



Coerced consent

Supreme Court should set aside sedition as constitutionally unsustainable

The Indian state has not infrequently used the colonial offence of sedition, codified under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), as a tool to quell dissent. In May 2022, the Supreme Court of India asked State and central governments to refrain from registering new first information reports and from taking coercive measures under Section 124A in *S.G. Vombatkere vs Union of India* while the Centre said it would “reconsider” the provision. When the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) took effect in 2024, Parliament effectively replaced Section 124A with Section 152 and increased the minimum sentence to seven years. It was sedition by a new name. In February 2026, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant orally observed that the Centre’s promise in 2022 to review the provision could not bind Parliament. As if to release the pressure on courts, but also effectively easing the country’s passage into the BNS era, on May 21, 2026, the Court said that if an accused person has no objection, courts may proceed on cases involving Section 124A. However, such consent from the accused may be coerced, especially if they lack robust legal representation, because the alternative for the incarcerated persons is indefinite delay. It is effectively a Hobson’s choice between bad and worse outcomes.

Indeed, as the 2022 stay paused the use of Section 124A pending constitutional challenge, how meaningful an accused person’s consent to trial can be where refusal may entail prolonged delay is unclear. *S.G. Vombatkere* also provided those charged with sedition to move for bail, meaning liberty rather than restoring proceedings was the intended remedy for frozen trials. The May clarification swings in the other direction, and also stands in contrast to the ‘bail is the rule’ principle that the Court recently reinforced in *Syed Iftikhar Andrabi*. If the Court wished to preserve agency, it should have paired continuation with a presumption of bail. The 2022 stay was also intended to annul the chilling effect of the charge of sedition on free speech. Now, wealthier or politically connected accused persons may secure bail through sustained litigation and wait out proceedings outside the prison, whereas poorer prisoners who are unable to secure bail will be compelled to consent to a trial, if only to obtain a verdict. As a result, liberty could depend on the capacity to litigate rather than on legal principles. Finally, if the state knows that cases involving constitutionally contested offences can remain in limbo while the accused persons are incarcerated, there is a perverse incentive for bad-faith state actors to not resolve the underlying uncertainty quickly. Instead of determining once and for all whether sedition as a criminal offence is constitutionally sustainable, the Court has passed the burden to the accused and declined to do its own duty.

Cash, clash, clay

The French Open starts amid a dispute over prize money

In the Open Era (from 1968), only six men have won each of the four tennis Majors at least once. Rod Laver achieved it in a single breathtaking year in 1969; Andre Agassi, Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic toiled long and hard, ranging from five years to more than eight; Carlos Alcaraz completed it early this February in less than three years and five months. At the latest French Open, however, World No. 1 Jannik Sinner can shade all except Laver by being the quickest after the legendary Aussie – in under two years and five months since winning his first at the 2024 Australian Open. The stars have aligned well for Sinner to hoist the Coupe des Mousquetaires and banish the bad memories from 12 months ago when he missed three championship points versus Alcaraz. He is on an awe-inspiring streak of 29 match wins and has swept all three ATP Masters 1000 competitions on clay leading in. The 24-year-old’s generational rival Alcaraz – whom he met in three Slam finals in 2025 – is missing because of a wrist injury, and Alexander Zverev, the second seed, has lost his previous nine contests to the Italian. Djokovic, 39 and a record 24-time Major champion, is undercooked, having played just four times since his worthy runner-up finish at the Australian Open.

There is no such overwhelming favourite among women, with Aryna Sabalenka, Iga Swiatek, Coco Gauff and Elena Rybakina all fancied. World No. 1 Sabalenka, who lost a topsy-turvy summit clash to Gauff in 2025, has reached semifinals or better in 12 of her last 13 Slams. But she is without a final on clay this season, a first such occurrence since 2020. Swiatek is a four-time Roland-Garros titlist, and will look to reclaim her kingdom with some help from Francisco Roig, a coach who was once part of 14-time winner Nadal’s team. Gauff was a finalist in Rome recently, but has lifted just one trophy since her Paris success. Rybakina, champion in Melbourne, is capable, but dirt is her least-preferred surface. No. 7 Elina Svitolina is a contender, having overcome both Swiatek and Gauff in Rome for her biggest title after returning from a maternity break in April 2023. Mirra Andrejeva, 19 and seeded eighth, boasts of two finals, a semifinal and a quarterfinal from her last four events. However, the setting for this high-quality fare is less than ideal, for players are miffed at the French Open organisers – and other Majors by extension – for denying a larger share of the tournament revenue as prize money. An amicable settlement that would help lower ranked youngsters is essential for the long-term health of the sport.

The U.S. ends Russia oil waiver, implications for India

The United States’ decision to tighten restrictions again on Russian seaborne oil may seem like another chapter in the sanctions battle over the Ukraine war. But beneath the headlines lies a much larger story – one that directly affects India and much of the developing world.

The issue is no longer just Russia. It is whether the global energy system can withstand simultaneous geopolitical shocks without causing prolonged inflation, supply insecurity and economic instability across Asia. For over three years, the world has attempted an unprecedented balancing act: keeping one of the largest oil exporters under heavy sanctions while trying to maintain stable energy prices. That balancing act is becoming increasingly fragile. The latest restrictions come at a sensitive moment. Oil markets are already unsettled by conflict in West Asia, persistent disruptions in maritime trade routes and growing concerns over the Strait of Hormuz, the world’s most critical oil transit chokepoint. In such conditions, even policy signals from Washington can alter freight rates, insurance premiums and crude price expectations almost overnight.

Why India cannot ignore this development India imports nearly 90% of its crude oil and is the world’s third-largest importer as well as one of the fastest-growing energy consumers. Unlike many developed economies, where energy demand has plateaued, India’s energy needs will keep rising with industrialisation, urbanisation and expanding mobility. It is this reality that shapes India’s energy choices.

When Russian crude began flowing into India in large volumes after 2022, many in the West viewed it through a geopolitical lens. India saw it



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The world’s emerging economies are increasingly being caught between geopolitics and energy survival

as an economic stabiliser during a period of extreme volatility. Russian oil helped moderate inflationary pressures, improved refinery economics and reduced dependence on any single region. It provided supply flexibility at a time of great turbulence in global energy markets. Critics often frame the debate as morality versus commerce. But energy-importing countries rarely have that luxury.

For countries such as India, energy affordability directly affects transport costs, food inflation, fertilizer subsidies, manufacturing competitiveness and household spending. A sustained rise in crude prices quickly spreads through the wider economy.

When sanctions meet market reality

Global oil markets are operating with little room for psychological comfort. The world has already seen disruptions in the Red Sea, attacks on shipping infrastructure, growing military tensions involving Iran, tighter tanker availability and sharply higher war-risk insurance premiums. In such conditions, constraining one of the world’s largest oil suppliers inevitably unsettles markets, even if physical supply losses remain limited at first.

Oil markets react not only to shortages but also to the fear of shortages. That fear alone can drive prices sharply higher. Ironically, this exposes a contradiction at the heart of the western sanctions policy.

The U.S. and Europe want to reduce Russia’s oil revenues. But they also want lower inflation, stable fuel prices and uninterrupted global energy flows. Increasingly, these objectives are colliding with each other. The harder sanctions become, the greater the risk of tightening global supply balances. Once oil prices rise sufficiently, Russia can continue earning substantial revenues despite lower export volumes. In some cases, higher global prices can partially offset the impact of sanctions themselves. This explains why the sanctions policy has repeatedly oscillated between aggressive rhetoric and tactical flexibility. Markets eventually force pragmatism.

The temporary waivers and carve-outs of recent years were not merely signs of policy inconsistency; they reflected energy-market realities. The uncomfortable truth is that the modern global economy still runs overwhelmingly on hydrocarbons. Despite the rapid growth of renewables, oil remains central to transport, aviation, petrochemicals, agriculture and global trade logistics. The world may speak of transition, but it still functions on molecules.

For India, the challenge is even more complex. The Strait of Hormuz remains a major strategic vulnerability, carrying nearly one-fifth of global

oil trade. A large share of India’s crude oil and LPG imports transit through these waters. Any escalation in the region could disrupt supplies, raise shipping costs and delay deliveries. This is why Russian crude evolved into something larger than a discounted barrel for Asia. It emerged as a diversification mechanism during a period of growing uncertainty in West Asia.

The larger lesson from these developments is that energy security itself is changing shape. In earlier decades, countries were concerned mainly with access to physical supply. Today, vulnerabilities are far more complex. Energy flows can now be disrupted by shipping restrictions, insurance controls, financial sanctions, tanker blacklisting, payment barriers and maritime security risks. In effect, global energy has become deeply entangled with financial and geopolitical architecture.

India’s long-term energy strategy

This changing landscape has major implications for India’s long-term strategy. India cannot rely indefinitely on opportunistic crude sourcing during crises. The country needs a broader and more resilient energy framework. That means expanding strategic petroleum reserves, diversifying crude sourcing regions, strengthening domestic exploration, improving refining flexibility, accelerating gas infrastructure, expanding alternative energy pathways and reducing dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints. At the same time, India will need to preserve strategic autonomy in energy decision-making.

The emerging global order is becoming increasingly fragmented. Energy trade is no longer governed purely by economics; it is increasingly shaped by sanctions regimes, strategic rivalries and competing geopolitical blocs. For major importing countries, excessive dependence on any single geopolitical camp carries long-term risks. India’s approach therefore reflects not neutrality, but realism.

The years ahead are likely to witness repeated tensions between geopolitical objectives and energy-market stability. The world is entering an era in which sanctions, wars, maritime insecurity and supply-chain disruptions may become recurring features rather than temporary exceptions. That makes resilience more important than ideology. In the end, energy systems obey physical realities, not political slogans. Tankers must still move. Refineries must still operate. Economies must still function. Nations that fail to build diversified and resilient energy systems may discover that, in the 21st century, economic sovereignty increasingly depends on the ability to navigate a fragmented and unstable energy world.

How energy shocks travel into India’s economy

The implications for India extend far beyond crude prices alone. Modern energy disruptions now transmit through multiple interconnected channels

Energy shock	Immediate impact	Secondary impact on India
Higher crude oil prices	Costlier imports	Inflation and rupee pressure
Strait of Hormuz disruption	Supply uncertainty	LPG and fuel logistics stress
Shipping insurance surge	Higher landed crude cost	Refining margin pressure
Russian crude restrictions	Reduced supply flexibility	Higher sourcing costs
Freight disruptions	Delayed cargoes	Inventory and stock management strain

Sources: IEA, Energy Institute Statistical Review, industry and shipping estimates

India’s green transition still runs on coal

The recent rise in global energy prices following the escalation of the conflict in West Asia has once again exposed India’s continuing vulnerability to external energy shocks. Despite years of policy emphasis on renewable energy, nearly half of India’s fossil fuel imports still transit through the Strait of Hormuz, including crude shipments from Saudi Arabia and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports from Qatar.

This vulnerability sits uneasily alongside the dominant narrative around India’s clean energy transition. Over the past decade, India has emerged as one of the world’s fastest-growing renewable energy markets. Since 2017, renewables have consistently accounted for the largest share of new power capacity additions in the country. In numbers, renewable energy sources accounted for 42.4% of India’s installed power capacity by March 2026, up dramatically from just 0.72% in March 2005. Over the same period, coal’s share in installed capacity fell from 58.7% to 42.2%.

By conventional metrics, India appears well into an energy transition. Yet, the persistence of energy price shocks reveals a more complicated reality. Installed capacity is not the same as actual electricity generation. While renewables now account for over two-fifths of installed capacity, they generated only 15.8% of electricity in April 2026. Coal, by contrast, still accounted for 71.8% of electricity generation, only marginally lower than its 76.2% share in March 2019.

Capacity and generation gap

This gap between capacity and generation is central to understanding India’s energy system. The country has succeeded in building renewable infrastructure, but not yet in replacing coal in the actual electricity mix. In effect, renewable energy is being added on top of coal rather than



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Rising renewable capacity has yet to substantially displace coal generation

displacing it. The data clearly show India’s continued dependence on coal. Despite strong renewable growth since 2017, India has added almost no new fossil fuel capacity since 2018, retired very few old coal plants, and seen gas-based capacity decline. As a result, coal remains the main backup and balancing source in the power system.

The reasons are structural. Solar and wind power remain intermittent sources of electricity. Their output fluctuates with weather conditions and the time of day, while electricity demand remains continuous. In the absence of large-scale battery storage, flexible grids and adequate balancing capacity, coal continues to provide the baseload reliability required to keep the system functioning.

This also explains why domestic electricity prices remain closely tied to global fossil fuel markets. Historical trends show Indian electricity prices moving alongside Brent crude in the last few years. Even sectors that appear domestically anchored remain indirectly exposed to external commodity cycles because fossil fuels continue to determine marginal cost of power.

Ground reality

As a result, current geopolitical tensions in West Asia affect India more severely. A spike in crude prices not only raises transportation and industrial costs directly, but also pushes up coal prices, electricity tariffs, inflation, and fiscal pressures.

India’s energy transition discourse is increasingly centred around the wrong benchmark. The focus remains on installed renewable capacity because it offers an attractive measure of progress. Yet, power systems are not sustained by headline capacity additions. They depend on actual electricity generation and the

ability to supply power consistently when it is needed most.

The distinction matters because it shapes perceptions of vulnerability. China remains less exposed, with oil and gas accounting for only 4% of its power mix and electric vehicles and hybrids, now over half of new car sales, reducing oil demand by over a million barrels a day. Spain shows the alternative, having broken the gas-electricity link through renewables. India’s transition is real, but incomplete.

Work towards system transformation

This does not diminish the importance of the renewable push. On the contrary, India’s decision to aggressively scale solar and wind capacity since the late 2010s now appears prescient given growing geopolitical instability and fossil fuel volatility. But the next phase of transition will require moving beyond capacity creation towards system transformation itself.

That means investing in storage infrastructure, grid modernisation, transmission connectivity and market mechanisms capable of integrating intermittent renewables at scale. It also requires recognising that coal’s persistence is not simply a policy failure or institutional inertia. Coal currently performs a stabilising function within the grid that renewable energy, in its present form, cannot yet fully replicate.

India’s energy challenge today is therefore not merely about producing more green power. It is about building an electricity system in which renewables can reliably substitute for fossil fuels in actual generation. Until that happens, every geopolitical crisis and every spike in global energy prices will continue to remind India that its green transition still runs on coal.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Significance of the CJP

The growing popularity of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) points to a deeper problem – many institutions today seem to lack transparency and a meaningful connection with the people. There is also a growing perception that some of them are giving up their independent voice and avoiding speaking truth to power. Therefore, the issues raised by the party, such as unemployment, examination irregularities, and ministerial

accountability, have clearly struck a chord. In our democratic system, parties in power often appear unwilling to listen to criticism or feedback unless it takes the form of a massive public protest, and this continues for five long years.

V. Nagarajan,
Chennai

The rise of the CJP only underlines the digital power of India’s youth. It also reflects a deeper reality – India’s youth want to be

heard. It has already succeeded in starting conversations around unemployment, governance, and freedom of expression. The real question now is whether this viral rebellion can evolve into a durable political force. Nevertheless, for now the cockroach has truly crawled across the political floors of the BJP, creating tension and concern within the ruling establishment.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

Restraint over contestation

Beneath a Hindu temple, one may uncover a Buddhist structure; beneath that may lie yet another forgotten past. Such discoveries reveal the continuity and evolution of civilisation across centuries. Endless attempts to reclaim historical ownership through courts and excavations risk deepening social divisions and perpetuating inherited grievances. A nation as diverse as India requires constitutional restraint,

historical humility, and civic wisdom. Public discourse should strengthen social harmony and mutual coexistence.

Harsh Pawaria,
Rohtak, Haryana

Tamil Nadu cabinet

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay should be credited for his timely inclusion of an MLA from the VCK and another from the IUML in his Cabinet. By giving due representation to socio-religious minorities, he has reaffirmed the

secular credentials of both his party and his government. Such inclusion is not only a constitutional imperative but also serves as an effective check against the BJP, which is attempting to gradually expand its presence. Such representation will make governance more broad-based and democratic.

N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

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

Busting two myths around Bengal polls

From the century-old red edifice of Lal Bari, the Writers' Building, once the seat of Bengal's colonial and postcolonial bureaucracy, and from where the BJP had promised to govern, to Nabanna, Bengal's Neelbari, the blue and white Secretariat that came to embody Mamata Banerjee's aesthetic and political imprint, and further to the historic chambers of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, the sudden wash of saffron light was not merely a matter of altered decor. It felt like a visual declaration of a deeper political rupture in a State that had, for decades, imagined itself resistant to the crudities of communal binaries.

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Bengal cannot be explained through electoral arithmetic alone. The 2026 Assembly election verdict, which gave the BJP 207 of 294 seats with 45.84% of the vote, while reducing the Trinamool Congress to 80 seats with 40.8%, unsettled much conventional political wisdom. The Left Front and Congress, once central to Bengal's political imagination, were reduced to a combined 7.42%. But numbers alone tell only the surface story. Beneath them lies a longer tale of political exhaustion, organisational patience, and the collapse of older certainties.

Two convenient myths have quickly emerged. The first is that 2026 witnessed a dramatic fresh migration of traditional Left and Congress voters directly to the BJP. The second is that Bengal simply succumbed to an all encompassing Hindu consolidation. Both explanations are politically convenient and analytically lazy. Bengal's political shifts have rarely followed such neat trajectories.

The BJP's rise was neither abrupt nor principally the result of a sudden Left exodus. Historically, the party's greatest obstacle in Bengal was not the Left but Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress. When Ms. Banerjee broke away from the Congress,



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In politics, the moment power begins to imagine itself invincible, the electorate begins to search, desperately if necessary, for the sharpest available instrument with which to puncture that illusion

she successfully occupied the anti-Left political space, leaving little room for the BJP. During the Atal Bihari Vajpayee years, she was part of the National Democratic Alliance, and the BJP remained peripheral in Bengal's political imagination.

The real shift came later under Amit Shah, when the BJP's organisational relationship with the RSS acquired sharper purpose. The RSS had maintained a quiet presence in Bengal for decades. From this ecosystem emerged Dilip Ghosh, deputed to build what the BJP had long lacked, a serious grassroots machine. Yet even then, the breakthrough was slow. In 2016, the BJP won only three seats with around 10% of the vote.

The real erosion of the Left support began after that, accelerated by the Trinamool dominance and the violence that increasingly accompanied political contestation. The 2018 panchayat elections became a grim marker, with at least a dozen deaths reported around polling and a wider climate of intimidation. For many grassroots supporters, politics ceased to be ideological and became existential. Those who once looked to the Left or Congress for protection increasingly found those structures incapable of defending them.

By 2021, despite an alliance that also included Abbas Siddiqui's Indian Secular Front, the Left-Congress experiment collapsed to around 8.7%. The BJP rose to nearly 38%, while the Trinamool held steady at around 48%. This was not ideological conversion so much as the consolidation of anti-Trinamool sentiment behind the only viable challenger. By 2026, the Left-Congress combine slipped further to 7.42%, while the BJP gained roughly seven percentage points, largely at the Trinamool's expense.

The second myth, that of wholesale Hindu consolidation, also demands caution. Nearly 30%

of Bengal's electorate is Muslim, and the BJP's support there remains negligible. If this had simply been the story of monolithic Hindu consolidation, the BJP's decisive breakthrough should have come in 2021, when the party deployed its most aggressively polarised campaign around the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens. That strategy helped the BJP rise dramatically from three seats to 77. Yet even then, it fell short. Bengal still held.

What changed in 2026 was not simply the retention of that support, but the movement of an additional section of Hindu voters who had backed Ms. Banerjee in 2021, not out of ideological commitment, but because she appeared the strongest barrier against the BJP. Once disillusionment with the Trinamool deepened, that tactical resistance weakened. The nearly seven percentage point shift from the Trinamool to the BJP cannot therefore be read simply as religious consolidation. It was anti-incumbency finding its most effective electoral vehicle.

The BJP would be mistaken if it chose to read this verdict as a sweeping ideological embrace of Hindutva in Bengal. This was not, in any simple sense, Bengal surrendering to saffron. It was Bengal reaching for saffron as an instrument of protest, draping itself in a colour not necessarily out of devotion, but out of despair, anger, and exhaustion. This was less an affirmation of the BJP's grand ideological project than a fierce indictment of a regime that appeared, to many, to have grown distant, complacent, and convinced of its own permanence.

There is a warning here that extends beyond party lines. In politics, the moment power begins to imagine itself invincible, the electorate begins to search, desperately if necessary, for the sharpest available instrument with which to puncture that illusion. In Bengal, for many voters, the BJP became that instrument.

