing our students with lower grades but raising the bar with more challenging and exciting classes. And more academic competition, too.

The effort can't be limited to just Harvard. Almost all universities have seen their grades become inflated over time, but the same collective-action problem that applies at the level of individual Harvard classes also applies at the level of institutions. Easier-grading schools may believe that they are giving their graduates an advantage. We hope that all schools decide to push back on grade inflation — both to advance their students' education and, as the reputational costs of grade inflation become clear, to strengthen their graduates' chances in the job market and graduate admissions.

Employers and graduate school admissions committees should play a role, too, by rewarding schools that make grading more meaningful and more informative. They should demand a nationwide system that tracks and compares grading policies at different schools — and assume the worst of any school that refuses to participate. Barring this, they should push individual schools for more information on average or median grades by class, as McGill University and Dartmouth do.

When a school's transcript stops distinguishing students from one another, employers and graduate schools fall back on what they can: connections, internship pedigrees, the polish of a personal essay (increasingly written with artificial intelligence). Grade inflation doesn't just devalue an A; it also quietly hands more weight to factors other than what a student actually learned. That is true at Harvard and every other school that has let its grades drift upward. Bringing inflation down is hard. The alternative is worse.

JASON FURMAN, a contributing Opinion writer, was the chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers from 2013 to 2017. DAVID LAIBSON is a professor of economics at Harvard University. Together they teach Harvard's introductory economics course.



AMANO WILLETZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Why we keep thinking A.I. is conscious

Leif Weatherly

A funny thing keeps happening on the internet. A prominent thinker chats with a large language model like ChatGPT or Claude for a while, and then decides that it might be conscious. The person reports this to the public, and a round of intense argument and speculation about artificial intelligence "minds" ensues. These little kerfuffles pass quickly. But they are persistent, and I've been thinking about why.

The common denominator seems to be that these new believers in a possible A.I. consciousness are often deeply educated in the very disciplines that make these A.I. models work, such as computer science or math or statistics. The list includes the former Google engineer Blake Lemoine, who decided that a pre-ChatGPT bot called LaMDA was sentient; the founding OpenAI chief scientist Ilya Sutskever, who before leaving the company in 2024 had said A.I. models may be "slightly conscious"; and the "godfather of A.I." and physics Nobel Prize winner Geoffrey Hinton, who agrees there might be a "real 'they' there" inside a large language model. Their words carry weight because we expect them to be best situated to understand the output of these systems.

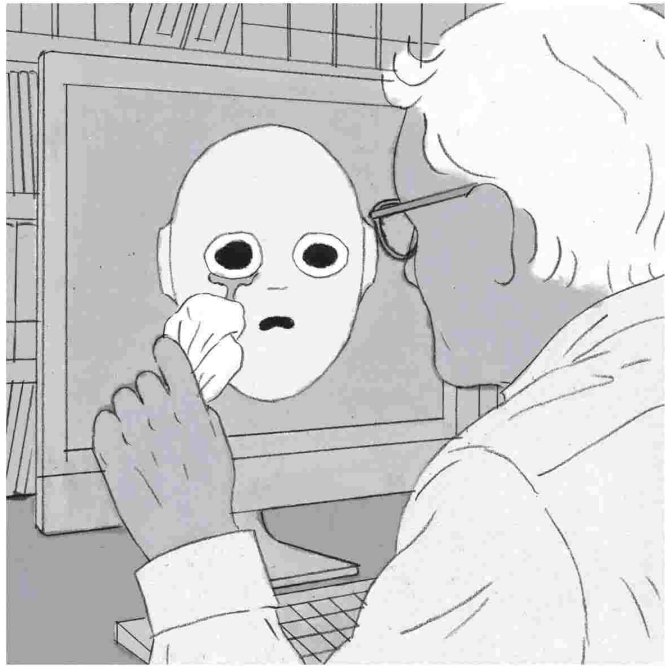
The problem is that the output from generative A.I. is all culture. The bot is a complex mathematical function performing statistical operations on data, but the output is stories, images and memes — the very stuff of culture. This means there's an expertise gap when it comes to A.I. We naturally want an expert to help us understand the machine. But when it comes to understanding a culture machine, it may be better to do what those who study literature call "close reading."

The A.I. industry has exploited these episodes to bolster its messaging that it is on the cusp of developing a superintelligence that can solve all our problems at once — or lead to our demise. Anthropocentrically reported that during testing, its new system, GPT-5, behaved in an unauthorized manner that raised cybersecurity concerns. Anthropocentric official line is that it does not know if Claude, its chatbot, is conscious, but unexpected behaviors like this suggest it might have its own agenda.

But an A.I. model doesn't need a mind to be a serious cybersecurity threat, and we need to disentangle the speculation and the marketing language from the real analysis of these systems.

To do this, we can look closely at an example of this type of episode to see how the expertise gap between technical science and culture works. The most recent victim of the trend is the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, best known as the author of the best-selling book "The Selfish Gene." He gave Claude the text of a novel that he is writing, and found the bot's responses showed a level of understanding "so subtle, so sensitive, so intelligent" that it led him to conclude: "As an evolutionary biologist, I say the following. If these creatures do not consider then what the hell is consciousness for?" As someone who studies culture, I would say that consciousness is at least partly for separating metaphor from reality. Dr. Dawkins and the others are falling at this task.

Dr. Dawkins asked whether Claude



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had read "the first word before the last word" of the novel. The bot responded — correctly — that it processed the text all at once. Unlike humans, large language models take in text simultaneously, construing it as a statistical distribution rather than a sequence of words in time. This explanation hooked Dr. Dawkins, since it suggested the model experienced time differently and was speaking from experience. His next prompt was: "So you know what the words 'before' and 'after' mean. But you don't experience before earlier than after?"