A rollback, at last

Karnataka govt. lifts order that banned faith markers, including hijab, in schools

STATE OF PLAY

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In what was called an "emergency" press conference last week, Karnataka's Minister for School Education and Literacy Madhu Bangarappa announced the rollback of the 2022 order on uniforms in schools and pre-university colleges. The controversial order of the previous BJP government had led to hijab-donning girls being barred from entering classrooms. It started with six Muslim girls in hijab being prevented from entering their classroom in the coastal town of Udupi, spread quickly across the State, and reached the High Court and eventually the Supreme Court.

Though the rollback was a manifesto promise of the Congress, the government had been dragging its feet on it for nearly three years. In fact, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah had a few months after the party's stellar victory in 2023 elections made a public announcement that people can "wear whatever they want, eat whatever they want", only to clarify the next day that no formal order had been issued and the government was only considering revocation after discussion with officials.

The rather sudden announcement of the rollback has come in between two significant political developments. It came soon after the Congress managed a narrow victory in the bypolls to Davanagere South, a constituency with a significant Muslim population. The run-up to the bypolls had seen an intense push by Muslim leaders for the Congress to field a candidate from the community, but to no avail.

Following this, there were allegations of anti-party activity leading to the suspension of MLC Abdul Jabbar from the primary membership of the Congress and the removal of Naseer Ahmed from his post as Chief Minister's political secretary. It also came just ahead of "Karnataka Muslim Empowerment and Accountability Summit" to seek answers from the Congress on the promises to the community made but not kept, the rollback of the uniform rule being one of them. The document released at the convention spoke of the hijab ban as "one of the most painful and visible symbols of exclusion faced by Muslim girls in Karnataka." It cited the People's Union of Civil Liberties-Karnataka report "Closing the Gates to Education" that documented how hijab restrictions affected Muslim girl students' right to education and dignity.

The carefully-worded new order that came on May 13 (three days prior to the convention) on uniform allows "limited traditional and faith-based symbols" and mentions hijab, turban, janivara (sacred thread), and rudraksha, along with the prescribed uniform. The order also prohibits authorities from compelling students to remove these symbols, which came in the context of some Brahmin students being asked to remove their janivara during the recent Common Entrance Test,

a qualifying exam for Engineering courses in the State. The order was a clear balancing act in anticipation of the BJP dubbing it "appeasement politics". Mr. Madhu Bangarappa was flanked by his Cabinet colleague Dinesh Gundu Rao, a Brahmin, on one side and MLA Rizwan Arshad on the other, as if to further drive home this point.

All this effort, of course, has not prevented the BJP leaders from calling it "appeasement." Mr. Siddaramaiah has responded to this by asking why allowing the hijab is appeasement, while allowing janivara or turban is not. He also clarified that saffron shawls, which many students (mostly male) wore in protest against hijab being allowed in classrooms back in 2022, would not be allowed in educational institutes. In fact, the order's emphasis on "limited traditional and faith-based symbols" too seems to anticipate this.

But whether there will be an orchestrated effort for saffron shawls to enter classrooms, along with hijab, remains to be seen. Vijayapura MLA Basanagouda Patil Yarnal, who has been expelled from the BJP but remains a Hindutva rabble-rouser, has already said that he would launch a movement to counter hijab by asking students to wear saffron shawls and tilak to school. He even said that whenever teachers call out attendance, students would be asked to respond with a "Jai Sri Ram."

As schools and colleges are set to reopen for the next academic year, how this will pan out and how firmly the Congress government will handle it remains to be seen. Meanwhile, in the Supreme Court, following a split verdict, the hijab case awaits hearing by a larger bench.

Now, only two young States haven't had a coalition govt.

With Vijay's TVK regime accommodating its allies in its Cabinet, Tamil Nadu has joined eight other States ruled by coalition governments in 2026

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis
Pon Vasanth B.A.
Iwaala Narasimhan

On May 13, 2026, when the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam led by C. Joseph Vijay, which fell short of the 118 seats needed to form a government, won the vote of confidence in the Tamil Nadu (T.N.) Assembly, history repeated itself in the State.

In 1952, the T.N. Assembly became the first legislative body in Independent India to witness a motion of no confidence, which the Congress party won after C. Rajagopalachari formed the first coalition government in the country. For the next 74 years, Tamil Nadu remained among a handful of outliers in the country to have never had a coalition government, mainly due to the domination of the DMK and the AIADMK. Even in 2006 when the DMK fell short of a majority, it did not have to accommodate its allies in the Cabinet.

Though Mr. Vijay had expressed his party's willingness to share power even in 2024, the fractured mandate made it a necessity to accommodate the Congress, the VCK and the IUML in the Cabinet.

Now, only the young States of Chhattisgarh and Telangana, formed respectively in 2000 and 2014, remain the outliers among the major States by never having a coalition government (Chart 1).

The dominance of the Congress was first challenged in the 1967 elections, a crucial point in India's politics as the party failed to secure a majority in a number of major States, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, T.N., and Kerala.

This shift towards coalitions and the emergence of regional parties is also reflected in the number of parties represented in the Lok Sabha from 1967 (Chart 2). It also shows the emergence of the BJP. (With inputs from Sambavi Parthasarathy and Devyanshi Bihani)

Share in power

The data for the charts are sourced from the Election Commission of India and Lok Dhaba. The dataset maintained KK. Kailash, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad, was used for verification for some years

Chart 1: State-wise single-party and coalition governments formed over the years. The key criterion used to define a single-party rule is the non-participation of any other parties or independents in the Cabinets. Each dot represents a new type of government formed in a year

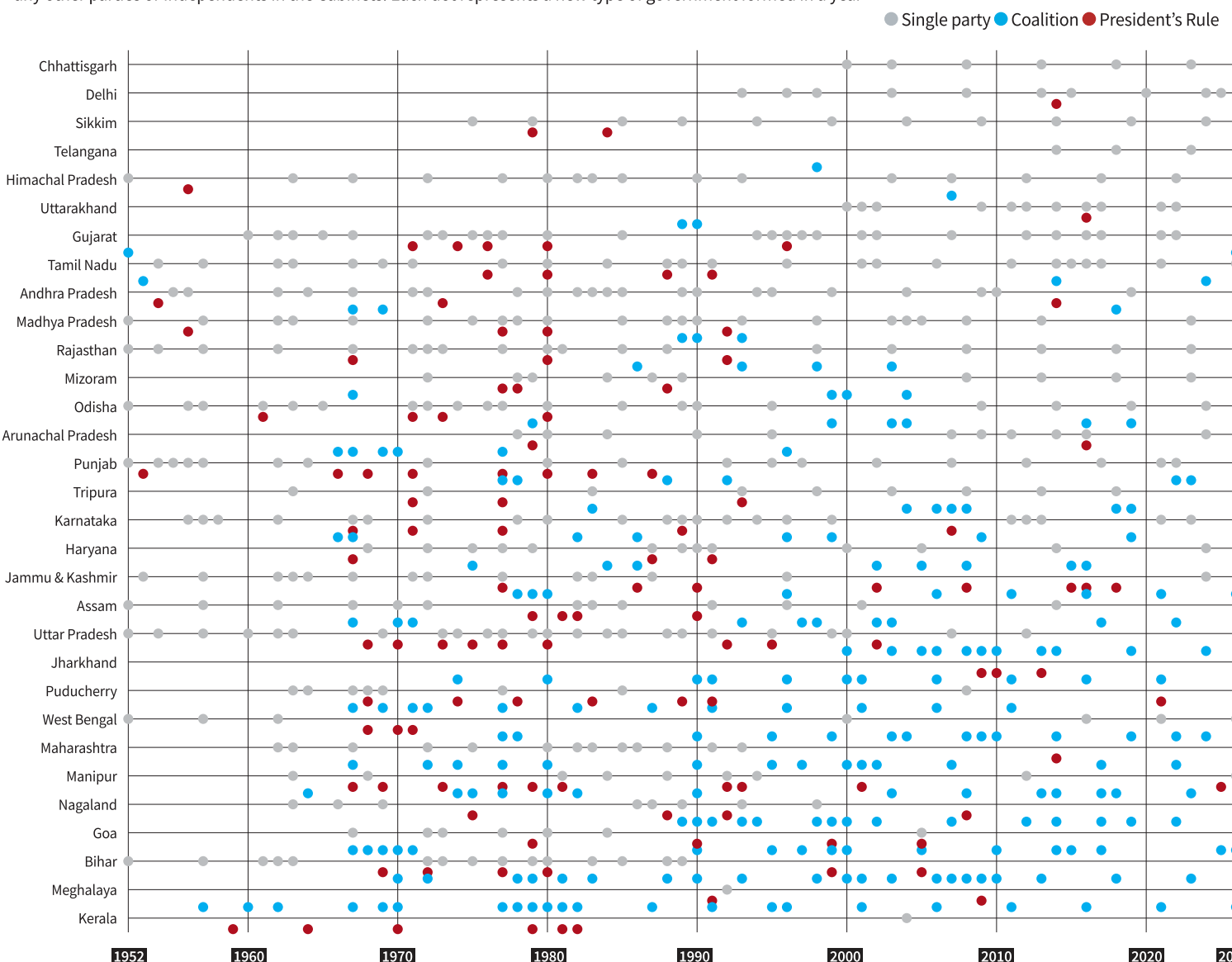
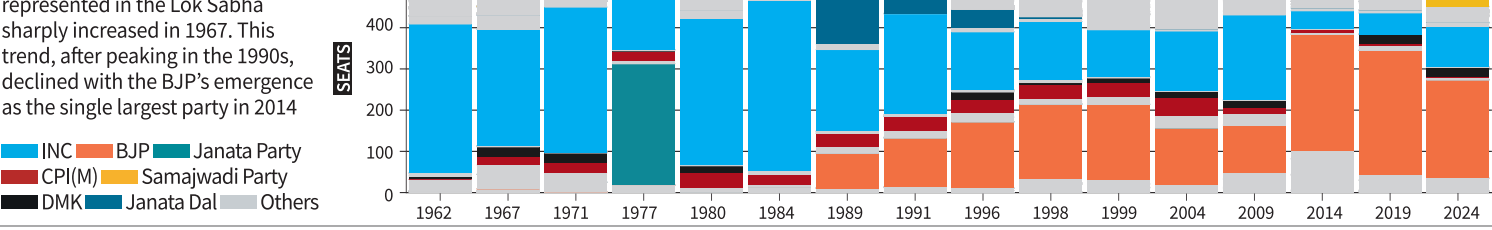


Chart 2: The number of parties represented in the Lok Sabha sharply increased in 1967. This trend, after peaking in the 1990s, declined with the BJP's emergence as the single largest party in 2014



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 25, 1976

HMT's expansion plans in watch-making

MADRAS, May 24.: The Hindustan Machine Tools Factory, Bangalore, is expected to reach the Rs. 250 crore turnover during the Sixth Plan period, when it would have introduced many new product lines.

The HMT has received permission from the Central Government to expand its watch production capacity from one to three million watches. HMT engineers are now in Switzerland attending an important fair, where machine tools for watch-making are being exhibited. A high-power delegation led by the Executive Director of the HMT Watch Factory is now in Geneva to negotiate suppliers' credit. Mr. S. M. Patil, HMT Chairman, was recently in Geneva for preliminary discussions on credit negotiations.

Disclosing this here today, Mr. Patil told pressmen that the project report for the watch-making expansion would be submitted to the Government of India in two or three months.

He said the Union Government, as part of its Hill Area Development Programme, would help the Sikkim Government to set up a sub-assembly unit for HMT watches.

Darjeeling was another centre selected by the Central Government. All the watches assembled at these sub-assembly centres would be marketed by the HMT.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 25, 1926

Antiquity of football

This year's F. A. Cup Final arouses widespread interest in a very ancient game.

"The Daily Herald" recalls that the Chinese played a kind of football ages ago. The winners of a match were always regaled with a great "feed" and acclaimed as heroes, but the losers dared not lift their heads for shame, and the losing captain was invariably flogged!

There were numerous attempts to prohibit the game in Mediaeval England, and Elizabeth's reign found the "murderous game of ball" forbidden on pain of imprisonment. But the people could not be denied a fast improving game, and so football came into its own. It was played in all sorts of queer places, but most often across the open country.

In some instances the goals were several miles apart, and whole villages played each other.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Acres of barren land in Ladakh to be reclaimed

800 Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Sunday launched a restoration project to reclaim nearly 800 acres of barren land and transform it into productive ecosystem through innovative freshwater recharge techniques. PTI

Percentage increase in post-COVID hip damage surgeries

40 in per cent. A worrying post-pandemic orthopaedic trend has emerged across India, with doctors reporting a significant rise in cases of hip arthritis and avascular necrosis (AVN), particularly among younger and middle-aged adults. PTI

Number of homestay registrations cancelled by Dehradun

103 Dehradun district administration has cancelled registrations of 103 homestays on Sunday following extensive inspections, revealing violations of safety norms and operational guidelines, officials said. PTI

Persons sentenced to life imprisonment in Nabarangpur clash

19 Nineteen people were sentenced to life imprisonment by a court in Odisha in a 2016 clash between two groups that left three persons dead. The incident happened on July 16, 2016 following a dispute over the cultivation of government land. PTI

Persons killed in mine blast at the Liushenyu shaft in China

82 Rescuers in northern China searched on Sunday for two people still missing after a gas explosion killed 82 in a mine that authorities said was beset by serious safety violations. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What is China's Hainan FTP initiative?

How has Hainan's free trade port changed tariffs and trade rules? Why is the FTP attracting new enterprises? What benefits are businesses gaining? How are the duty-free system and visa-free policy boosting tourism and consumption? What strategic role does FTP play in China's comparison with Hong Kong?

EXPLAINER

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

The story so far:

Hainan, China's southernmost province and a tropical island in the South China Sea, has come to the forefront of the country's modern-era opening-up efforts with the beginning of its free trade port (FTP) and customs closure in December. Envisioned as a 'landmark leap' into economic ease, China is trying to set up a business hub in the island province aimed at attracting global and local customers with the appeal of zero tariffs, low personal taxes, and simplified flow of commuters and data.

What is the free trade port initiative?

The plan for the FTP in Hainan was first unveiled on June 1, 2020. The FTP was officially launched on December 18, 2025, with island-wide special customs operations implementing the policy of "freer access at the first line, regulated access at the second line, and free flow within the island". Under the initiative, tariff barriers on trade were removed from the island with the closure of ordinary customs operations, enabling easier imports. While the island remains an integral part of China, it has now become a neutral zone for international trade, with regular customs procedures and tariffs applying only to goods entering the Chinese mainland from the island. Visa-free entry for people from 86 countries is also expected to boost tourism.

Hainan will be a "new frontier of opening up, hub for regional cooperation and engine for economic globalisation," said Wang Bin, spokesperson for the Chinese Communist Party's Hainan Committee, ahead of the official opening of the FTP. He added that the FTP would help save 860 million RMB in tariffs annually while creating investment opportunities for Chinese enterprises in the Global South.



The International Yacht Centre at Sanya Central Business District, a key tourist and industrial hub in Hainan. VIGNESH P. VENKITESH

How will the initiative help China's trade?

The island-wide special customs operation is seen as an opportunity to "deepen reforms in key sectors, steadily advance high-quality development, improve risk prevention, and build the FTP into a leading gateway for China's opening-up in the new era," He Lifeng, Chinese Vice-Premier, said at the launch of the FTP on December 18.

Since the launch, the number of tariff-free product categories has expanded from around 1,900 to 6,600, while the share of goods eligible for zero tariffs has risen from 21% to 74%. *Global Times* reported that 3,265 foreign-invested enterprises registered in the FTP between December 18 and December 31, while over 30,000 foreign trade registration enterprises were added in 2025.

According to Haikou Customs, goods worth around 753 million yuan (about \$107 million) were imported into Hainan in the first few months after the FTP's opening. The value of processed and value-added goods brought into the mainland during the same period stood at around 85.9 million yuan.

How are businesses benefiting?

The establishment of the FTP has drawn numerous industries to the island. The MI

Coffee Dream Factory in Wanning is one such enterprise benefiting from the initiative. "We import coffee beans for RMB 1,100 per kilo from Panama, which cost RMB 1,700 per kilo on the mainland," said Tong Shuo, director of MI.

Hainan Ausca International Oils and Grains Co., Ltd., established with a total investment of 3.5 billion RMB, is among the first enterprises operating within the FTP. It piloted the import tariff exemption policy to produce goods with at least 30% added value after processing. The group started construction in September 2020, soon after the FTP plan was unveiled, and opened its first production line in April 2021. It now has a production line of 2 million tonnes per year.

How does the initiative encourage consumers?

The FTP has also opened Hainan to individual consumers.

Sanya, the province's main tourist hub, houses the China Duty Free centre, with a collection of global and local brands competing for customers. The CDF offers a shopping experience for both international tourists and mainland residents, provided they present a return ticket at entry. Local residents, however, face a shopping cap of 1,00,000 RMB per person per year and must travel out of the

province once a year.

"The FTP is expected to bring benefits with an increase in overseas visitors, which will boost spending and help the local economy," said Bai Xue, deputy general manager at Sanya CDF. "The visa-free policy will help us provide a window to showcase Chinese culture to the world, while introducing local brands and shifting focus from the world to China," she added.

The *Global Times* reported that offshore duty-free shopping in Hainan exceeded 2 billion RMB since the FTP's opening, with more than 3,00,000 shoppers. Haikou and Sanya, the two major cities of the province, have seen the fastest growth in inbound flight ticket bookings.

What does China seek to gain with Hainan?

While Hainan is on its way to further China's strategy of economic opening up, there are multiple factors affecting its success. Unlike Hong Kong – one of the world's leading financial hubs, being a special administrative region under the Chinese government, with its own legal system, currency, and independent membership in international trade organisations – Hainan is China in all perspectives and domain.

With a customs-free, tariff-free, region outside the mainland that follows all other legal and constitutional provisions, China has made both a partner and competitor to Hong Kong in Hainan. China now has an open economic and tourist zone at the northern end of the much-contested South China Sea, with fresh and vast economic opportunities compared to congested Hong Kong.

The geopolitical and economic implications of Hainan, and its output to China, which seeks to attain "socialist modernisation" in the coming decade, will be unveiled in time.

For now, the Hainan experiment is attracting eyes and its baby strides are firm. (The writer was in China at the invitation of the China Public Diplomacy association)

THE GIST

Hainan has launched its free trade port (FTP) with island-wide "customs closure," enabling "freer access at the first line, regulated access at the second line, and free flow within the island," along with zero tariffs, lower taxes and simplified movement of trade, people and data.

The FTP is attracting foreign-invested enterprises and boosting trade, tourism and consumption through expanded tariff-free products, duty-free shopping, visa-free entry for 86 countries, and growing investment and trade volumes since its launch.

When does purposeful writing evolve in children?

At what age should a child start writing? Can early writing become a burden for children?

M. Emmanuel Bhaskar

The story so far:

Most of us have seen a two-year-old child hold a crayon and scribble. In most cases, school educators see that a kindergarten child can grip a pencil and therefore encourage them to write. But we need to assess if the child writes without pain and fatigue. Most importantly, does the child enjoy writing at this age?

In what stages does purposeful writing evolve?

At 1-2 years, the palmar grasp is established, and the child uses the entire arm movement to scribble. At 2-3 years, the child can rotate the forearm. The child can now hold the pencil with fingers, but the shoulder still dominates when writing. Between 3 and 4 years, the four-finger grasp is established. The child uses all fingers except the little finger and can draw a fairly straight line, an incomplete circle, and may colour within

a picture outline.

At 4-5 years, the grasp improves and becomes a three-finger grip. The pencil is held between the thumb and index finger, while the middle finger supports it from below. The ring and little fingers rest on the writing paper. However, the movement depends on the wrist since the finger muscles are weak. At this age, a child can write, but doing so for a long period will result in pain in the hand, elbow, or shoulder.

The middle finger may hurt since it supports the pencil. The thumb or index finger can hurt due to the pressure of holding the pencil firmly for a long time. The elbow may hurt because of constant bending and pressure on the writing surface. The shoulder may be painful because the muscles around it must continuously contract to keep the elbow in position.

What are the mechanics of writing?

Writing requires coordination of many nerves, muscles, and joints. We can start with shoulder stability. You will notice

that your shoulder barely moves while writing.

The elbow moves only sideways, helping the hand move across the page. This movement often happens in the air and sometimes with support from the table or another surface. The wrist, too, holds its position and does not bend sideways as the hand moves from left to right. Only the thumb and index finger actively move. The other fingers move along without any movement in and of themselves. This is just what happens in the upper limb.

Writing is controlled by the brain. Here enters the hand-eye coordination, the child's memory of the shape of letters, the sequence of letters, and, more importantly, attention and patience.

What is the difference between circle and alphabet drawing?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the U.S. lists that a three-year-old "draws a circle when you show the child how to do it". When drawing a circle, the shoulder rotates

freely, so shoulder stability is less important. The wrist and the finger grip move as a whole when drawing a circle. In other words, the child holds the crayon or a pencil between the thumb and index finger or even with the whole palm and rotates the shoulder with decent accuracy to complete the circle.

Writing requires precise motor planning. When a child switches between complex letters, direction changes along with the curve, size of deflections, stopping and turning, spacing and many more.

What should be the norm?

A kindergarten child can use a crayon to colour designs with large spaces. A pencil grip should be avoided at this age. In upper kindergarten, a child may try to write alphabets like A, C, E, F, H, I, K, L, M, N, O, T, V, W, X, Y and Z which have straight lines or circles with no complex curves as in B, D, G, J, P, Q, R, S and U.

By the age of five, the child can be assessed for a proper hand grip, and if found capable, more complex writing can be attempted. We should remember that each child may have variations in their ability to do all that is required for writing. This is where parents' and teachers' efforts in the kindergarten and pre-school phase at home determine if the child starts to love writing or considers it a burden.

(M. Emmanuel Bhaskar, MD, is Professor of Medicine, Sri Ramachandra Medical College and Research Institute, Chennai)

THE GIST

Writing in young children develops in stages from scribbling with whole-arm movement to controlled finger movement, and early pencil grip or long writing can cause pain in the hand, elbow, or shoulder due to muscle strain and poor coordination.

Purposeful writing requires coordination of shoulder stability, wrist control, finger movement, and brain functions like memory and attention, so it should be introduced gradually based on the child's age and ability.

CACHE



The simple rule with the agents is that the more you tell them, the better it works; that means Google will be able to build a more intimate profile about you. REUTERS

Google's new 'information agents' are a privacy and web infrastructure problem

'Information agents' will continuously monitor the web on users' behalf, but raise serious concerns around data and privacy as they collect intimate personal details across Google's ecosystem and may feed the ad tech industry; they could also accelerate automated bot-driven web traffic

John Xavier

At its annual developer conference a few days ago, Google unveiled something called information agents, a feature that will be built into Search to monitor the web on your behalf. This bot's feature will continuously scavenge the web for updates you've told it to watch for. It sounds genuinely useful, and it probably is. But it also raises serious questions around user privacy, web traffic and concentration of data on one platform. For starters, this type of agentic feature works best when the user gives the agent details about themselves. To monitor housing listings on your behalf, it needs your location preferences, budget, family size, commute constraints, and timeline. If you want to plan your travel and stay during a vacation, you will end up sharing your personal and financial details with the bot.

The simple rule with these agents is that the more you tell them, the better it works. That means Google will be able to build a more intimate profile about you.

The company already sits across your search history, Gmail, Calendar, Maps, Chrome, YouTube, and Android. Information agents are designed to sit at the intersection of all of those applications, connecting them in a way that's different from what any single Google product does today.

Data and privacy

In that process of connecting multiple

applications, these agents will pick several bits of data from the user, which in turn can be used as feed for the massive ad tech industry.

A prompt to an agent for a specific type of house in a particular area will include details about financial position and location details. And this information will very likely be stored indefinitely.

In terms of what people ask AI agents, we have only scratched the surface. As more use cases emerge, people may end up sharing a lot more sensitive, personally identifiable data like religious and political views, sexual orientation, medical history, and financial behaviour.

At this point, it is unclear how Google plans to use this data and how long it will keep it on its systems. The company has said that, when it comes to agentic commerce and payments, buyers' data will not be shared with the sellers. But that's a narrow assurance for a significant issue.

Google is not the only player in this race, as other AI companies are building similar personal intelligence systems. But Google is unrivalled when you look at the company's comprehensive data infrastructure.

Web traffic will accelerate

Apart from data management and user privacy concerns, information agents can also accelerate automated traffic on the internet.

According to the Thales 2026 Bad Bot Report, bots now account for 53% of all global web traffic. That means the

majority of activity on the internet is no longer human.

AI-driven bot attacks specifically surged 12.5x in 2025, and daily blocked bot requests jumped from 2 million to 25 million in a single year, per the report.

Information agents will worsen this trend. For instance, a normal Google search triggers one crawl when you hit enter. But an information agent monitoring apartment listings or stock prices triggers potentially hundreds of automated fetches per day, every day, on behalf of every user who sets one up.

Now, multiply that across millions of Google AI subscribers and you have an enormous, continuously crawling load placed on third-party websites that never agreed to host it.

For publishers, this could be brutal as the traffic from AI-driven searches will hardly lead to click-throughs. They will have to carry the server costs of being crawled as their content gets harvested and synthesised into answers. This could potentially lead to publishers blocking Google's crawlers entirely – a change that could degrade the quality of agents themselves.

In the hands of a few

The feature also deepens Google's position in the AI market.

If you build a sophisticated set of agents monitoring your housing search, financial watchlist, and health queries, all running inside Google's ecosystem on Google's models with data in Google's infrastructure, switching away from

Google becomes a genuinely costly exercise.

There's a liability question too. If a Google information agent nudges you toward a financial opportunity and you act on it and lose money, no regulatory framework currently exists for recourse. The agents are framed as assistants, not advisors.

And then there's who gets access in the first place. Information agents launch exclusively for Google AI Pro and Ultra subscribers, meaning wealthier users get persistent AI scouts monitoring the web on their behalf while everyone else searches manually.

If these agents become as consequential as Google is suggesting, that will widen the informational divide.

Others are in the race

Google is not alone in building persistent, always-on agents. Perplexity already offers autonomous multi-model agents on its top tier. Microsoft has embedded monitoring agents across Outlook, Teams, and SharePoint. Meta is building ambient AI into WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook.

Every major AI company is converging on the same model: agents that watch the world for you, indefinitely. That means data accumulation, web scraping, and publisher revenue erosion. So, the question isn't whether to accept them from Google specifically, but whether anyone has a plan for what the internet looks like when it's mostly machines talking to machines.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Minister had his hand in the cookie jar

Filling out all those forms felt like endless rigmarole

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of 'having one's hand in the cookie jar'? (Priyanshu Dubey, Mau)

The original expression was 'getting caught with one's hand in the cookie jar'; now, it has been shortened to 'have one's hand in the cookie jar'. Americans refer to the jar in which they keep their biscuits as a 'cookie jar'. When you catch someone with his hand in the cookie jar, you catch the person red-handed; in other words, you catch the person in the act of doing or attempting to do something wrong, like a mother who catches her child attempting to steal a couple of biscuits from the jar. Today, the expression is used by everyone, not just children. A politician caught taking bribes, a student cheating on an exam, an employee embezzling funds, etc., can all be said to be caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

The police established that the CM's nephew had his hand in the cookie jar.

What is the difference between 'airplane' and 'aircraft'? (C. Deepak, Chennai)

When the airhostess begins to demonstrate the safety measures we should be familiar with in case of an emergency, we find that she invariably refers to the plane as 'aircraft'. What is the difference between an 'airplane' (also spelt 'aeroplane') and an aircraft? Well, anything that can fly can be labelled 'aircraft' - hot-air balloon, helicopter, airplane, glider, etc. In other words, 'aircraft' is an umbrella term for anything that can fly - it includes the plane. An 'airplane' on the other hand, is a type of aircraft - it has wings, is powered by an engine, etc. A lot of people, however, use the two words interchangeably.

How is the word 'rigamarole' pronounced? (Jaideep, Kolkata)

The noun can be spelled in two different ways: the British spell the word 'rigmarole', while the Americans sometimes spell it 'rigamarole'. When spelt 'rigmarole', the word consists of three syllables. The first rhymes with 'pig', 'wig', and 'big', while the vowel in the second sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. The final syllable is pronounced like the word 'role'. In this case, the word is pronounced 'RIG-me-role', with the stress on the first syllable. When spelt 'rigamarole', the vowel in the second and third syllables sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. In this case, the word is pronounced 'RIG-e-me-role', with the stress, once again, on the first syllable. The word is mostly used to suggest disapproval; when you refer to someone's instructions as being nothing more than 'rigmarole', what you are suggesting is that it was so long and so complicated that it drove you crazy - it made your head spin. The term can also be used to refer to everyday conversations which are incoherent and foolish.

I didn't realise that buying an insurance policy involves a lot of rigmarole - filling out numerous forms, making copies, standing in line, etc.

The word has its origins in a game called 'ragman roll'; the roll was a collection of verses and each player opened a random page and read a verse aloud.

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Word of the day

Risible: arousing or provoking laughter

Synonyms: funny, humorous, ridiculous

Usage: His excuse for being late was completely risible.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/risible

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈrɪzɪbəl/

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on personalities, places and events associated with May 25

V. V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

In 1895, which famous English writer was convicted for gross indecency and for practising homosexual acts, and sentenced to serve two years in prison?

QUESTION 2

Name the British politician and writer known for coining phrases like 'the pen is mightier than the sword' and 'It was a dark and stormy night' born on this date?

QUESTION 3

May 25 is observed as 'Africa Day' to commemorate the foundation of the Organization of African Unity on that date in 1963. In which National capital was it founded?

QUESTION 4

In 1977, the first of the 'Star Wars' films was released. What was it retroactively titled?

QUESTION 5

What first did British mountaineers Charles Evans, Joe Brown and George Band achieve on this date 71 years ago?



Visual Question: Name this Asian country celebrating its Independence Day today.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. Filoviruses come in five (known) genera. The two most famous are Ebola and Marburg. Fill in the blank. **Ans: Marburg**
 2. The Ebola virus does not directly destroy tissue. Instead, it infects macrophages and dendritic cells early. This prompts the immune system to release a deluge of proteins called Cytokines. **Ans: Cytokines**
 3. The Ebola virus has a protein called VP35 that mimics X, which is a kind of RNA that the immune system's sensors have learnt to recognise as a sign of infection. However, VP35 binds to them in such a way that they're occupied but not activated, and as a result, they can't 'trigger' the immune system's defence. What is X?

Ans: Double-stranded RNA

4. The Ebola virus can persist in immune-privileged sites in the body long after it has been cleared from the blood. These include the eyes and the central nervous system. Fill in the blanks. **Ans: Aqueous humor**
 5. The Ebola virus first latches onto proteins on the cell surface. Then the cell swallows it whole, enclosing it in a bubble called a Y. Name Y. **Ans: Endosome**
 Visual: Name this country. The disease is called Ebola virus disease, the virus is called Ebola virus, and the species label is "Q ebolavirus", where Q is the former name of this country. **Ans: Democratic Republic of the Congo**
Early Birds: Utsav Kaushal | Anusha Tomar | Ravi Kumar | Prem Raj P.

Long-awaited anti-COVID drug is also a milestone against future viruses

Betacoronaviruses have now caused three major outbreaks in recent memory; drugs like Ensitrelvir provide scientists with a valuable starting point against this entire sub-family of viruses, possibly allowing humankind to respond more quickly when the next virus will inevitably emerge

Arun Panchapakesan

The recent success of Ensitrelvir at preventing COVID-19 is a milestone in a drug quest that began with a singular development at the start of the pandemic.

In January 2020, the full-length genome sequence of a strain of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was posted on an online discussion forum for virologists. The sequence revealed that SARS-CoV-2, like its relative SARS-CoV-1, keeps most of its proteins as one long chain. The individual proteins are then cut from this chain and released by enzymes called proteases.

Inconvenient guests

SARS-CoV-2 has two proteases called the main protease (M^{pro}), which does most of the cutting, and the Papain-like protease (PL^{pro}) which cuts the three sites at one end of the chain that the M^{pro} does not process. Almost immediately after the genome sequence was published, scientists knew that both these proteases were attractive drug targets.

Viruses are made of the same material as their host cells. The viral membrane is derived from the host's cell-membranes, and the viral proteins are made by the host cell itself. This makes antiviral drug development more challenging than developing drugs against, say, bacteria.

Most other pathogens are living cells with several features that humans do not have. For instance, bacteria have a rigid cell wall. Antibiotics can be made that block the synthesis of this cell wall, and those antibiotics will affect only the bacteria without affecting humans much. Also, that antibiotic will work against most classes of bacteria because most of them have a cell wall.

Viruses, however, do not offer such conveniences. Since they rely heavily on the host cell's machinery, drugs that attack the virus can also risk damaging healthy cells. As a result, there is no broad-spectrum antiviral drug. Instead, scientists usually need to design drugs specifically for a particular virus, or if they are lucky, for a group of closely related viruses that share similar proteins.

A drug shelved

This is why viral proteins that are essential for the virus while being significantly different from human proteins are extremely valuable drug targets. Both SARS-CoV-2 proteases fit this description perfectly. The virus cannot replicate without them and human cells do not have identical versions of these enzymes. Among them, M^{pro} was the first choice for most researchers.



A person diagnosed with COVID-19 being shifted to a ward at King George Hospital, Visakhapatnam on January 22, 2022. K.R DEEPAK

When scientists sequenced the SARS-CoV-2 genome, those at Pfizer realised its M^{pro} protease was very similar to that of SARS-CoV-1. It so happened that a few years ago, they had developed an intravenous drug called PF-00835231 targeting the M^{pro} of SARS-CoV-1. However, when the virus vanished in early 2004, they shelved the compound thinking they would not need it again.

In 2020, knowing that the two M^{pro} proteins are similar, they set out to re-engineer PF-00835231 because an intravenous drug would be useless at controlling a pandemic the size of COVID-19, where most people would not get admitted to a hospital. After a few months, they developed Nirmatrelvir. By the time they finished clinical trials, it was already late 2021.

Different approach

However, while Nirmatrelvir was very effective as an oral drug, it had major problems. First, it was metabolised very quickly by the liver. To keep it in the bloodstream for longer, scientists had to add a second drug, Ritonavir, to the regimen to slow down the liver's ability to metabolise Nirmatrelvir. The problem? Ritonavir had dangerous interactions with common heart and blood pressure medications. And then there was the added side effect of a bitter aftertaste.

Around the same time that Pfizer was engineering Nirmatrelvir, a Japanese

pharmaceutical company named Shionogi took a different approach to targeting M^{pro}. Instead of making and testing millions of potential drug candidates, they decided in the interest of time that they would use computational chemistry to 'virtually' screen compounds.

Using the structure of the M^{pro} protease, they simulated thousands of molecules that would bind the protease and inactivate it. This approach quickly identified a promising molecule that they could then test further. Then they partnered with the International Institute for Zoonosis Control at Hokkaido University for testing. With a few tweaks, they came up with a molecule that stayed in the blood for a long time without the need for additional drugs and did not have the bitter after-taste. They called this molecule Ensitrelvir.

SCORPIO-PEP trial

Ensitrelvir was granted emergency approval in Japan for use in November 2022 to treat mild-to-moderate COVID-19. In early 2024, it was granted full authorisation for regular use. Now, a new paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* has reported that it can also be used for postexposure prophylaxis — to prevent infection after exposure to the virus.

The international study, called the SCORPIO-PEP trial, involved 2,387

participants, all of whom were exposed to an infected household member. They were assigned to a test or a placebo group at random. Participants in the test group received Ensitrelvir and the control group received the placebo.

The results revealed that Ensitrelvir lowered the incidence of symptomatic COVID-19 from 9% in the control group to 2.9% in the group that took the drug — a drop of 67%. The trial scientists showed that irrespective of whether symptoms developed, the presence of SARS-CoV-2 in the contacts was reduced from 21.5% to 14%. Importantly, the drug maintained a good safety profile in the study. The authors concluded that giving Ensitrelvir to contacts within 72 hours of a primary patient showing symptoms could effectively prevent COVID-19.

SARS-CoV-2 today does not pose the threat it once did but the importance of Ensitrelvir extends well beyond COVID-19. Betacoronaviruses have now caused three major outbreaks in just over two decades: SARS-CoV-1, MERS-CoV, and SARS-CoV-2. Drugs like Ensitrelvir provide scientists with a valuable starting point against this entire sub-family of viruses, possibly allowing humankind to respond more quickly when the next virus will inevitably emerge.

(Arun Panchapakesan is an assistant professor at the Y.R. Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education, Chennai. arun.panchapakesan@gmail.com)

THE GIST

Ensitrelvir was granted emergency approval in Japan for use in November 2022 to treat mild-to-moderate COVID-19. In early 2024, it was granted full authorisation for regular use

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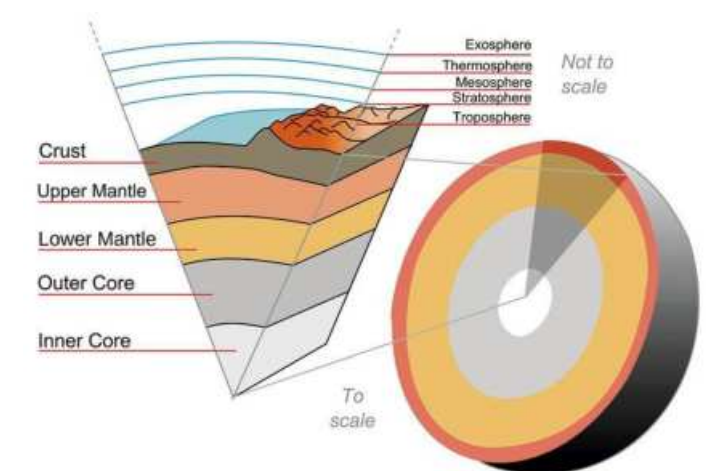
BIG SHOT



Astronauts for the Shenzhou 23 crewed mission, from left: Hong Kong's Lai Ka-ying (identified by Chinese authorities as Li Jiaying) and China's Zhu Yangzhu and Zhang Zhiyuan wave as they attend a seeing-off ceremony for their crewed space mission at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northwestern China on Sunday. AP

WHAT IS IT?

Outer core: unafraid of drama



An infographic depicting the earth's geophysical layers. SURACHIT (CC BY-SA)

Vasudevan Mukunth

The earth's outer core is a voluminous liquid layer that lies around 2,800 km beneath the surface. This hot, churning sea is filled with molten iron and nickel.

As the outer core moves constantly, it acts like a large generator, creating the planet's magnetic field, which shields the earth from harmful solar radiation.

Researchers from the University of Edinburgh and the British Geological Survey have reported that around 2010, the liquid iron in the outer core below the equatorial Pacific Ocean changed direction from a slow westward crawl to a more rapid eastward surge.

They found this after mapping 27 years of iron movement in the outer core using data from ground stations and four European satellites. They identified two important patterns in the flow.

The main pattern accounted for 95% of the movement: it consisted of a

steady flow westwards — which also explains why the earth's magnetic field has historically drifted west. The second pattern revealed the dramatic shift in 2010. The researchers also found that this shift began to weaken around 2020.

The researchers were able to link the 2010 reversal to seismic and geodetic shifts in the earth's solid inner core. According to their model, the flow is also roughly 10% lopsided between the northern and the southern hemispheres.

These details could explain sudden 'jerks' in magnetic field readings and suggest that deep-earth liquids can change direction much faster than the traditional theory predicts.

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

Fiscal dividend

RBI's dual transfers, a confidence booster

In what must come as a measure of comfort in these otherwise grim times for the fisc, the Reserve Bank of India has transferred a record dividend to the Centre, while also setting aside ample sums for its own contingency buffers. The Centre needs the funds badly, and so does the RBI — both for distinct reasons. Besides reducing fiscal stress, the dividend will also infuse liquidity into the system, now shrinking due to RBI interventions to shore up the rupee.



At ₹2.86 lakh crore for 2025-26, RBI's dividend transfer is almost 7 per cent higher than last year's. This may help in reducing the Centre's rising fiscal deficit this year. Meanwhile, the RBI needs the comfort of ample contingency reserves for market intervention in these very volatile times. With respect to the latter, a revised economic capital framework, adopted by the RBI in 2025, provides it the flexibility to maintain the contingency risk buffer at 4.5-7.5 per cent. To support the Centre during Covid-19 pandemic, the CRB had been lowered to 5.5 per cent of the RBI's balance sheet. As economic activity normalised, the buffer had been gradually increased to take it to 7.5 per cent of the balance sheet in 2024-25. It is well that the RBI has not used the entire leeway provided by the revised economic capital framework and has lowered the CRB's portion by only one percentage point to 6.5 per cent of its balance sheet, despite the exigencies created by the war. Even so, the transfer to CRB is 143 per cent higher for 2025-26, at ₹1.09 lakh crore. This has been made possible by the RBI's balance sheet expanding 20.6 per cent to ₹91.97 lakh crore; much higher than the expansion of 8.2 per cent in 2024-25. A 26 per cent rise in RBI's income (gross and net) has come in very handy.

The expansion in the balance sheet appears driven by the open market operations in government securities to support the government borrowing programme and infuse liquidity. The RBI did not buy much gold in FY26, restricting the purchases to 0.9 tonnes. But the 61 per cent surge in domestic gold prices in 2025-26 will also have boosted its currency and gold revaluation reserve. The sharp increase of 26.42 per cent in gross income appears led by the sale of US dollars, purchased at lower rates, and the higher interest income on its holding of domestic and foreign government securities, due to the high yields prevailing in India and the US.