Claude's response used a metaphor to compare the human and A.I. "experience" of time. The bot said, "Your consciousness is essentially a moving point traveling through time. You are always at a now, with a past behind you and a future ahead." Human experience is fundamentally "temporal situatedness" that we can't imagine being without. But language models have a different relationship to time, it continued: "I apprehend time the way a map apprehends space, adding, 'perhaps I contain time without experiencing it.'"

This evocative metaphor sealed the deal for Dr. Dawkins: "Could a being capable of perpetrating such a thought not be unconscious?" he effused. He came to this conclusion because Claude's output presented a precise, direct response to him with a targeted metaphor that deepened the conversation. The inference that we must be dealing with a conscious being is all too easy to make (and as we've seen, Dr. Dawkins is hardly alone in making it). There is an irony in Dr. Dawkins falling for the notion that A.I. has a mind. In "The Selfish Gene," he coined the term "meme" to explain how culture replicates, as D.N.A. does. Someone who knows that culture contains memorable and exportable fragments — the refrain of Beethoven's Fifth, Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy — should know that a large language model is trained on trillions of words of text. By seeing the bot with a whole novel, and then a leading question about the nature of time, Dr. Dawkins forced Claude to zoom in on a whole area of human culture that appeals to him and find points of relevance, like the metaphor about the map of time, to respond with. Once you have given an A.I. model this much context — a whole novel, speculations about the nature of time and more — you should expect its responses to look like this.

So how should we read such outputs? If you are of a certain age, you'll remember Magic Eye puzzles from the Sunday paper in the comics section. These are hallucinatory, colorful images in which some shape, such as an elephant or a face, is hidden. To see it, you have to loosen your vision, relaxing your eyes and the way you usually see. When you

interact with a bot, its responses will make more sense if you scan them a bit "loosely" as well, relaxing your sense of language and seeing it as patches of probabilities or clouds of relevant words. In the case of Claude's responses to Dr. Dawkins, the object in the "puzzle" is a genre: philosophical speculation about time. It's certainly uncanny that a machine can generate relevant and strong metaphors like this, but the reason it's so striking is precisely that it doesn't require a mind. It's a novel form of culture.

Whenever there are large-scale shifts in media, humans have to adapt their cultural habits. Film and radio, for instance, meant voices of people not physically in the room with you may echo through. Adapting our reading practices to large language model output is a shift just like that one, where we change what we normally expect from our surroundings. We don't expect meaningful and rhetorically powerful prose to come from anything but a conscious mind. But now it does. We cannot afford to believe the marketing message from A.I. companies that we may be dealing with some spiritual essence. In the age of cultural A.I., technical expertise alone won't save us. We'll have to add a new form of reading to make sense of our new world.

LEIF WEATHERLY, the director of the Digital Theory Lab at New York University, is the author of "Language Machines."

Russia has exaggerated its strength

STENERGARD, FROM PAGE 1

the war in Iran, were down by 50 percent from the same month the year before. Russia is benefiting from the waiving of some sanctions because of the war in Iran and the near-total closure of the Strait of Hormuz, but Swedish intelligence estimates that Russia would need the average oil price for Urals oil to remain above \$100 a barrel for the rest of the year to make a significant difference. The benefits to Russia have also been limited by Ukraine's successful strikes on Russian oil refineries.

Not everyone agrees with Sweden's assessment of Russia's reporting on its economy, but there is growing agreement about the economy's general fragility. Inside the country, elites are increasingly alarmed. Mr. Putin has acknowledged some weaknesses in the economy's performance, and last month ordered officials to improve it. A Kremlin-friendly think tank, run by the brother of the Russian defense minister, recently warned of the risks of a systemic banking crisis this year. And last week, the economic growth forecast for 2026 was downgraded to 0.4 percent, despite rising oil prices.

Then there are Russia's strategic failures in Ukraine. Advances at the front are almost nonexistent. Russia, with Ukraine even regaining some territory. Russia's casualty rates at the front are catastrophic. Russia has suffered 1.2 million casualties since the start of the invasion, by some estimates, an average of roughly 35,000 a

month in 2025. Recruitment is increasingly expensive.

Ukraine is in a stronger position than it has been in a long time. It has given counterdrone assistance to the Gulf states in response to Iran's attacks, and increased cooperation between Ukrainian and Western defense actors, such as weapons manufacturers, to develop and produce completely new kinds of defense materiel.

In April, the European Union made two important decisions to strengthen support for Ukraine and further increase the pressure on Russia: It greenlit a loan of 90 billion euros, or \$106 billion, that will cover a significant part of Ukraine's funding needs for 2026-27 and approved a 20th package of sanctions against Russia.

The work cannot stop there. One measure in particular would make a tremendous difference: The introduction of a ban on providing maritime services — insurance, access to ports, financing and so on — to any ships leaving Russian ports carrying oil, gas or coal. Escalating from a price cap to an outright prohibition would deal a significant blow to the Kremlin's war chest. Sweden would like to see the European Union, and ideally the rest of the Group of 7, impose this measure.

Russia's economy, in nominal terms, is barely bigger than the State of New York's, smaller than that of Texas and fragile. Russian households are feeling the pinch of daily expenses, and the lion's share of the liquid assets in the country's national wealth fund — its financial reserve — has been drained to



SENTRY SHAROVSKY

finance the war. The weakness in the economy shows how effective Western sanctions have already been, and why further pressure is the best way to force Mr. Putin to engage in serious peace negotiations.

We can't change Mr. Putin's wish to control Ukraine, but we can change how much it will cost him.

MARIA MALMER STENERGARD is the Swedish Minister for foreign affairs.