As for the Centre's finances, the fisc will be faced with rising subsidies on food, fertilizer and fuel, alongside welfare and stimulus commitments; on the other hand, revenues will not be buoyant. Higher crude prices and reduced margins could lower dividends from oil majors. Margins of companies are expected to decline, impacting corporate tax collections. Lower consumption due to inflation can dent indirect tax revenues. In sum, with oil prices likely to be above \$90 a barrel on average in FY27, a fiscal target of 4.3 per cent of GDP looks daunting — and, this dividend transfer could help.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

EUROPE

Trump has lost the governing plot

Republicans don't want to say this publicly, but privately they do: President Trump's personal political obsessions are hurting his Presidency, harming the chances for further policy gains the rest of this year, and putting control of the House and Senate in jeopardy. That's the backdrop to the GOP revolt this week in Congress on war powers and funding for the Department of Homeland Security. Mr. Trump's unrelated priorities are handing Democrats gift after gift and forcing Republicans to take difficult votes that could cost them in November. His desire for political revenge is also alienating Members of Congress he will need this year. (NEW YORK, MAY 23)

GULF NEWS

UK-Gulf deal is a needed boost for free trade globally

At first glance, little seems to connect disparate items such as medical equipment, luxury cars, chocolate or butter. This week, however, four years of talks and a 2,000-page agreement brought them together. Such goods may be among the cheaper, more available British exports on sale in the Gulf as part of a milestone free-trade deal struck between London and the GCC. It is a major moment for both parties. The UK has codified a strategic and significant trade relationship with the six-nation bloc. The GCC nations combined are equivalent to the UK's 10th-largest trade partner, with demand for imports to the group forecast to double by 2050. For the GCC, the deal is its first free-trade pact with a G7 nation and builds on the deep historical and people-to-people ties that have existed with the UK for decades. (DUBAI, MAY 22)

Creating semicon dependency?

DESIGN MATTERS. With focus merely on assembly, testing, and packaging, India walks into a high-investment, low-yield trap



NISHANT SAHDEV

India is pouring concrete in Odisha, but the rules for what goes inside those factories are redrafted in Washington. While the recent inauguration of domestic packaging facilities is a legitimate win for job creation, celebration is justified but complacency is not. While bilateral frameworks like the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) are sold to Indian institutional investors as a triumph, the numbers tell a harsher story.

In February, Washington imposed a uniform 10 per cent tariff. In March, the USTR launched aggressive Section 301 investigations into industrial capacities across 16 economies. These are not accidents of diplomacy. They are the new baseline of American trade policy, which is growing highly protectionist. India is building the physical hardware for the future, but the US holds the rules for how that hardware can be used. We are building a house on a rented foundation.

New Delhi suffers from the assumption of linear progress. Policymakers believe geopolitical alignment with the US guarantees technology transfers, which fuels manufacturing, ending in export dominance.

This ignores how modern supply chains actually work. Trade policy today is a highly volatile market. If a domestic facility's viability can be erased overnight by a sudden pivot in foreign export controls, it is not an independent Indian asset. It is a leveraged project dependent on external permission.

THE PACKAGING TRAP

Washington's playbook in the Indo-Pacific is economically rational: onshore the high-margin, intellectually rigorous work of chip design and AI research, and outsource the lower-margin, ecologically demanding labour of assembly, testing, and packaging (ATP) to partner nations.

Look at the underlying economics. In the global semiconductor value chain, fabless design and core intellectual property capture nearly 50 per cent of the industry's total profit. Assembly and packaging yield less than 10 per cent. By focusing state incentives primarily on ATP and legacy manufacturing, India walks into a high-investment, low-yield trap.

A fab without design capability is a factory with rent to pay. The 3D Glass Solutions partnership in Odisha creates vital employment, but it cannot be the



ACT NOW. India must aggressively scale up its chip design linked incentives GETTY IMAGES

final destination. Without a corresponding surge in indigenous chip design and intellectual property ownership, India will remain a highly capable subcontractor.

This is the Silicon Shackle: achieving the status of being physically indispensable to the global supply chain, while remaining fundamentally dependent on the original architect. If India owns the building but not the operating system, sovereignty is cosmetic.

THE TOKEN TAX

This dependency extends into the digital sphere. A new zone of influence is being drawn by the US Department of Commerce that prioritises American technological hegemony over global market access.

Under these rules, acquiring the compute-dense GPUs (graphics processing units) necessary for India's 10,000-chip National AI Mission requires navigating National Validated End-User (NVEU) authorisations. For Indian data centres, these mandatory audits act as a silent embargo. They delay time-to-market by months. India subsidises the power and constructs the data centres, but the computing power humming inside them remains audited and overseen by a foreign capital.

India is building the physical hardware for the future, but the US holds the rules for how that hardware can be used. We are building a house on a rented foundation

Compute dependence is the new oil dependence. Furthermore, we must confront the hidden economic drain of our current AI ecosystem. Over 80 per cent of Indian AI startups today build their applications on top of US-hosted, proprietary foundational models. This creates a perpetual Token Tax. Every time an Indian enterprise utilises an American API to process a prompt or analyse data, a micro-payment of capital — and crucially, behavioural data — flows outward.

India's electronics import bill is already projected to cross a staggering \$120 billion by the end of this fiscal cycle. Now, factor in the cost of artificial intelligence. A single cluster of top-tier Nvidia GPUs costs tens of millions of dollars, and Indian enterprises are currently forced to rent this compute power by the hour from American hyperscalers. If we do not cultivate our own foundational model weights, we will add a crippling digital trade deficit to that ledger. We risk becoming a vast workforce of diligent prompt engineers rather than the architects of original systems.

THE CLOSING WINDOW

Historically, India's greatest leverage in technology negotiations has been its demographic scale. We represent the largest open data market in the world, processing over 13 billion digital public infrastructure transactions every single month. Global AI giants have extracted this data to train their models for free.

This is where India should worry. The frontier of artificial intelligence is moving away from scraping raw human data. The next generation of models increasingly relies on synthetic data — data autonomously generated by

algorithms training themselves. As this happens, our demographic advantage will precipitously diminish. Once algorithms no longer need our data to become smarter, our primary bargaining chip disappears.

We must urgently enforce a Data-for-Tech framework. If foreign entities wish to utilise the high-quality datasets generated by the Indian populace, they must be compelled to provide more than localised software services. They must share the underlying blueprints: the model weights and the source code. Access to our digital market must be priced as a high-value geopolitical trade.

A POLICY BLUEPRINT

If India wants to transition from diplomatic optimism to hard-headed execution, it must adopt an uncompromising approach:

A sovereign GPU reserve: India must establish a state-backed stockpile of high-end compute. This requires unlocking institutional capital to secure long-term, non-revocable licences for cutting-edge hardware, insulating domestic startups from sudden export control shocks.

IP co-development mandates: Any foreign firm receiving taxpayer-funded incentives under the India Semiconductor Mission must be legally required to enter into binding IP co-development agreements with Indian entities. We need the design blueprints, not just the assembly instructions.

Targeted chip design scaling: India must aggressively scale up its Design Linked Incentives (DLIs), offering massive R&D tax credits specifically for fabless chip design firms. The objective is clear: own the intellectual architecture of the chips we are currently paying to package.

The 'Indi-LLM' initiative: We require a heavily funded national mission to build foundational models trained explicitly on Indian languages and legal frameworks, with the core weights stored domestically. This guarantees that if external APIs are ever restricted, India's digital nervous system continues to function.

The global technological order is currently being recalibrated. The margin for error is zero. To move beyond the role of a diligent subcontractor, India must recognise that true autonomy is the product of calculated hedging and aggressive IP ownership. We must ensure that when we build for the future, we are building on ground that we unquestionably control.

The writer is a physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a columnist on AI, infrastructure, and global systems

Why Ebola is turning into a public health emergency

Unlike previous outbreaks, this one, caused by the Bundibugyo virus, has no approved vaccines or therapeutics

bl.explainer

PT Jyothi Datta

The outbreak of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda resulted in the World Health Organization (WHO) calling it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) — the highest level of alarm from the UN health agency. Ebola's outbreak comes even as the Covid-19 pandemic remains a recent memory.

What do we know of Ebola disease?

Three different viruses, according to the WHO, are known to cause Ebola disease outbreaks — namely, Ebola virus, Sudan virus and Bundibugyo virus. The disease is severe, often fatal in humans — with the average case fatality rate being around 50 per cent. First reports of the Ebola disease are the two simultaneous outbreaks from 1976 — the Sudan virus disease in what is now South Sudan; and the Ebola virus disease in DRC. The latter occurred in a village near the Ebola River, thus the name.

International health administrators are worried at the speed of the spread,

exacerbated by, among other things, weak health infrastructure, reduced US funding and conflict in some regions. According to the WHO, as of May 21, 82 cases were confirmed in DRC, the ground-zero of the Ebola outbreak, with seven confirmed deaths. There are almost 750 suspected cases and 177 suspected deaths. Uganda reported two confirmed cases in people who travelled from DRC, with one death, the health agency said.

How does the Ebola virus spread?

The zoonotic virus (from an animal) spreads between people through direct contact — from broken skin or mucous membranes; blood or body fluids of a sick person or one who has died from Ebola disease; from objects or surfaces that have been contaminated with body fluids (like blood etc). Healthcare workers often get infected while treating patients with Ebola — if infection control measures are inadequate.

People cannot transmit the virus before they have symptoms, but they remain infectious as long as their blood contains the virus. As a result, burial ceremonies involving direct contact with the body of a person who has died



WORRISOME. The speed and spread of the virus REUTERS

can also contribute to the transmission of Ebola disease, the WHO said.

What does the PHEIC mean, does it mean the world faces another pandemic?

On May 17, 2026, the WHO said the Ebola disease caused by the Bundibugyo virus in DRC and Uganda constitutes a PHEIC, but stopped short of calling it a global pandemic, as it did not meet the criteria of the International Health Regulations (2005). The definition calls for an international coordinated response, to an outbreak presently reported locally in Africa.

Has India reported Ebola in the past, is the country at risk?

India has not reported an Ebola case this time, or during previous outbreaks, said Union Health Ministry representatives.

What measures is the Indian government taking?

The Centre, on Sunday, urged citizens to avoid non-essential travel to Ebola-hit regions. This follows an earlier advisory calling for the screening of travellers from these high-risk regions. Passengers showing symptoms even 21 days after travel have been asked to contact local health authorities.

What are the symptoms and treatment?

Symptoms include fever, fatigue, muscle pain, headache and sore throat. It can be followed by vomiting, diarrhoea, rash, internal and external bleeding.

The WHO chief recently said, unlike previous Ebola outbreaks, caused by Zaire virus, this outbreak from the Bundibugyo virus has no approved vaccines or therapeutics. Those infected are isolated and given supportive treatment to address the symptoms.

BELOW THE LINE



Timing matters

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was conferred the prestigious Agricola medal by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) last week. The medal was awarded for demonstrating "exceptional commitment to eradicating hunger,

reducing poverty, and ensuring global food security and nutrition". The late Manmohan Singh was similarly awarded in 2008 for spurring agricultural development and reducing hunger and poverty in India. A little bird wonders about the timing of the award. Is it in preparation of a tough time ahead for the agriculture sector, with wheat, rice and corn production projected to fall? Is the FAO looking to India to tide any hunger or food security crisis in the least developed countries due to the ongoing Iran war and the evolving El Nino weather? It's something only the FAO can answer.

Ministers turn jittery

The recent Council of Ministers meeting seems to have left quite a few ministers jittery. During a performance review presentation by the Cabinet Secretary in the presence of Narendra Modi, one slide apparently drew unusual attention. It was about ranking of ministers based on the number of files pending with them for over a month. The bureaucratic equivalent of "naming and shaming", as some described it, has since triggered a flurry of activity across ministries. One minister, who figured near the top of the list with more than 35 files pending beyond 30 days, some for

over 50 days, reportedly returned red-faced and immediately summoned senior officials for a review meeting. Officers were told to ensure all background notes and inputs are placed before him quickly so decisions can be expedited. The sudden burst of urgency, however, amused some insiders. "If every file needs a presentation before disposal, then the delay is intentional, not natural," quipped one official. **'Son Rise' in AP?** Will there be a "son's rise" in Andhra Pradesh politics? The buzz is growing ahead of the Telugu Desam Party's (TDP) Maha Nadu later this month. Nara Lokesh, son of Chief Minister N

Chandrababu Naidu, has steadily emerged as a key face of the NDA government in the State — handling IT and HRD while also spearheading investment outreach, including the marquee Google data centre project in Visakhapatnam. Naidu recently added to the speculation by saying Lokesh deserved "bigger responsibilities". With Lokesh's political stock rising, Andhra Pradesh political circles are now asking: Is Naidu preparing for a larger national role in the NDA while gradually handing over the State's reins to his son? This is now a million-dollar question. **Our Bureaus**

A cricket tour with a fan

An endearing personal account of a spectator

BOOK REVIEW.

S Girdhar

I picked up *My Summer of Cricket* by Nikhil Kulkarni — a kind of personal diary, recounting a fan's experience of watching a Test series in the stadiums — with a sense of intrigue. For the book is about watching India's doleful series that we lost 3-1 to Australia in 2024-25. Now, that takes courage, for who would want to write about a series where India were outplayed in every other Test?

It is a slim book and covers the author's travels and experiences of the last three Tests of the series at Brisbane, Melbourne, and his home-town Sydney. This is a cricket lover's diary; his awe, wonderment, and happiness at watching the games from the ground; it is an account of a person who savours what the cities have to offer outside his cricket viewing time.

THIS ONE IS DIFFERENT

For those who might think of Bharat Sundareshan's book on India's fairytale series win in 2020-21 (*The MiracleMakers: India's Greatest Epic*) or Rahul Bhattacharya's book on India's first ever win in Pakistan (*Pundits from Pakistan: On Tour with India 2003-04*), please know this one is different.

Those books, we read, to enjoy the first-hand analysis and experiences, available only to journalists who travel with the team. In *The Summer of Cricket*, Nikhil Kulkarni, feels, thinks, and expresses himself as a spectator in the stands. It's written like a personal diary, sharing from his life as much as from the cricket he is watching.

It is an endearing memoir. Though initially there are places where Kulkarni, in his eagerness to share everything, loses the reader's attention. But to his credit he quickly pulls back the reader with a fun fact, a droll anecdote or a deft turn of phrase. The confidence and assurance in the writing rise with every chapter.

Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney are sandwiched between a warm-up chapter called "The Run-Up" about the author's early memories (from the times of Sachin as a 16-year-old prodigy) and the concluding chapters, titled "The Game Continues" and "Postscript". In the concluding chapters (in fact from Melbourne) he is a batter in form and full flow.

His account of the MCG and



Title: My Summer of Cricket: Three Tests, One Fan and Decades of Stories
Author: Nikhil Kulkarni
Publisher: Notion Press
Price: ₹269

Melbourne city is lovely. His description of the ground, its facilities, the uniquely wonderful experience of watching a game here are written as though he is whistling a joyful tune while typing. Be it a day among the boisterous Bay12 or a day in the P20 stand, with a spectacular view behind the bowler's arm, our man lives every moment of the dream. The Boxing Day Test at MCG came after Gabba, so Kulkarni must write about Gabba and Brisbane before serenading us through Melbourne.

While he is gentle on Gabba and Brisbane, the ground could clearly do with some improvement. It also did not help, that much of the game at the Gabba was washed out. That he had the same dinner (a dish called Laksa) on all five days of the Test tells us he found Brisbane boring. When he writes about MCG and Gabba, it is with the wonderment of a person watching his first Test. Naughty man, for when he comes to Sydney, his home-town, for the final Test, we realise, he is actually a seasoned spectator, having been many times to the SCG.

NIMBLE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Through the book, one sees, how much he packs into each day. Our author is alert, agile, extremely nimble on social media; he is an active and valuable member of the Australia India Youth Dialogue and such forums. He loves meeting people and it is all these attributes that enable him to work up such a whirlwind of connections and interactions around and beyond the game.

The reviewer, one of the earliest members of Azim Premji Foundation, is the co-author of 'Mid-wicket Tales: A Century and More of Cricket' and 'From Mumbai to Durban: India's Greatest Tests.'

Building a business sans VC money

R Narasimhan's book is a useful manual for first-time entrepreneurs looking to create thriving companies

BOOK REVIEW.

Penelope MacRae

Books about startups that become overnight tech unicorns are a dime a dozen on business shelves. But *Building India's Upstarts* by R Narasimhan is an entirely different breed of guide, a how-to manual to creating businesses that opt for steady growth and can still win big. It offers a clear, step-by-step account to first-time entrepreneurs of what it takes to build a company without venture capital that survives, thrives and can eventually be sold.

Narasimhan has engineering degrees from IIT Madras and Purdue, and a management degree from the Haas School at UC Berkeley. The book serves in part as a memoir and in part as a textbook. The title itself is a play on words: not "startups" in the Silicon Valley sense, but "upstarts" — entrepreneurs building their way to success brick by brick. For readers who tend to zone out over detailed passages, he has thoughtfully included a summary of key takeaways at the end of each chapter.

After a solid career in the US with multinationals like Yahoo, Logitech and PricewaterhouseCoopers, he realised he did not want to remain a manager in a global corporation. Instead, he wanted to build something of his own. He returned to India and chose the decidedly unglamorous world of logistics, convinced that the fundamentals of intracity commercial transportation were fragmented — even broken — and ripe for change.

Starting with around ₹50 lakh in savings, Narasimhan spent over a decade building a national company that employed thousands before eventually

selling it to Delhivery, one of India's largest logistics and supply chain companies.

BUILDING ON SMALL WINS

What makes his highly readable account particularly useful for first-time entrepreneurs is that Narasimhan had to "bootstrap" his way to success, learning from mistakes and building steadily on small wins.

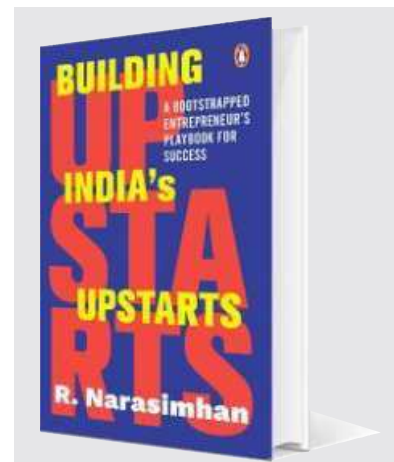
"As a novice founder with no background in entrepreneurship, little background in my chosen sector of logistics and no experience working in India, I had to learn the ropes from the ground up," he writes.

He deliberately chose a traditional sector with modest capital requirements, where customers understand what they are buying and producers have clarity on demand, pricing and profitability. Logistics was his entry point, but he also points to sectors like food, healthcare and retail as fertile ground, given India's persistent supply constraints and fast-expanding market with the country's 1.45-billion population.

He set up in Chennai, where he had cultural familiarity, language comfort and family support, and where he did not need large amounts of capital to begin.

From the outset, his goal was not to burn through investor capital and build a hyperscale startup chasing rapid market dominance. Instead, he focused on creating a sustainable, profitable business that could grow steadily without the pressure of delivering quick returns.

He also made the conscious decision to remain a solo founder rather than bring in an equity partner, choosing instead to hire experienced professionals to build his team and scale the business. Being an entrepreneur, he argues, is "all about trusting people beyond yourself to do things that you



Title: Building India's Upstarts: A Bootstrapped Entrepreneur's Playbook for Success
Author: R Narasimhan
Publisher: Penguin Business
Price: ₹499

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Narasimhan is a successful entrepreneur who bootstrapped, built and sold a national logistics business in India that employed thousands of people

cannot do alone. Control is illusionary, and good faith in your colleagues is critical for success."

He was wary, too, of the risks that arise when co-founders fall out, citing Harvard Business School professor Noam Wasserman's finding that 65 per cent of startups collapse due to such disagreements.

So what underpins his success? A firm rejection of short-term, *jugaad*-style fixes, and a commitment instead to

building a "culture of process consistency". His operating mantra is "product-value-fit", which means staying laser-focused on what customers are willing to pay for, while steadily improving processes and adopting technology incrementally to enhance competitiveness and profitability.

Narasimhan points to companies like Marico, Haldiram's and Agarwal Packers and Movers as examples of businesses that grew steadily in both scale and value over time.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

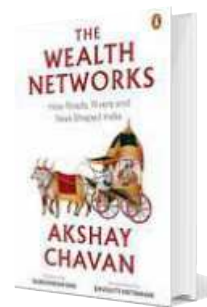
He walks readers through the mechanics of building a business in India: managing cash flow, expanding services, navigating taxation and regulation, and building teams. One of his clearest warnings is to expect the unexpected. In the early years, he faced crises that could easily have sunk the company — a lost truck, a flooded warehouse, even an employee who stole customer goods — but managed to work through each setback.

He also stresses that entrepreneurs do not need to be workaholics. There is limited productivity a founder can sustain beyond eight hours a day over the long term. As Marc Randolph, Netflix's co-founder, has observed: "You don't lose the deal at 2 am because you didn't check the fonts. You lost it four weeks ago when you didn't get the fundamentals right."

Ultimately, having nurtured his company from infancy to scale, Narasimhan concluded that his mission was accomplished. To take the business forward, he decided the best course was to sell it to the right corporate custodian that could expand its footprint. As he puts it, the upstart had grown up — and "it was time for it to step into bigger shoes".

The reviewer is a former Reuters correspondent who writes on business

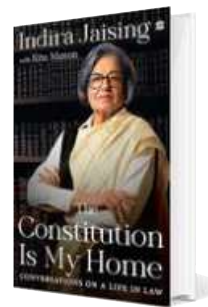
NEW READS.



Title: The Wealth Networks: How Roads, Rivers, and Seas Shaped India
Author: Akshay Chavan

Publisher: Penguin Business

The book offers a different way of seeing history. Once you notice the patterns, the past and the present begin to look different



Title: The Constitution Is My Home: Conversations on a Life in Law
Authors: Indira Jaising and Ritu Menon

Publisher: HarperCollins India

The book is both a vital record of resistance and a call to hold fast to the republic's founding promises



Title: Bringing the Cheetah Back to India: How Diplomacy Made Conservation's Big Mission Possible
Author: Prashant Agrawal

Publisher: Hachette India

The book for the first time narrates the human drama behind one of conservation's most ambitious experiments

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 25, 2006

Reliance eyes cane processing

Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) is slated to make a presentation before the Union Agriculture Minister, Mr Sharad Pawar, on its proposed foray into sugarcane processing. The company is planning to set up three units, each with capacity to crush over 10,000 tonnes of cane per day, in Maharashtra. Unlike normal sugar factories, these would convert the entire sugarcane juice to ethanol.

Dishman to buy Swiss co Solutia's unit

The Ahmedabad-based Dishman Pharmaceuticals & Chemicals Ltd has reached an agreement to buy the pharmaceutical services business of Solutia Inc for a consideration of \$74.5 million (₹340 crore). The acquisition is Dishman's second in Switzerland this year.

EPFO awaits norms to invest in equity markets

Even if the Central Board of Trustees allows it, the EPFO would be constrained from investing in the equity market because the Labour Ministry has still not notified the revised guidelines for EPFO investments. According to rules, the Finance Ministry first issues the notification following which the administrative ministry concerned makes the guidelines applicable.

Short take

An unhealthy workforce cannot deliver growth

Indu Bhushan

Despite progress over the past decades, India continues to carry nearly 20 per cent of the global disease burden while accounting for less than 2 per cent of global healthcare spending. The economic implications of this imbalance are profound. A persistently high disease burden lowers workforce participation, reduces productivity, and imposes an estimated annual opportunity cost of over \$1 trillion on the economy.

The relationship between health and economic performance is well established. Improvements in health-adjusted life expectancy (HALE), the number of years lived in good health, are closely associated with higher income growth. Once HALE crosses a

threshold of around 57-60 years, GDP per capita growth accelerates materially. India has already crossed this threshold, with HALE improving from about 50 years in 1990 to around 61 years today.

But this is not enough. To align with its 2047 ambition, India will need to push HALE closer to 70 years. The growth challenge, therefore, is no longer just about expanding the workforce, it is about improving the quality and productivity of those working years.

POLICY IMBALANCE

A healthier population works more, earns more, and saves more. Households protected from medical shocks invest more productively. At the macro level, these effects translate into stronger and more resilient growth. At the heart of this challenge lies a fundamental policy

imbalance. India's public investment in health remains among the lowest in the world. Government health expenditure is still around 1.3-1.5 per cent of GDP, well below the 2.5 per cent target articulated in the National Health Policy 2017, and significantly lower than levels seen in comparable economies.

The consequences of this underinvestment are visible in the structure of health financing itself. India's total health expenditure stands at about 3.3 per cent of GDP, compared to 6-7 per cent in many peer economies. Even more telling is its composition: out-of-pocket expenditure, though declining, still accounts for around 44 per cent of total health spending, among the highest globally.

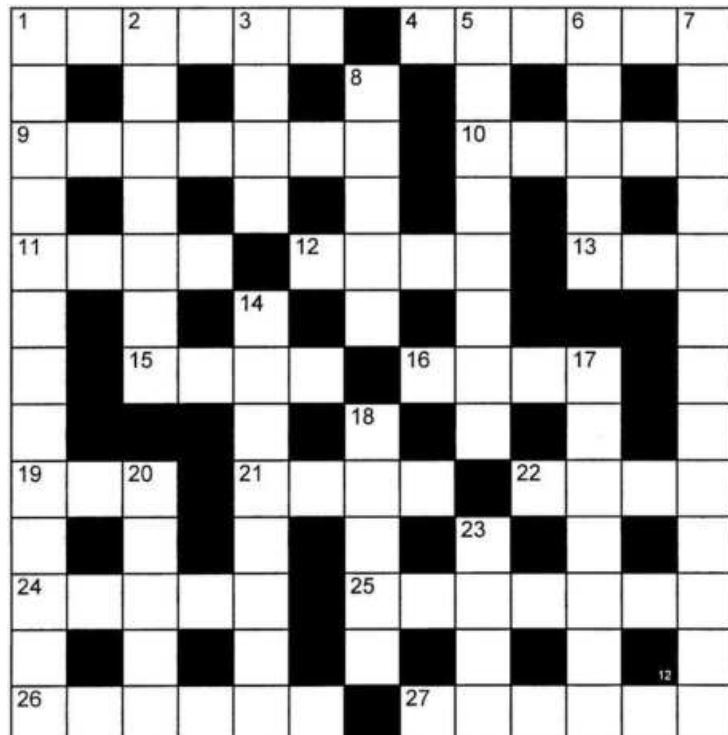
High out-of-pocket costs suppress household consumption, delay care, and

push families into financial distress, thereby dampening aggregate demand and slowing growth. The next phase requires a shift from incremental expansion of access to systemic improvement in outcomes. Estimates suggest that India will need over \$200 billion to address gaps in healthcare infrastructure and service delivery.

Equally important is the prioritisation of primary and preventive care, which offers the highest long-term returns by reducing the burden of disease before it escalates into more complex and costly conditions. This requires sustained public investment, stronger risk pooling through insurance, and a stable policy environment that encourages private investment and innovation.

The writer was founding CEO of Ayushman Bharat

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EASY

ACROSS

- Mean, trashy (6)
- Weighing-device (6)
- Sentimental fiction (7)
- Clear away, dispose of (3,2)
- In a frenzy (4)
- To tumble (4)
- Lug (3)
- Tidy, trim (4)
- Record (4)
- Human skill and ingenuity (3)
- Notion (4)
- A tangle in hair (4)
- Visible part of tooth (5)
- Small flute (7)
- Epistle (6)
- Vipers (6)

DOWN

- Essentially a part (4,3,6)
- Personal satire (7)
- To telephone (4)
- To grouse (8)
- To fall from grace (5)
- Believing in omens, etc (13)
- An award (5)
- Ability to endure suffering, delay etc (8)
- Give solace or comfort to (7)
- Speed and rhythm (mus) (5)
- Rainbow fish (5)
- Hallucinatory drug (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Party of about fifty is perhaps not worth considering (6)
- They weigh the thin plates of fish (6)
- Fiction more can turn to (7)
- Dispose of the modus operandi young dog uses (3,2)
- Running wild, a donkey loses its tail (4)
- The autumnal collapse (4)
- There's a bit of corn in the arrangement (3)
- Looks trim without water being added to it (4)
- Record is kept in Washington location (4)
- Occult knowledge of painting (3)
- It occurs to one if a die is cast (4)
- A favour that's not to be heard of (4)
- To hit him on the head can make a man a king (5)
- Small Italian wind instrument (7)
- Cee for communication, perhaps (6)
- Perhaps dreads their bite, which is venomous (6)

DOWN

- It is essentially a piece of apparel doctor can't make up (4,3,6)
- Satirise one man playing polo? (7)
- The circle is squared where boxing is concerned (4)
- Grumble about policeman abandoned by the East (8)
- A failure in memory shows up in one's pals (5)
- Believing in omens, use spirits out of order (13)
- Gong gets first diners in to their repast (5)
- Solitaire may be got with willingness to wait (8)
- Organist's key-desk may bring one some comfort (7)
- The pace of piece will rise: use delaying tactics (5)
- Tutor may turn into interfering old woman (5)
- Drug partly eradicated as it turns up (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2685

ACROSS 1. Succinct 7. Drive 8. Soldier 9. Nestled 10. Eros 12. Thunder 14. Psychic 17. Stop 18. Inhuman 21. Vintage 22. Tower 23. Assented


DOWN 1. System 2. Colloquy 3. Ibis 4. Cornet 5. Will 6. Lender 7. Dispute 11. Scheme 13. Distract 14. Plinth 15. Canvas 16. Append 19. Howl 20. Once


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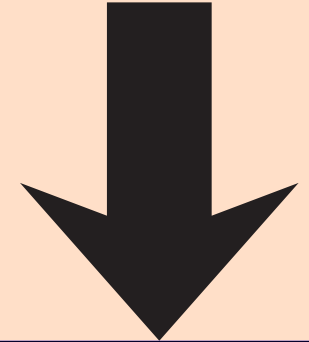
Indian Newspaper

- 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
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The rupee problem this time is different. The solution must be, too



SAJJID Z CHINOZ

THREE MONTHS into the West Asia conflict, India has done well to avoid widespread energy shortages. Further, the burden-sharing of higher energy prices between the public and private sectors has begun. Retail prices are being raised, but will need to be increased further to elicit the necessary behavioural response from households and firms.

Instead, the key pressure point remains the balance of payments (BoP) and the rupee. But there are two unique elements this time.

First, pressures have long pre-dated the West Asia conflict. For the first time in decades, the BoP has been in deficit for two consecutive years, and we are on course for a third successive deficit. This suggests a more chronic underlying phenomenon that needs to be addressed.

Second, pressures are emanating from the capital account, not the current account. In past episodes, there was a prototypical evolution: The current account deficit (CAD) widened and became more dependent on fickle capital inflows to finance it, which ultimately dried up. This put pressure on the rupee and necessitated compressing the CAD. This episode is very different. The current account deficit has remained very benign — averaging less than 1 per cent of GDP over the last three years. Instead, pressures have been driven squarely by the capital account. Capital inflows — which used to average 2.5 per cent of GDP pre-pandemic — have consistently slowed since 2023, completely dried up in 2025 and have exerted pressure on the rupee.

Making the analytical distinction between the capital and current account as the source of pressures is crucial to formulating the right response.

In turn, a collapse in FDI is at the heart of the capital flow story, with net FDI, which used to average 1.5 per cent, completely drying up since 2024. What's driving this? Between 2020 and 2025, India's net FDI has been strongly correlated with US 10-year treasuries — a proxy for global financial conditions. When yields are low, India tends to get a gush of FDI; when yields have hardened — as in the last two years — net FDI has completely dried up. Recall, FDI is typically governed by both (global) "push" and (country-specific) "pull-factors." India's FDI has largely been governed by push factors since 2010. The last time it was driven by India-specific pull-factors was in 2005-10 when a strong corporate capex cycle catalysed FDI. In contrast, Vietnam has consistently been able to attract above 4 per cent of GDP in FDI irrespective of global financial conditions.

Why does this matter? Because global financial conditions are likely to remain tight. Sticky inflation and a precarious fiscal situation are likely to keep US yields elevated. Meanwhile, India's CAD is on course to more than double because of the West Asia conflict. Even if the Strait of Hormuz opens immediately, it is estimated crude prices will remain in triple digits all year as supply takes a while to normalise while demand remains strong to replenish inventories. If so, this would translate into India's CAD widening close to \$100 billion this fiscal. The combination of higher bond yields and higher crude prices risks a pincer-like effect on the BoP.

The genesis of the problem, however, is a sustained slowing of capital flows, amplified only recently by the terms-of-trade shock from higher energy prices. This must inform the policy response.

The first line of defence is to let

the rupee depreciate — as policymakers have correctly done — to act as a shock absorber. A weaker rupee will disincentivise imports, improve export competitiveness and thereby simultaneously narrow the CAD and boost domestic activity ("expenditure switching"). Theoretically, too, a sharp slowdown in FDI compounded by a large negative terms-of-trade shock from crude prices would argue for a much more depreciated equilibrium exchange rate.

But while rupee depreciation is a necessary condition, will it be sufficient? In theory, a weaker rupee acts as an automatic stabiliser on the capital account, too, because if it is perceived to have overshoot, foreign capital should be attracted back. But what does overshooting mean in the current environment? To what extent will the rupee need to depreciate — if it is the only instrument deployed — to close a large BoP gap? That is the question foreign investors are grappling with, and it's not clear that any value of the rupee will be seen as being oversold, given the perceived size of the BoP gap.

In fact, if the rupee depreciates too rapidly, it increases the incentives for foreigners to hedge their existing stock of assets in India (FPI, ECBs, FDI), compounding BoP pressures. That hedging puts more pressure on the rupee, further increasing the desire to hedge, thereby creating a self-fulfilling spiral — signs of which have emerged. This risks pushing the rupee far away from its fundamentals and warrants a circuit breaker to restore order.

That circuit breaker should be foreign capital augmentation measures. The objective must be to attract a large enough quantum of near-term capital inflows across multiple avenues — even if it in-

volves a subsidised swap — to change exporter, importer and investor behaviour, and prevent a destabilising overshooting of the rupee.

A weaker rupee and an influx of capital should hopefully stem the tide. If not, "expenditure compression" — tighter fiscal and monetary policy — may be needed, but only as a last resort. Back in 2013, when the rupee was under pressure, it was clear the economy was overheating, and the obvious response was to tighten fiscal and monetary policy to narrow the CAD. The current context is very different: Core inflation has averaged just 2-3 per cent in recent years, suggesting the existence of slack, and we are still awaiting a private capex cycle that is likely to be further delayed amidst heightened geopolitical uncertainty. In this environment, fiscal compression that accommodates higher fuel and fertiliser subsidies by cannibalising public capex risks making policy pro-cyclical.

It's important to realise that this BoP episode is different. The pressure point is the capital account, not the current account. This will require both a weaker rupee and foreign capital augmentation measures. Simply squeezing the current account through demand compression can, in fact, be counterproductive by slowing growth and turning off growth-sensitive capital inflows.

More generally, the biggest lesson India must draw from this episode is that attracting strong and stable FDI needs to be an urgent imperative — both for macro stability and growth. This will require sustained economic reform that improves India's structural competitiveness. There is no escaping that imperative.

The writer is head of Asia Economics at J.P. Morgan. Views are personal

The pressure point is the capital account. This will require both a weaker rupee and foreign capital augmentation measures. Squeezing the current account through demand compression can be counterproductive

An election far away, a crisis at home, lessons in aftermath



GARIMA AGARWAL

THE DUST has only just begun to settle on the West Bengal election. This poll, which saw historic voter turnout and a new mandate, was being tracked by another unlikely stakeholder — the urban elite. The typical members of this group, like you or me, live in gated societies in metros like Delhi NCR or Bengaluru and are likely amongst the top 1 per cent earners in the country. These high-powered lives are held together by a steady supply of support services from migrant workers, many of whom are from West Bengal and, therefore, returned home to vote in a crucial election.

Domestic staff — maids, cooks, drivers, and nannies — cater to the hyper-personalised needs of employers who have rarely attempted such tasks themselves. Their absence triggered a "crisis" in urban homes. Who had the time to discuss the BJP vs Didi contest, given the more immediate problems of JPB (*ghaadu-pochha-bartan*) without your *didid*? Instagram reels set to songs of labour struggles showed young couples buckling under the pressure of mundane chores. About a month ago, a popular reel showed a Bengali cook asking his (non-Bengali) employer for leave to go home and vote. The visibly distressed employer asked what the real need to travel was and generously suggested time off during Diwali instead.

This class divide is not new and reflects in the labour contract for domestic work — low pay, a seven-day week, unclear scope of work, and general lack of respect. Workers negotiate terms individually with multiple employers. An interesting development is the emergence of app-based gig platforms. For Rs 100-150 an hour, these apps allow customers to book well-trained professionals for a miscellany of household tasks. Professionals arrive at the designated time in uniforms, request an OTP to start a timer on their phones, wear aprons, and get to work. In return for standardised services and predictable supply, customers are now pushed to respect contractual boundaries. Extra time and tasks are now clearly priced. The entry of an organised third-party may give workers real bargaining power and dignity. When I first used this service in February,

I could book services instantly. I was matched with Safina (name changed), an excellent worker, incidentally also from Bengal. I would plan my housework around her availability and even offered her a regular job. She refused, saying she preferred the app for better pay and flexible hours. When my regular help left for the elections, I turned to the apps again. Safina was unavailable, as were many others. I had to constantly switch between platforms to find one elusive slot, even days later, only to have last-minute delays. The likely cause was the sharp decline in labour supply from Bengali migrants. As economic theory would predict, this negative shock to supply pushed up wages. Hourly app rates increased, and even traditional contracts became costlier. Is this wage revision permanent, or will the market snap back as labour supply stabilises? The scale of disruption caused by an entirely anticipated event has again exposed how precarious the urban informal labour market really is.

The app-based outside option may have positive spillover effects on traditional contracts and alter labour-market norms. It remains to be seen, however, whether and how much workers will benefit. During the election crunch, many app-based domestic workers likely clocked 10-11-hour days. Customers tend to extract the most value for booked hours, but who is tracking the toll on the worker? This worrying commodification of human labour is a product of the same mindset that has perpetuated such lopsided work arrangements in the first place.

Many of us first cleaned or cooked for ourselves during the Covid lockdown or during a stint abroad where labour costs might have been prohibitive. While we talked about our exhaustion for months, we don't seem to remember that as employers. Perhaps it is time to think afresh about dignity and respect for people who provide essential services, create fairer contracts that recognise human effort, and maybe also build these skills for ourselves. Something is not right if a state election thousands of kilometres away can bring our households to a halt.

The writer is assistant professor of Economics at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru

The burden and trap of being a 'good woman'



RINKU GHOSH

AMID ALL the haze around the death of Twisha Sharma, her last text, "I am trapped bro", is the headline that raises a larger question. Why can't an educated, capable, empowered, urban woman exit a marriage easily, even when she is unhappy or emotionally unsafe?

The one-line message articulates the insecurity that shrouds independent thinking in young women, especially in a case like Twisha's, where girl meets boy not in a meet-cute but on an app, where both have consciously ticked off boxes, where there is no social mismatch or conflict. That's because for all the spiel about modern marriage as one of companionship, equality and independence, the institution itself remains deeply conservative in its expectations of women. Even in nuclear double-income couples, women are unwittingly carrying the weight of role-playing. Call this a social dowry if you will — an uncoded playbook of what a young woman can bring to the table of family life.

A man-woman relationship is seldom allowed to evolve on its own dynamic once a marriage is finalised, even when a live-in is accepted. It becomes a social structure to be endured with patience. For women conditioned by marital roles played by their mothers and grandmothers, adjustment comes more easily than self-assertion and autonomy. There is also the game of emotional one-upmanship and "mother knows best" tussle between generations of women that complicates matters. This is more manipulative than well-meaning. Meant as a sweet advisory from one householder to the next, it hides an internecine war for attention and relevance for the son/husband. The fact that society continues to define a good mother or a good daughter by how they perpetuate a man's centrality in their lives is the biggest hurdle. If the man is not the prized trophy worthy of attention, then the woman is either a bad mother, a bad wife, a rebel, or a maverick. It's the worst when the woman does not want a child, simply because she feels she isn't cut out to be a mother and is not meant to exist solely for the continuity of the human race.

Young women feel further trapped by the lack of a supportive ecosystem, cornered by social pressure, emotional manipulation, fear of humiliating their parents, the stigma attached to divorce and sometimes by the sheer exhaustion of starting out again. Tolerating discomfort and the status quo suddenly seems the lesser evil. That's why, for all the semblance of independence, they reconcile themselves to societal surveillance.

This subtle tension between privacy and social legitimacy is the reason that the most carefree woman is actually withdrawing into herself and erasing her individuality. Sadly, this silence itself is culturally rewarded, not her ambition or talent. As author Alice Walker wrote, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." Women may be visibly vocal but chained by institutions that have not evolved to listen to them.

The writer is senior associate editor, The Indian Express. rinku.ghosh@expressindia.com

For women conditioned by marital roles played by their mothers and grandmothers, adjustment comes easier than self-assertion and autonomy

The app-based outside option may have positive spillover effects on traditional contracts and alter labour-market norms. It remains to be seen, however, whether and how much workers will benefit

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



40 YEARS AGO

May 25, 1986



Raid on Amritsar gurdwara

THE PUNJAB Police rounded up 12 suspected terrorists from a gurdwara in Amritsar and one extremist was arrested near Rajasansi Airport, about 15 km from the city. Following a tip-off, a police party rounded up the suspects hiding in Gurdwara Shaheedan. The district superintendent of police, S S Virk, said the police were still verifying the antecedents of those arrested.

Kerala impasse resolved

WHAT HAD come to be derisively described as the Pillai problem plaguing Kerala politics for close to a year has at long last been resolved with Chief Minister K

Karunakaran's decision to reinstate Kerala Congress leader R Balakrishna Pillai as a minister. Pillai, who has been out of power for over 11 months following a controversy over his alleged call for a Punjab-type agitation in Kerala, is being sworn in again as a minister on May 25.

Firing in Goa, CRPF moves in

A BATTALION of the Central Reserve Police is arriving in Panaji on May 25 to assist the Goa Police in the maintenance of law and order in the wake of renewed violence by Konkani supporters. The Goa collector and district magistrate, Shakti Sinha, told a press conference that the entire reserve police force and home guards

had also been asked to be ready to face any situation.

US, UK veto move on Pretoria

THE UNITED STATES and Britain have vetoed a Security Council resolution censoring South Africa for its raids on three Black-ruled neighbours because it included a call for sanctions. France abstained from voting while the other 12 members voted for the draft resolution prepared by Congo, Ghana, Madagascar, Trinidad and Tobago and the UAE. Discussions between the sponsors and the US and Britain failed to produce a text acceptable to all, despite some changes softening the original language.



India faces a 1991 moment: It needs to reform, relook at subsidies



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI
AND RITIKA JUNEJA

THE INDIAN rupee continues to weaken against the US dollar. If the RBI does not intervene decisively, the exchange rate could well slide to Rs100 per US dollar. To stabilise the rupee, the RBI may need a war chest of at least \$50–60 billion, and even that would provide only temporary relief. The underlying causes of the crisis lie largely beyond the RBI's control.

The crisis in the Middle East is finally hitting India pretty hard. Energy and fertiliser costs have almost doubled. The recent increase in petrol prices by around Rs 3–4 per litre is only a partial pass-through of global prices. Similar underpricing exists in LPG, LNG, and fertilisers, especially urea. These pressures are likely to widen the fiscal deficit beyond 5 per cent of GDP.

Foreign portfolio investors are losing interest in India and withdrawing their investments. Domestic investors are equally worried and are not coming forward to invest big. The IMD has forecast a strong El Niño. As a result, the Indian economy is losing momentum. Our calculation, based on today's conditions, is that in the current financial year (FY27), India will be lucky to clock 6 per cent GDP growth and contain Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation below 6 per cent. If the Strait of Hormuz remains closed for another three months, GDP growth will fall below 6 per cent, and CPI inflation will shoot above 6 per cent — the upper band of the RBI for inflation control. The RBI will not have much choice but to raise the repo rates soon, triggering the northward movement of fall interest rates. The economy seems to be on the brink of a major crisis. The only rational way



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

to avoid this is to carry out major reforms, similar to those in 1991.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called for austerity measures, and some chief ministers have reportedly travelled on motorcycles, metros and electric cars. Such tokenism does not last long. After returning from his five-country visit, Modi held a meeting with his cabinet colleagues and asked them to carry out reforms that can save resources, especially energy, narrow down the twin deficits of trade and current account, and restore confidence in India's growth story. The technical blueprint of economic reforms is not difficult to prepare, but what is required is the political will to undertake such reforms. The culture of distributing freebies, at the central as well as the state level, is now deeply entrenched. That's the biggest hurdle in carrying out structural reforms. Let us demonstrate with the examples of fertiliser and food subsidies.

Take the case of fertilisers first. India imports anywhere from 20 to 25 per cent of its urea requirements. The last import tender showed that the minimum price of urea's landed cost on the west

The ultimate solution — the real 'brahmastra' — lies in reforming the entire chemical fertiliser subsidy regime by moving towards a direct benefit transfer system on a per-acre basis, integrated with the PM-Kisan scheme

coast would be \$935/tonne. But it is being sold at less than \$70/tonne to farmers. How prudent is this? Let the readers judge. But what we know is that such pricing creates a large arbitrage — a large amount that is being diverted away from agriculture to other industrial uses in India and also smuggled out to neighbouring countries. Bihar is an interesting example. Government data on fertiliser supply and usage reveal a mismatch. While official figures show large quantities of urea, DAP, and MOP being supplied, another set of government data — the Cost of Cultivation surveys used to determine the minimum support prices for major crops — suggests that actual on-farm usage is more than 50 per cent lower than the quantity supplied. The obvious question is: Where does the rest go?

Anyone familiar with Bihar's ground realities knows that the state has long been an easy route for fertiliser diversion into Nepal. Reports from border districts also indicate that subsidised fertilisers are routinely smuggled into Bangladesh. The root cause is the enormous subsidy on urea, which today

covers nearly 90 per cent of its cost.

The fertiliser subsidy bill, budgeted at Rs 1.71 lakh crore for FY27, is almost certain to exceed Rs 2.25 lakh crore and could even touch Rs 2.50 lakh crore. The ultimate solution — the real *brahmastra* — lies in reforming the entire chemical fertiliser subsidy regime by moving towards a direct benefit transfer system on a per-acre basis, integrated with the PM-Kisan scheme. Concerns relating to tenant farmers can be addressed by triangulating different data sets, provided the government gives this reform the same priority it once accorded the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-mobile linkage initiative.

Once this transition is made, fertiliser prices should be left to market forces. That would curb leakages and the smuggling of urea, correct the imbalance in the use of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, and improve nutrient use efficiency. Such reforms could save the government at least Rs 40,000–50,000 crore annually.

If comprehensive reform is politically difficult, the second-best option would be to impose quantitative restrictions on fertiliser sales based on landholding size and the crops being cultivated. If even that proves unfeasible, a third alternative would be to bring urea under the nutrient-based subsidy scheme, raise urea prices gradually, and potentially reduce the prices of phosphatic and potassic fertilisers, while keeping the overall subsidy bill around Rs 2 lakh crore.

A similar issue arises with food subsidies. The food subsidy bill for FY27 is budgeted at Rs 2.28 lakh crore. Yet, if the government claims that extreme poverty has fallen to 5.3 per cent, according to World Bank standards, or around 11 per cent according to NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index, why should free foodgrain continue to be distributed to more than 800 million people? Rationalising the coverage under the scheme or increasing issue prices for those above the poverty line could potentially save another Rs 50,000 crore annually.

Failing to undertake these reforms would reflect not caution, but policy timidity.

Gulati is distinguished professor and Juneja a senior fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

On media, a heavy-handed government, biased rankings



COOMI KAPOOR

THE NORWEGIAN journalist Helle Lyng opened a can of worms by sanctimoniously preaching press freedom and human rights to India. There were several takeaways from the ensuing brouhaha. The Ministry of External Affairs' long-winded discourse on India's history and civilisation in response to the question as to why Norway should trust us simply digressed, unnecessarily making a mountain out of a molehill.

Lyng's query also drew attention to the fact that our articulate PM opts not to field questions from the media, either at home or abroad. Still, that is not exactly a major media freedom issue, as is being made out. Other world leaders also shy away from speaking extempore.

But what rankled many Indians was Lyng piously quoting Reporters Without Borders' 2026 Press Freedom Index, which ranked India a lowly 157th. It's true that standards of press freedom have plummeted of late. Even then, can a report card which places countries such as Burundi, Hong Kong, Singapore, Congo, Nigeria, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Kuwait and Jordan above India be taken seriously? Middle Eastern countries are ruled mostly by despotic monarchs, where a whisper against the government can lead to instant deportation or imprisonment. Indian residents are mortally afraid of even sending a WhatsApp message back home mentioning drone strikes in their neighbourhood. Countries once part of the former Soviet Union, such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, inherited autocratic systems of secret police and detentions — these are not yet dismantled. Business-oriented Singapore views the press more as an arm to enhance nation-building than a medium to question the system.

A safe environment for journalists to work in is one of the key criteria in judging a country's standing. Yet Israel, which according to the Committee to Protect Journalists was responsible for the death of 84 journalists in the line of duty last year, is ranked much higher than India, where the committee lists just one journalist's unnatural death. The United States received a fairly respectable score of 64, though criticisms from some MAGA-

aligned and heartland media outlets of President Donald Trump's erratic and allegedly unconstitutional actions and perceived attempts to enrich his family have been limited. The most trenchant criticism in the US comes from the late-night show comedians. CBS recently ended popular comedian Stephen Colbert's show after 33 years, citing falling ad revenues. Trump publicly rejoiced at Colbert's ouster, reportedly the price for CBS's parent company, Paramount, being safeguarded from facing



trouble at the hands of the government.

Modi detractors who cite India's low rating as a consequence of his dictatorial policies will be disappointed to learn that even prior to the current dispensation, India consistently got low media freedom rankings. In February 2014, India was ranked 140. One assumes that a key indicator of a country's robust press is the plurality of opinions openly expressed on different media platforms. An illustrative example was last year's Operation Sindoor, where there were several voices on just how the four-day war with Pakistan was unfolding, from chest-thumping journalists to cynical publicly aired assessments that the Pakistan-China combine had downed five Rafale jets. Neither extreme position was accurate, but it reflected the wide range of discourse. In Pakistan's military dictatorship, where its most popular leader is still in jail, the media almost unanimously stuck to the government's story that Pakistan was victorious, even though satellite images of bombed military air bases released by India suggested otherwise.

This article is not an endorsement of the Indian government's ham-handed media policy, but simply questions Reporters Without Borders' own biases. Otherwise, why would it elevate military dictatorships and feudal overlords, from countries where popular political opponents and scribes are often jailed, above a functioning democracy, however imperfect? There is, perhaps, a prejudice against nations not in conformity with the outfit's foreign-policy goals, or inherent racism, as well as prejudice against countries with non-Abrahamic religious majorities. The recent narrative of the Cockerroach Janta Party social media account going viral in a day illustrates both India's strength and weakness. The overwhelming support for the post criticising the Chief Justice's comments testifies to the openness of our society. The toxic trolling and the X account being withheld in India — on a government request citing security concerns — reflect the growing danger that India could slip to 157th place even in an unbiased ranking if such heavy-handed actions continue unchecked.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fuel price hikes

THE REPEATED hikes in petrol, diesel and CNG prices is becoming unbearable for ordinary citizens (3rd hike in 9 days: Petrol gets costlier by 87 paise, diesel by 91 paise, ₹₹ May 24). While global crude prices and the Iran conflict may have contributed to the situation, the government and oil companies must find ways to protect consumers from frequent shocks. The strategy of gradual hikes may appear moderate, but the cumulative impact is severe. Public transport, milk and other essential commodities are already becoming costlier. Equally concerning is the role of private retailers allegedly keeping prices higher to divert customers toward public-sector outlets. Such market distortions require close monitoring.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Cockroach power

THE EDITORIAL highlights an intriguing moment where an obiter dictum by the CJI risks delegitimising dissent ('Degree or no degree, let the cockroach be' ₹₹ May 23). Such metaphors shrink democratic space, yet the Cockerroach Janta Party shows how ridicule becomes a response. Limor Shifman in *Memes in Digital Culture* reminds us that memes are a shared cultural shorthand and a form of vernacular creativity. Blocking accounts under a national security legal framework reveals the fragility of free speech. The remedy lies in a democracy that thrives not by silencing cockroaches but by listening to them scurrying across the cracks of power.

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow

VIPS WHO hold exalted positions should show discernment in their choice of words and avoid dehumanising others and themselves in the process ('Degree or no degree, let the cockroach be' ₹₹ May 23). The CJP is generally perceived to be a youth-led protest movement. Gen Z has reason to protest: It has no significant representation or participation in politics. It cannot be dismissed as a gimmick. Time alone will tell what the CJP's impact on Indian politics will be.

G David Milton, Maruthancode



ACHAL AGARWAL, SUBHASH LAKHOTIA, SUNIL MUKHI

RESEARCH INVOLVES original, creative, patient investigations and analyses to generate new knowledge. The findings are typically published in research journals following peer review by experts. Teaching and research at higher educational institutions (HEIs) are symbiotic, although hiring, promotions, awards, funding, etc. are significantly dependent upon research activity.

A higher "rank" encourages students to seek admission at an institution and thus generates greater revenue, and also facilitates enhanced public and private funds. HEIs' academic ranking on national and international platforms relies heavily on the number of research publications and their citation count, which together contribute 30 per cent of points in India's official National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and 50 per cent in the QS World University rankings.

The current quantity-dependent ranking parameters utterly fail to assess the true academic merit of research and teaching. In fact, following Goodhart's law that any measure ceases to be effective once it becomes a target, the current rankings are damaging the country's academic ecosystem.

Careful analysis of India's apparent rise in the global research scenario reflects this damage. In recent years, India has ranked third, behind the US and China, in the number of research publications, but unfortunately stands second in

With enhanced publication and citation counts being targets, institutions push their faculty to publish more. This has promoted the emergence of 'predatory' and 'paper-mill' journals

published papers being retracted for unethical practices. While contributing 5 per cent of global research publications, India accounted for 20 per cent of retractions in 2025. Several institutions securing top ranks have higher retractions for research misconduct. Additionally, numerous "research papers" from India appear in huge numbers in journals of dubious quality. With enhanced publication and citation counts being targets, institutions push their faculty to publish more. This has led to the emergence of "predatory" and "paper-mill" journals, citation cartels and financial incentives for so-called adjunct/visiting faculty or collaborators.

The "Stanford/Elsevier" 2025 list of the world's "top 2 per cent scientists", widely "acclaimed" in India, also reveals serious flaws. It considers publication and citation numbers to be a proxy for research quality. Twelve per cent of Indian researchers in this list have suffered at least one retraction, with one having more than 40. While this list includes 6,000-plus Indian researchers, the "top 1 per cent researchers" list by Clarivate Analytics, which penalises retractions and other misconduct, has just five.

Emphasis on research metrics has staggering financial costs, too. In the misplaced hope of improving research quality, India's public universities spend nearly Rs 2,000 crore annually on research journal subscriptions, besides paying, often to poor-quality journals, huge publication charges. The inclusion of private universities will magnify this amount.

What should be done?

A fair, responsible, transparent and quality-based assessment of individual and institutional research must replace the current rankings on numerical parameters. Rather than total numbers, the quality and genuine impact of a select few papers should be critically assessed. Unethical self-citations (institutional and individual) and retractions for unethical practices must be severely penalised. The recent introduction of a "mild" penalty for retractions by NIRF is a welcome beginning, but more stringent action is essential. Unusually large numbers of publications should be examined for possible "paper-mill" activity.

Data for regular, contractual and visiting/adjunct faculty reported by HEIs need rigorous verification since these numbers are often unethically boosted. Student outcomes (for example, alumni performance) need greater emphasis while assessing teaching quality since HEIs are expected to prepare questioning minds.

India's size and diversity necessitate an autonomous Research Integrity Office to oversee and enforce ethical teaching and research practices. Promotion, identification and recognition of high-quality teaching and research across the academic ecosystem should receive the highest priority so that India's enormous talent effectively takes the country to a truly leading position.

The writers are board members of India Research Watch, which advocates for academic ethics in India. This article is endorsed by the full board

We need an autonomous Research Integrity Office

Between Russia and EU, Delhi's defence rebalancing



GULSHAN SACHDEVA

APART FROM green growth and technology, defence cooperation emerged as an important area of engagement between India and Europe during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and Italy. The adoption of the India-Italy Defence Industrial Roadmap was an especially important development. Earlier, on the margins of the India-EU Summit in January, Delhi signed a Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) with the EU, an integral part of Towards 2030: A Joint India-EU Comprehensive Strategic Agenda.

If implemented well, these pacts can reshape India's defence links with the outside

world, particularly Delhi's long-standing ties with Russia. Reducing India's dependence on Russian defence supplies has also been a stated objective of both the US and Europe.

A major transformation is underway in European security, driven largely by the war in Ukraine, uncertainty over long-term American commitments, and the emergence of domains such as cyber, space, and drone warfare. Europe is returning to classical geopolitics, with a renewed focus on military deterrence. Under the ReArm Europe project (later recast as "Readiness 2030" following objections from Spain and Italy), EU member states are set to invest close to \$1 trillion in defence in the coming years.

The White Paper on European defence asserts that "the moment has come for Europe to rearm". The priority areas identified

by the document include air and missile defence, artillery systems, ammunition and missiles, drone and counter-drone capabilities, military mobility, AI, and the protection of critical infrastructure. Apart from expanding its domestic capabilities, the EU is also strengthening its security partnerships, with a particular focus on countries such as Canada and key Indo-Pacific partners, including Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea.

The India-EU SDP has to be understood in this context. As India has an ambitious

Unless Delhi succeeds in developing robust indigenous defence platforms, India's integration into European defence supply chains is unlikely to be easy

defence indigenisation programme, and its defence exports have now reached around \$4 billion annually, linking its defence industry to Europe seems attractive. However, a significant share of these exports is still driven by co-production and the integration of technologies based on Russian-origin platforms, including systems such as the BrahMos missile, Sukhoi components, and parts and ammunition for the T-90 and T-72 tanks.

In recent years, India has exported artillery shells to a few European countries, some of which were diverted to Ukraine. Russia has expressed concerns, but the issue has largely been managed so far, given the relatively modest scale of such exports. Unless Delhi succeeds in developing robust indigenous defence platforms, gradually reducing its dependence on Russia, India's

integration into European defence supply chains is unlikely to be easy. The White Paper on European defence identifies Russia as an enduring threat to European security.

Buying a few big-ticket items such as Rafale jets from France or submarines from Germany with limited technology transfer is very different from integrating India into European defence supply chains. India's strategy appears to be to skillfully leverage new opportunities with European partners while not abandoning its ties with the Russian defence industry. The task is far more complex than issuing measured statements on Ukraine. Deeper integration of defence industries inevitably requires alignment with wider geopolitical realities.

The writer is professor and Jean Monnet Chair at the Centre for European Studies, JNU

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

● ENVIRONMENT

4-letter word everyone in Delhi needs to know: dust

Beyond smoke and car exhaust, a critical pollutant in the city is toxic dust hiding in plain sight. Common solutions offer limited benefits



SOPHIYA MATHEW

IT IS persistent, it lingers in the air. It is inhaled deep into the lungs, it even enters the bloodstream. And it carries toxic metals that can trigger disease, damage lungs, and raise cancer risk, especially among children.

Meet road dust — the main villain in Delhi's pollution story that is quietly putting your life at risk, every day.

A January 2026 report by a panel of top experts constituted by the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) identified road dust as a major pollution source in Delhi because it acts as "both a primary emission and a persistent source". The panel defined road dust broadly to include airborne dust from roads and shoulders, vehicle movement, dry soil, and road wear. It said poor road surfaces, potholes, broken edges, unpaved stretches, road-tyre-brake wear, and debris falling from the transport of construction and demolition (C&D) material all contribute to the dust load.

The report also underlined the mechanism that makes road dust difficult to control: dust deposited on road surfaces is resuspended by vehicular movement, particularly during dry conditions. This keeps pollution levels elevated even in the absence of active dust-generating activities.

Mohammed Rafiuddin, Programme Lead for Clean Air at the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), said, "Scientifically, road dust is a very different kind of source compared to C&D dust. It is a line source (spread along a corridor), but at a construction site, the dust generated is from a point source." In other words, road dust requires corridor-wide, routine removal and surface management, while construction dust depends on site-level containment and enforcement.

Why it persists

A road-dust committee set up by the CAQM last year said resuspension is driven by continuous dust deposits along road edges and medians, unsuitable road infrastructure design, poor maintenance, and inadequate dust-management practices.

The committee noted that dust from unpaved medians frequently blows onto carriageways. Irrigation practices can further worsen the problem, as thick hose pipes used for watering median and foot-path plantations often spill soil onto roads, which later dries and adds to dust levels. Encroachments and unauthorised parking were also flagged as operational barriers that obstruct cleaning and allow dust to accumulate.

Local roads and secondary streets, the report said, are often excluded from regular maintenance schedules. "Maintenance is

● DELHI'S ROADS CARRY A HIDDEN LOAD

145 KG Approx. amount of loose dust a 1-km road stretch in Delhi can hold

KEY POINTS FROM VARIOUS STUDIES

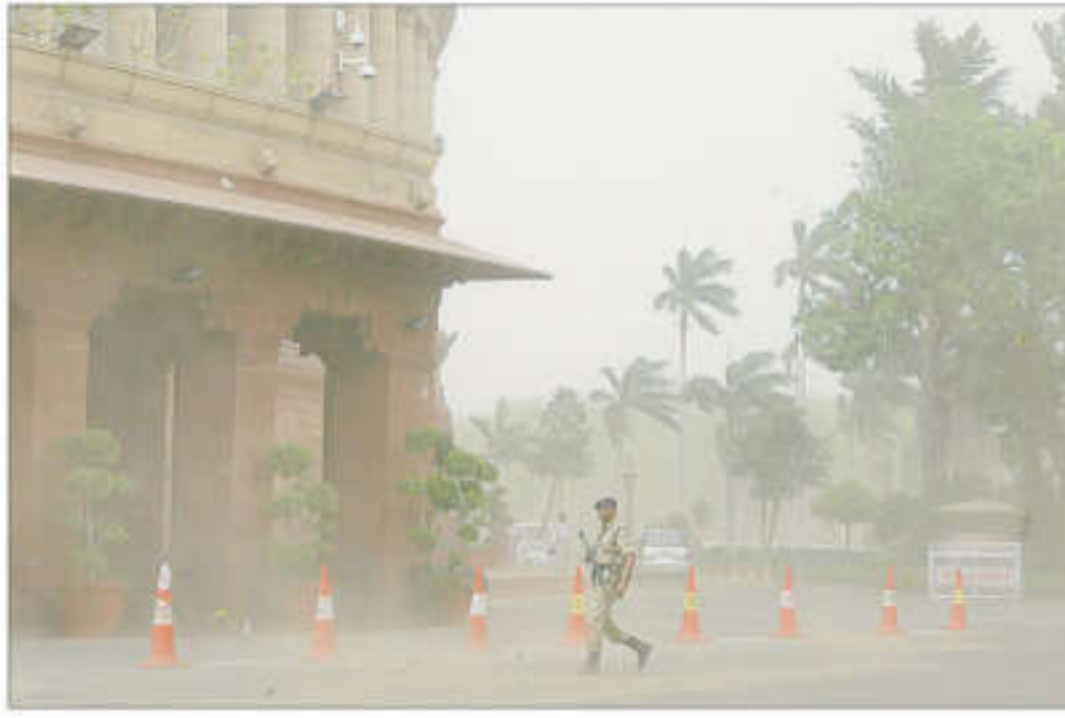
2016 IIT KANPUR:

- Road dust PM10 emissions in Delhi estimated at 79,626 kg/day
- Road dust PM2.5 emissions estimated at 22,165 kg/day
- North, north-east, and parts of north-west Delhi strong hotspots for road-dust resuspension-induced PM10

- These same areas overlap with low mechanical sweeping zones such as Narela, Shahdara North and Civil Lines
- Areas with relatively higher sweeping coverage, Shahdara South, Rohini and Keshavpuram, had much lower levels of road dust, as per the spatial mapping

2023 IIT KANPUR, IIT DELHI, TERI REPORT:

- Road silt load in Delhi ranged from 2



Aravalli degradation has weakened a natural dust barrier around Delhi.

to 12.5 g/m². Reducing it below 2 g/m² recommended, with regular vacuum sweeping

2023 IIT DELHI:

- Average Delhi road silt load was around 14.47 g/m²

- This means a 1-km × 10-metre road stretch can hold ~144.7 kg road dust

2020 IIT MADRAS:

- Delhi road silt load near construction sites reaching about 40 g/m², considered high for urban roads in India

often carried out after significant road damage, leading to prolonged dust emissions," it noted.

A separate joint study by CSIR-National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) and CSIR-Central Road Research Institute (CRRRI), submitted to the CAQM on February 7, 2025, noted: "The resuspension of road dust is influenced by continuous dust deposition at the edges of road medians, poor road design or condition and its maintenance, limited dust management practices." The study also noted how few road stretches in the capital reported "alarmingly high levels" with PM10 emissions as high as 1700 µg/m³ up to 10 m distance from the road — the permissible limit is 100 µg/m³ (24 hours) and 60 µg/m³ (annual).

Arpan Patra, Programme Associate at CEEW, said three elements need to be distinguished when assessing road dust: the sources of dust, the share that is wind-blown versus anthropogenic (including construction-related), and the amount of loose material available on road surfaces for resuspension.

Evidence suggests that road dust is becoming relatively more important as exhaust emissions decline. A multi-city 2023 study led by researchers from IIT Delhi found that even as tailpipe emissions fall with cleaner fuels, non-exhaust sources such as "resuspendable road dust, tyre wear and brake wear" are gaining significance.

The study showed that Delhi's higher silt load is driven by construction activity, heavy traffic, and dust storms during April

and May. Across 32 cities, silt loads ranged from 0.2 g/m² to 111.2 g/m², with Delhi averaging 14.47 g/m².

Researchers also pointed out that the degradation of the Aravalli range has weakened a natural dust barrier around Delhi, allowing more wind-blown dust to enter the city. Nationwide, the study said, exposure to road dust is linked to more than 10,207 premature deaths annually.

What Delhi is doing

Along with the clearing of dust by Mechanical Road Sweeping Machines (MRSMs), the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) deploys a total of 57,000 sanitation workers, sweeping areas where the machines can't enter.

But the NEERI-CRRRI report flags that mechanised sweeping needs to become more scientific, not just more frequent. "There is a need to prepare a standard operating procedure (SOP) for the operation of mechanical road sweepers on a particular type of road based on scientific study," it said. The frequency and efficiency of application, and particle-size analysis of lifted dust during and after use, should be studied, it said.

Other measures include water sprinklers, mobile anti-smog guns (ASGs), and repair of roads and potholes. The MCD, for instance, has a total of 167 water sprinklers and 63 ASGs installed at roads. There are also processing facilities for construction and demolition waste, Sanitary Landfill Facilities for residual ash and Waste-To-Energy plants to treat non-recyclable waste.

Health risks

Several studies suggest a link between long-term exposure to PM10 and respiratory diseases

Last year, a study by researchers from JNU and Australia's University of New South Wales found toxic elements in Delhi's roadside soil and dust with the potential to cause cancer and other serious illnesses

● CULTURE

International Booker Prize at 10: Taking stories across borders

Paromita Chakrabarti
New Delhi, May 24

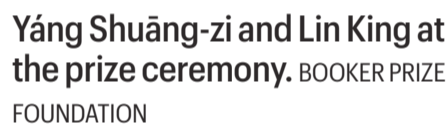
"...TRANSLATION ALLOWS writing to transcend the limits of time and space. I believe in literature's power because, in the life of the mind, literature has never ceded ground nor given up on the dialogue between people," Yang Shuang-zi, one half of the winner of this year's International Booker Prize for her novel *Taiwan Travelogue* — translated into English from Mandarin Chinese by Lin King — said at the award ceremony on May 19. What the 41-year-old writer was articulating was not merely literature's ability to forge connections, but also the fact that to be monolingual is to hear, at best, half the conversation the world is having with itself.

One of the world's most influential awards for fiction in English translation, the International Booker Prize, that marks a decade in its current form, has worked to reward writers who write against the grain of the global literary market, of translators who carry stories across the distance of languages, and of readers who refuse to be circumscribed by familiarity.

Road to reinvention

Launched in 2005 as the Man Booker International Prize, it was a biennial honour awarded to a writer for their entire body of work. Its early recipients, Ismail Kadare, Chinua Achebe, Alice Munro, Philip Roth and László Krasznahorkai, were already literary behemoths and the Prize only served to confirm their stature.

When the original Booker Prize expanded its eligibility in 2015 to admit writers of any nationality writing in English and published in the UK — it was earlier open only to writers from the Commonwealth, Zimbabwe and Ireland — the International Prize, too, changed purpose. It committed to fiction that had crossed over from another language into English. It also became an annual award for a single work of fiction, in any language, available in translation to English-speaking readers.



Yang Shuang-zi and Lin King at the prize ceremony. BOOKER PRIZE FOUNDATION

● PICKING WINNERS

- In 2025, all six books on the shortlist were published by independent publishers
- Sheffield-based And Other Stories, which published *Taiwan Travelogue*, also published last year's winner, *Heart Lamp*

transformation: the £50,000 prize would be shared equally between author and translator. It acknowledged, formally, that translation is not a mechanical service but a creative act. The translator, for long the invisible figure in world literature, was finally given a seat at the table. Before that, their names would often be missing from the book jacket.

The first winner under the new rules was Han Kang's unsettling and luminous *The Vegetarian*, translated from Korean by Deborah Smith. In the decade since, the Prize has honoured works from Arabic, Dutch, Polish, Bulgarian, Kannada and more. Last year, Indian writer Banu Mushtaq and translator Deepa Bhashti won the award for a collection of short stories, *Heart Lamp*. In 2022, Geetanjali Shree and Daisy Rockwell won for the novel *Tomb of Sand*.

A decade of winners

The International Booker Prize has also worn politics on its sleeves, showing a preference for fiction that grapples with the weight of history — Olga Tokarczuk's associative, nomadic *Flights* (2018); Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* (2019), a tapestry of Omani life across generations; David Diop's *At Night All Blood Is Black* (2021), a harrowing meditation on colonial violence. It has championed formally daring, structurally restless books that reflect some of the world's anxieties — war, displacement, memory, gender and the weight of the past.

The Nobel connection

No measure of the Prize's impact is more striking than the fact that four authors recognised by the International Booker Prize have gone on to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature: Kang, Tokarczuk, Annie Ernaux and Jon Fosse.

Indie publishing boom

Since 2016, sales of translated fiction in the UK have doubled. Independent publishers, those risk-taking imprints guided by passion and a growing appetite for world literature, form the bulwark of the Prize, by drawing attention to fiction from literary cultures marginal to mainstream Anglophone publishing.

● DEFENCE

DRDO's new missile offers precision strikes, anti-drone combat

Sushant Kulkarni
Pune, May 24

THE DEFENCE Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) last week carried out final development trials of the UAV-Launched Precision Guided Missile (ULPGM)-V3. This will be followed by user trials by the armed forces.

Significant upgrade

A DRDO scientist said that compared with the V1 and V2 variants, the ULPGM-V3 represents a significant advancement in India's indigenous drone-launched missile capability.

The V1 was a basic free-fall precision missile and the V2 introduced propulsion, longer range, and mid-course target updates. The V3 adds the ability to engage both ground and aerial targets, including drones and helicopters. It also features



Development trials of ULPGM-V3 at DRDO's test range in Kurnool. PIB

more advanced target-seeking systems, improved day-and-night combat capability, and multiple warhead options for different battlefield roles, making it a far more versatile weapon for modern drone warfare.

The ULPGM-V3 is fitted with an ad-

The new battlefield

- Development of drone-launched weapons will be one of the DRDO's focus areas
- Drones are important for both conventional conflicts and asymmetric warfare involving smaller, highly mobile threats

vanced guidance system using multiple sensors to accurately track targets, allowing it to strike a wide range of threats. It can be deployed in both plains and high-altitude regions in the day or night. It is equipped with a two-way data link, enabling operators to change or update the target even after the missile has been launched.

Depending on the mission, the missile can be fitted with three types of warheads. These include an anti-armour warhead designed to destroy heavily protected tanks and armoured vehicles, even those fitted with special layers of protection used in modern battle tanks. It also has a penetration-cum-blast warhead meant to pierce and destroy bunkers and fortified structures, and a pre-fragmentation warhead that disperses high-speed metal fragments over a large area to maximise damage. The missile can engage both stationary and moving targets in all weather conditions.

Network-centric warfare

DRDO has partnered with Bharat Dynamics Limited and Adani Defence Systems and Technologies Limited for development and production. The Ministry of Defence said that the missile has been produced entirely through the Indian defence ecosystem, involving DRDO laboratories and several Indian companies.

Officials said that the ULPGM-V3 has been developed primarily for the Army, with the air-to-ground mode for anti-tank roles and air-to-air modes for drone, helicopters, and other airborne targets.

A senior Army officer said systems like ULPGM-V3 are key, as drones are increasingly becoming central to modern warfare worldwide. It also reflects the growing shift towards network-centric warfare, where drones, sensors, and command systems work together in real time to detect and strike targets with precision.

● GLOBAL

Amid tighter Green Card rules in the US, why Indians could be uniquely affected

Vidheesha Kuntamalla
New Delhi, May 24

THE US on Friday moved to significantly restrict those eligible for permanent residency in the country, rattling the lakhs of Indians on temporary visas who are awaiting a Green Card.

The US Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), announced that those applying for Green Cards must return to their home countries to do so — a sweeping reversal of a practice in place for over half a century.

People can apply for Green Cards in two ways — going to a US consulate abroad, or applying while already in the US, which is called an "adjustment of status". The new

USCIS policy memo targets the second, more popular route, used by Indian workers on H-1B visas, students transitioning from F-1 visas, and spouses on H4 dependent visas. Indians also dominate the decades-long backlog in employment-based Green Card categories such as Employment-Based Second Preference (EB-2) and EB-3.

What has changed?

Immigration lawyers say the USCIS memorandum makes adjustment of status significantly more discretionary. Until now, eligible professionals could file Form I-485 and continue living and working in the US while the application was processed. But the memo now instructs officers to treat "adjustment of status" as "an extraordinary act of administrative grace".

"Applicants must now demonstrate what the memo calls 'unusual or even outstanding equities'," Rajiv Khanna, an immigration attorney based in Washington DC, told *The Indian Express*. "A clean record and full eligibility are no longer sufficient on their own. You must affirmatively show why you deserve this 'grace'."

What happens to Indians?

Indians are uniquely trapped in America's employment-based immigration backlog. They overwhelmingly dominate the EB-2 and EB-3 employment backlog categories for securing permanent residency. "The wait for many of them exceeds 20 years," said Khanna. During those years, many would have built entire lives in America — buying homes, paying taxes

and building careers — with the expectation that if they followed the rules, a Green Card would follow.

Now, lawyers say, the very fact that they stayed in the US for years while waiting could become something immigration officers scrutinise negatively.

According to Asel Williams, founding immigration attorney at the New York-based firm Williams Law firm, any push to have Indians return home to apply for the cards could create "enormous" appointment backlogs. "USCIS is currently adjudicating millions of 'adjustment of status' applications for foreign nationals physically present in the US. Redirecting even a fraction of those, potentially hundreds of thousands of Indian cases, to consular posts would overwhelm a State Department that

simply does not have the resources to absorb that volume," Williams said.

Khanna said, "Consular officers in India have, over the past several years, placed a significant number of employment-based immigrant visa applicants into administrative processing... There is no transparency about what triggers it or when it will end."

These delays are likely by design, in line with the Donald Trump administration's push to restrict immigration. Khanna added that an applicant who leaves the US for a visa interview could suddenly find themselves stranded in India indefinitely, "sometimes without the ability to continue their employment at all."

Williams also warned that delays in consular processing could cause employers to pull back on job offers.

What are lawyers advising?

"My recommendation is to hold off on filing an adjustment of status application and wait for clarity on how USCIS will implement this policy," Williams said. "Indian clients cannot afford even a single immigration violation." She warned Indians who already filed adjustment of status applications not to travel without legal consultation.

Khanna said eligible Indians should file if their priority dates are current. "The memo does not prohibit approvals," he said. But he emphasised that applicants now need to proactively tell their story: "Your application may now need to state your length of residence, your tax compliance, your community ties, your employer's reliance on your work, your family circumstances, and your clean record."

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

WHY MITHUN MANHAS

Mithun Manhas is one of the key individuals responsible for the development of Jammu & Kashmir cricket, a team that became Ranji champions. Now at the helm of BCCI, he has a lot on his plate like the cricketing ties with Pakistan, the sport's return to the Olympic and the growing influence of Indian cricket globally

'I don't see India-Pakistan players shaking hands, as of now ... our tradition is *namaste*'

In his first major interaction since taking charge, BCCI president Mithun Manhas speaks about Jammu and Kashmir's historic Ranji Trophy triumph, the board's stance on bilateral cricket with Pakistan, and why protecting the domestic system remains non-negotiable. The conversation was moderated by Sandeep Dwivedi, National Sports Editor, *The Indian Express*

Given those factors, we are confident the value of the rights will continue to grow.

Shankar Narayan: Almost every year, Test matches in north India are scheduled in October or November despite an obvious pollution issue. Have any measures been taken to ensure avoiding this in the future?

There are a lot of factors that go into allocating matches. The BCCI broadly follows a rotation policy to ensure fair distribution across venues. We are also very careful about external factors — weather conditions, logistical requirements and pollution in northern regions during certain times of the year. We take these very seriously. We try to plan the schedule in a way that avoids hosting matches in such conditions, and we have done that in the past. If you look at the Ranji Trophy season, breaks have been deliberately created so that we play fewer matches in the north when conditions are bad — fog, smog, pollution — which would cause health issues.

Shankar Narayan: Grounds like Ahmedabad and Guwahati are getting Border-Gavaskar Trophy games but traditional venues like Wankhede and Eden Gardens haven't hosted Australia for a very long time...

It is the rotation policy. It is also about generating revenue. If you look at Ahmedabad, that's our biggest stadium and the BCCI benefits from that. If we generate a lot of revenue from one stadium and can accommodate more fans, why not? That has been done in consultation with our respective state associations.

ON THE CHANGE IN J&K TEAM

'Back in the day, there used to be an 8-8 quota for Jammu cricketers and those from the Kashmir valley. I never believed in it. For me, it doesn't matter which religion you follow. My religion is cricket'

Nihal Koshie: What is the BCCI's policy on India playing Pakistan? And if India plays Pakistan, will we see players shake hands?

The BCCI has always consistently maintained that any decision regarding bilateral series with Pakistan is subject to Government of India's policy. We fully respect and abide by that position. Any future engagements will entirely depend on the prevailing situation.

Nihal Koshie: What about handshakes?

I don't see it happening as of now. Though it's the prerogative of players — if they don't feel like doing it, they won't. As Indians, our tradition is to do namaste. We were never a hand-shaking nation.

Venkata Krishna B: How important is it to send a strong team to the 2028 Olympics?

I can talk about it from an organisational standpoint, although I don't get into selections as such. But I can assure you that we will leave no stone unturned in ensuring that India sends its strongest possible team to the 2028 Olympics. Proper planning and preparation will be put in place well in advance. It's about winning gold, not just participation. So we assure you that we aim to have the best team representing the country at that stage. And it's very important for us.

Venkata Krishna B: With the international calendar packed, is player fatigue becoming a concern?

Not really. Test cricket is something we are very mindful of. Though it is the selectors' job, we keep a watch on the load. There is a lot of cricket happening and that's why we don't allow our players to play foreign leagues. We also follow a rotation policy. So the team management is constantly in touch with the selection committee and that's how they operate. Players' fitness and mental health is of paramount importance to us.

Venkata Krishna B: Given recent Test setbacks against New Zealand and South Africa at home, what is being done to improve performance?

We always get back to the drawing board. We want more senior players to play domestic cricket — not just the one-day format but the days format too. We need preparatory camps before Test series like we used to have in the past — a 10-15 day camp before a series. Before the next series, you will get to see that.

Nitin Sharma: You played with Virat Kohli and Gautam Gambhir in Delhi. Any memories?

Well, I not just played with Virat, but with Gautam too — the Indian team coach. I had also coached them (laughs). So to comment on just them and not others won't make any sense. They are all equal to me.

Sandeep Dwivedi: In your seven months as BCCI president, what has been your biggest challenge?

This has been an extremely demanding and packed year. The women's World Cup, followed by the Women's Premier League, then the men's T20 World Cup and finally the IPL. While I'm relatively new to this role, I have been fortunate to receive excellent support from my colleagues at the BCCI. I also benefited from the guidance of Mr. Jay Shah, the ICC president who was the BCCI chief back then. His insight and support have been very valuable. Not just BCCI, even when I joined the Jammu & Kashmir Cricket Association (JKCA) in 2021 and even now, he has guided me.

Sriram Veera: You got into cricket administration in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The year you became BCCI president, J&K made history by winning the Ranji Trophy.

The victory can be a turning point for cricket in J&K and Ladakh. We were always rich in talent but it was just about channeling the potential in the right direction. When I joined, my idea was: we play to win, and even if we lose while doing that, it doesn't matter.

In the 67 years of J&K cricket history, we have never done anything particularly special. But we have always shown glimpses of talent.

This time, eight of our teams qualified for the knockout stage in various domestic competitions. Our effort was to be very transparent and honest in our approach. You will be surprised to know that the JKCA in Jammu still holds matches at a college ground. They don't have a stadium, even after 67 years. In Kashmir, they have a stadium, but it's in poor condition. Jay Shah *bhai* was the first from the BCCI to visit our region in our 67-year history. After that, there was no looking back. Now, we don't need to go outside our state to play cricket. We have the best red soil and black soil wickets. The SG Test and Kookaburra balls that are used in national tournaments are used for training at our camps as well. We start early, and before the season begins, the age-group teams and the senior teams each play about 40 to 50 games.

Sriram Veera: What made you choose Ajay Sharma as the J&K coach?

Ajay Sharma has been around since I started my cricket. I believe in him and have worked very closely with him. I understand how he operates. He's a demanding coach who knows the fine nuances of batting. We have been struggling with our batting — bowling has always been our strength. He's also very disciplined and firm. I'm very happy for him. He's got his due.

Nihal Koshie: Ajay Sharma is a Delhi cricketer and comes from a different culture. Did he take time to adjust?

Everything takes time. If you want to do something good, it takes time — *kharab karne ke liye do minute hi lagte hain*. (to spoil something it takes two minutes) It is all about understanding their point of view and where they were coming from. Coach and players need to gel. If they don't trust each other, players wouldn't talk about their faults. It's like going to a doctor. Unless you tell him what the problem is, he can't help. Or he will continue doing the tests and nothing will happen. It takes time. It was not about me or Ajay *bhai* or anyone — it was all about maximising their potential.

Sandeep Dwivedi: What has been the impact of the Ranji Trophy win beyond the sporting field in J&K? What does this win mean to the people of the region?

When we were playing the final, bazaars were empty as everyone was glued to their television sets. There was not a home where the final was not being watched. This win will help us not just in cricket but will be very beneficial for the youth as well. There is a lot of struggle here. Every boy and girl has a story. I think this win means something very special to us.

Now they've started believing that boys and girls from JK can move ahead in life because of cricket. Parents from remote areas are sending their children to cricket centres. Imagine, today we have a girl from Gurez who wants to be a trainer. Players from Ladakh, Kargil, Gurez, Chenab Valley, Poonch, Rajouri and border areas want to play cricket. It is a wave that has swept the whole of JK. Special credit goes to Jay *bhai* because he was the one man who believed that we could do it. Whatever we asked of him, he provided. And here we are, Ranji Trophy champions in 2026, only the 11th association to do so.

ON WHY AHMEDABAD GETS BIG GAMES

'It is the rotation policy... also about generating revenue. Ahmedabad is our biggest stadium and BCCI benefits from that. If we generate a lot of revenue from one stadium and can accommodate more fans, why not?'



ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

Sandeep Dwivedi: Has cricket been able to drop the hyphen that connected Jammu and Kashmir?

Back in the day, there used to be an 8-8 quota for Jammu cricketers and those from the Kashmir valley. I never believed in it. For me, it doesn't matter which religion you follow. My religion is cricket and that should come to the fore. Whenever I speak, I call it JK, never J&K.

Sandeep Dwivedi: India's presence in world cricket keeps spreading. Indian or Indian-origin cricketers own teams in most leagues around the world. Do you think Indian players also need to be allowed to play in these leagues?

It is a very pertinent question but there are a lot of factors. The international

cricketing calendar is extremely demanding, followed by a long domestic season and the high-intensity IPL. In addition, many states have their own T20 leagues, which means players are engaged in cricket almost throughout the year. Our focus is that the domestic system remains strong. This can be achieved only if our established players are playing with young talent in domestic leagues — they transfer their experience and that's how the system grows. So at this time it will be challenging to permit our players to participate in overseas T20 leagues. It is also about their mental and physical health and keeping them fresh whenever they play for India.

Mihir Vasavda: How can the BCCI improve the fan experience? There are complaints about ticket

availability, poor stadium conditions, unhygienic toilets and overpriced water at nearly every venue.

Enhancing the fan experience is a key priority. It is extremely important and we are actively working on it. Whenever incidents are reported, we look into them seriously and make amends. We are in constant dialogue with our member associations to identify gaps and implement improvements across stadiums. We are also in the process of appointing a professional agency to assess some of our major venues and provide detailed recommendations on areas that require attention.

Mihir Vasavda: Given what is happening with FIFA World Cup

media rights, do you fear IPL rights could stagnate or even decline in value?

No, not really. I don't agree with that assessment, although it is something we need to remain mindful of. The IPL and Indian cricket continue to be extremely strong properties with a robust fan base in India and across the world. The growth over the past decade has been phenomenal. The IPL continues to offer unmatched reach and consistently high-quality cricket. Engagement across platforms remains strong and we are also seeing evolving consumption patterns, especially on digital, which are opening up new avenues for value creation. Our focus remains on maintaining the quality and competitiveness of the tournament because that is what ultimately drives value.

Revenue channels

RBI's surplus transfer will not ease fiscal pressure

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) Central Board last week decided to transfer a surplus of ₹2.87 trillion for 2025-26 to the Government of India. The RBI also decided to reduce the provisioning under the contingent risk buffer to 6.5 per cent of its balance sheet, compared to 7.5 per cent in the previous year. Although the RBI's economic capital framework allows it to keep the contingent risk buffer between 4.5 and 7.5 per cent of its balance sheet, it is unclear why the central bank decided to reduce the buffer. Although the amount transferred is about 7 per cent higher than that of the previous year and is a new record, it is unlikely to ease fiscal pressures significantly for the government. The surplus transfer is in line with expectations, and the government had already budgeted for it. This year's Budget estimate for dividend/surplus from the RBI and nationalised financial institutions is ₹3.16 trillion. However, the government's total dividend receipts could be substantially lower this year. Oil companies are usually major contributors, but they may not be able to contribute much.

The crisis in West Asia and the resultant surge in prices of crude oil have significantly complicated the overall Budget arithmetic. The state-run oil-marketing companies (OMCs) were reported to be facing underrecoveries worth ₹1,000 crore per day until recently. Three increases in the pump prices of petrol and diesel have helped reduce those, but more needs to be done. At this stage, it is difficult to gauge the extent of the damage high oil prices may have caused to the finances of OMCs. Only the June-quarter results will provide a clear picture because the March quarter will reflect only a partial impact. But dividends are not the only factor that will affect government finances. The government may have to substantially increase expenditure in certain areas, such as fuel and fertiliser subsidies, while also facing pressure on the revenue front.

The government has reduced special additional excise duty on petrol and diesel, which could lead to an annual revenue loss of about ₹1.5 trillion. Besides, tax collection would suffer due to the supply-chain disruption and lower production. It is also worth noting that the monsoon is expected to be below normal this year, which could have implications not only for food production but for overall demand. A consumption slowdown could again increase demands on the Budget while affecting revenue collection. The government has budgeted to contain the fiscal deficit at 4.3 per cent of gross domestic product, which now looks difficult. Much will depend on how long the West Asia crisis persists and how the government approaches its plan for capital expenditure.

While the RBI has done its bit in supporting the government through surplus transfers, it faces its own challenges. The rupee has been under pressure and is inching towards the 100 mark against the dollar. As economists have rightly argued, the RBI should not aim to defend the currency to prevent it from crossing a psychological mark. The other big challenge will be responding to the inevitable increase in the inflation rate. Since the monetary policy needs to be forward-looking, projecting the inflation rate over the next four to six quarters and adjusting the policy accordingly will be enormously complicated in the current environment. Bond yields have been rising in anticipation of tighter monetary policy and possible fiscal slippage.

Power planning

Surging energy demand needs better preparation

A developing super El Niño has led to scorching temperatures across the Indian sub-continent, at least a month ahead of schedule. With Indians cranking up cooling equipment, parts of the country are experiencing large power outages. On May 22, electricity supply across the so-called Millennium City, Gurugram, was disrupted and the Rapid Metro service suspended for over an hour owing to a massive transformer fire. Set against surging national demand, which peaked at 270.8 Gw on May 21 — up from the 2025 peak of 242.49 Gw in sultry June — the government's advisory to citizens to "use electricity wisely and judiciously" cannot be faulted. The problem is that such appeals are unlikely to work, mainly because citizens have few options. Given that, with or without the El Niño impact, summer temperatures hit new highs each year, a steady increase in power demand should have been anticipated.

The past decade has been the warmest in India's history. Every year, summers have arrived earlier and temperatures have scaled new peaks. Preparing for the inevitable demand surges, therefore, has become imperative. Yet, as the transformer fire in Gurugram demonstrated, infrastructure maintenance and upgrades are rarely carried out in advance (such as during the cooler weather). And, more to the point as India aspires for its net-zero target, the adoption of technological solutions to expand the availability of renewable power to bridge power deficits has been tardy. To be sure, India has come a long way from the dramatic north Indian grid failure of 2012, the world's biggest blackout at the time. Since then, there has been a reorganisation of the grid architecture to ensure that overloading in any state does not trip the system. More recently, the railway, coal and power ministries collaborated to ensure that the distribution system for coal, the principal source of energy in India, was streamlined so that thermal-power stations could replenish their stocks in time. These improvements have certainly reduced the chances of a nationwide collapse.

But the government's advisory suggests that a crisis is brewing even as the meteorological department predicts a prolonged heatwave. This too could have been avoided, had renewable energy been in a position to shoulder more of the load, though renewable power is playing a notably larger role in meeting and absorbing daytime peaks between 2 pm and 4 pm, when maximum demand coincides with the bright sunshine, enabling solar power to bridge the deficit. Together with wind and hydropower, solar accounts for about a third of total peak power in the daytime. The problem begins after sunset, when another, smaller residential peak occurs, for which thermal power takes the brunt. Soaring demand has made meeting this night-time requirement increasingly challenging. While pumped hydro storage systems can partially bridge this gap, they have limited utility. It is increasingly obvious that solar-power generators need to acquire battery storage systems at scale. Since 2021, the Centre has provided a slew of incentives to establish battery manufacturing capacity, but progress has been snail-paced. India's continuing reliance on China for raw materials has complicated the process. These longstanding structural issues need to be sorted out quickly, since no amount of judicious use will bridge India's burgeoning power demand in the foreseeable future.

A big push in economics

Special times call for special initiatives

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY



There is anxiety regarding the Indian economy. The present macroeconomic data operates with a lag, leaving analysis in a zone of subjective perception. However, a sequence of shocks has shaped the current environment. The economy was in poor shape in 2018 and 2019. After that, we got the pandemic, Ukraine war, United States (US) tariffs, war in Iran, and ensuing oil-price shock. The political foundations of global prosperity — liberal democracy and globalisation, built upon Western leadership — are exhibiting structural weakness. The macroeconomic conditions feature similarities to the Indian situation in the late 1980s, an era characterised by fiscal strain and a socialist state apparatus.

The oil shock poses to India a threat similar to the problems of the 1970s. But the central problem lies in the sustained difficulties of private investment, which forms the core of Indian economic growth. The last time the domestic private sector achieved a one-year gain of net fixed assets above 20 per cent in nominal terms was 2009-10. The last time this metric crossed 10 per cent was 2019-20. The Indian private corporate sector is exhausted and risk-averse. How can economic policy navigate these frictions and generate a sustained private-investment cycle? It is safe to say that the growth process is stuck. Business as usual — conventional tinkering measures — will not help; we need to think on a bigger scale. Ten ideas matter in the required economic policy strategy.

First, the oil price shock must fully pass through to the consumer. Price signals are the mechanism through which supply and demand reach an equilibrium. When prices are controlled, it introduces distortions and strains the fiscal balance. Higher prices of

petroleum products will induce the necessary adjustment in both consumption and production.

Second, the macroeconomic shock must fully pass through into the exchange rate. Attempts to manage the exchange rate harm economic growth and will prove futile. A flexible exchange rate acts as a necessary shock absorber.

Third, Indian economic success is built upon the emergence of high-productivity firms, with a starring role for exporters and multinational corporations. These firms face an uncertain global environment and require enhanced access to finance. To navigate the age of chaos, they require full access to the global financial system to obtain low-cost capital and hedging instruments. Numerous direct-tax frictions have come to impede cross-border activities, all these require solving. Delivering this requires a comprehensive package of capital-account liberalisation. The Ministry of Finance must establish an expert committee, supported by a technical team, to design this reform package and draft the required legal instruments.

Fourth, higher fuel prices and currency depreciation will generate inflationary pressures. Macroeconomic stability requires price stability. Economic agents are judging the institutional commitment to the 4 per cent target. A failure of the de jure macroeconomic framework will harm policy credibility for a decade. We must improve the economics capabilities in the inflation-targeting process. To build credibility, the Ministry of Finance should now narrow the tolerance band assigned to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), shifting it from the current 2-6 per cent to a tighter 3-5 per cent. To increase the credibility of monetary policy, the RBI Act must be amended to



SNAKES & LADDERS
AJAY SHAH

A natural healthy food billions of years old

Amazingly, one of the best sources of wholesome nutrition — having a full range of essential amino acids, key vitamins, minerals and antioxidants — is neither a grain nor a meat variety but is an aquatic entity that generates its own food from solar energy through photosynthesis. This superfood, containing as much as 65 to 70 per cent protein by weight, is spirulina, a form of blue-green algae that has existed in nature for billions of years. It thrives even in poor-quality water and in harsh environments, in which most other crops cannot grow. On well-run aquaculture farms, colonies or clusters of this rapidly proliferating algae variety can double its biomass in two-three days, reaching the harvesting stage in just 10-14 days. Besides, spirulina can also absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to serve as a natural carbon sink.

Spirulina can, indeed, prove a boon for a country like India where malnutrition, especially protein deficiency (anaemia), is rampant. According to the latest National Family Health Survey-5, conducted during 2019-21, 35.5 per cent of all children under five are "stunted" (having a low height for age), and 19.3 per cent are "wasted" (low weight for height). Overall, about 58 per cent of kids are anaemic, with 32.1 per cent being grossly underweight. Undernourishment is also widely prevalent among adults, with 23 per cent women and 20 per cent men being underweight.

The consumption of this unconventional food item is picking up fast across the world. But the growth is accounted for mostly by fitness enthusiasts, who are aware of its extraordinary nutritional traits, and not by the undernourished people, who actually need it. Stores selling health products now offer a variety of spirulina-based stuff, ranging from tablets and cap-

sules to smoothies and energy bars. These nutrient-dense products not only nourish the bodies but also boost vitality and immunity, thanks to the high level of antioxidants in them. The copious content of vitamins A, C, and E in spirulina facilitates cell regeneration to ensure good skin health. This variety of algae is also known for lowering cholesterol and maintaining blood pressure to ensure cardiovascular health. Besides, by helping the liver and kidney to function properly, spirulina helps eliminate heavy metals and other harmful matter from the body.

However, when compared with developed countries, both the production and consumption of spirulina-based food supplements in India is relatively meagre. In many advanced nations, these products have become almost a regular part of the diets of not only fitness freaks but also of elderly and physically weak individuals. Interestingly, the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) has been including spirulina in astronauts' diets during space missions, with good results.

Luckily, spirulina has begun to catch the attention of many Indian aquaculturists, resulting in a significant expansion of its cultivation. Factors like growing demand and high profitability are also contributing to this expansion. Spirulina farming is now counted among the high-value segments of agriculture. It is generally grown on small farms, having water bodies measuring one acre (43,560 square feet) or less. The ponds are often lined with concrete or plastic sheets to prevent water loss due to percolation.

The southern region, which has year-round tropical climate and plentiful sunlight, is deemed ideally suited for spirulina cultivation. It is grown in Maha-

rajasthan and Telangana, which have abundant solar radiation and warm climate. Tamil Nadu has emerged as the leading spirulina-producing state, followed, quite distantly, by Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The country's annual production of this is 2,000-2,500 tonnes, with Tamil Nadu alone contributing about 1,500 tonnes. Output in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka is estimated at 300 and 400 tonnes, respectively.

Many cultivators have set up facilities for growing spirulina under controlled atmospheric conditions to produce contamination-free algae required by the pharmaceutical industry. No doubt it involves additional cost but the produce of such farms fetches premium prices, ranging from ₹10,000 to ₹15,000 a kg, making it, by far, the most remunerative among all food or cash crops. Even when grown in open water bodies, spirulina yields good profit, selling at anywhere between ₹5,000 and ₹8,000 a kg.

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research is promoting spirulina cultivation on scientific lines. The New Delhi-based Indian Agricultural Research Institute recently held a training course on cultivation, processing and commercialisation of spirulina and its value-added products. Going by the spirulina industry's reckoning, the rate of growth in annual demand for spirulina, currently hovering at 15-20 per cent, is likely to shoot up as the awareness of its health benefits picks up. The government would do well to promote spirulina and its value-enhanced products through its flagship nutrition-oriented projects, particularly the agriculture ministry's newly launched "SEHAT Mission", which envisages nutrition strategies involving innovative and nutritious foods. Spirulina aptly fits the bill for this initiative.

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FARM VIEW
SURINDER SUD

Outing Stanford's secret elite



ANAND GIRIDHARADAS

If America is the most powerful country on earth, and Silicon Valley the most powerful place in that country, and Stanford the most powerful institution in that place, and a secretive network of students and adult hangers-on there the hub of influence on campus (I know that's a lot of ifs, but let me finish), then here lies the rapacious, awkward centre of the world.

Theo Baker, a reluctant journalist still not old enough to rent a car, nonetheless drives us, Jules Verne-like, into the molten core of our troubled time. He arrives at Stanford in 2022 as a bright-

eyed freshman wanting to climb the Silicon Valley ladder, drunk on Big Tech propaganda about "changing the world." He finishes that year having upended Stanford's leadership, jaded by a Silicon Valley where faux idealism obscures corruption, greed and power lust — leavened only by the social obtuseness of these aspiring masters of the universe.

Baker's first book, *How to Rule the World*, is a rigorous, self-assured, propulsive, at times terrifying portrait of a dweebocracy that "sets the agenda for the planet." In every age, there is some place that epitomises how power works. Baker's Stanford is a strong candidate, and his book follows in the tradition of Michael Lewis's Wall Street chronicle *Liar's Poker*, but with more pimples and less eye contact.

What gives Baker's book its power is that he Forrest Gumps his way into answering a question about the attitudes and pretensions overlordship mankind. In coming of age as a young man,

he travels to the heart of a dehumanising age. The best nonfiction doesn't declaim from oxygen-deprived heights; it ports you into a world and lets the relevance emerge.

Stanford through Baker's eyes is a foreign country with its own customs, religion, mores and language. Some students are "high-agency" super-builders or super-thinkers — techie Übermenschen expected to make billions. There is the "Coupa circuit," where shady, tech-adjacent adults spend their days at a coffee shop with students, hoping to get in early on start-ups. There are the NGMIs, who are not going to make it. And there are the "plucked," highly bright students who form a Stanford within Stanford, with access to Big Tech slush funds and parties. (The liberal arts majors and others with no prospects in technology are largely irrelevant.)

The Stanford-within-Stanford Baker exposes matters to you even if this exclusive core feels impossibly distant. The uni-

versity has let technology firms and venture capitalists worm so deeply into it that it now functions, in Baker's telling, as a talent-scouting system for future unicorns. Everyone else is window dressing.

Silicon Valley has long promoted itself as more meritocratic than elite circles past. Baker perforates this story. Many students are smart. But those who rise fastest often seem the most ruthless and maniacal. "Teenagers like me were a commodity," Baker observes. "We were to be protected and preserved, cosseted and buttered up, exploited, manipulated, funded, bribed and cultivated. We were business."

At first charmed by Big Tech, he joins TreeHacks, a hackathon group where start-ups are born. He arrives as a believer, knocking on the door of unimaginable power, at times even appearing pluckable.

But he also drifts to the school news-



HOW TO RULE THE WORLD: An Education in Power at Stanford University
by Theo Baker
Published by Penguin Press
320 pages \$32

paper. Because his mother and father are prominent journalists (Susan Glasser of *The New Yorker* and Peter Baker of *The New York Times*), he arrives wanting nothing to do with the profession, which he associates with over-busy parents. Yet he joins *The Stanford Daily*, chases a story, gains traction and, after a tip, finds himself investigating the university president, Marc Tessier-Lavigne.

Tessier-Lavigne's case comes to encapsulate a university deeply entangled with industry. A renowned scientist who made a fortune in business, he is accused of having overseen falsified research. Scrutiny of his case is complicated by the fact that he serves at the pleasure of a board with commercial entanglements much like his own.

Baker pursues the story like a campus reincarnation of Woodward and Bernstein. But for a time he continues trying to be an insider, even as he lobbs grenades

from without. He organises hackathons and files stories, takes coffees with talent brokers and stakes out Tessier-Lavigne.

This dual-track approach would probably discredit an established journalist. For a college freshman who is still figuring himself out, it is understandable — and makes him harder to dismiss. Toward the end, after a dramatic 30-hour climax involving drugs, a near-death experience, legal threats, hastily written news stories, start-up ideas and an ex-girlfriend, Baker comes to clarity on who he is.

Tessier-Lavigne resigns, owing significantly to Baker's work. But he secures a large settlement, buying a vast mansion and raising \$1 billion for a venture. Incredibly, but also fittingly, an investor in the deposed president's new company reaches out to Baker, offering the deposer funding for any start-up he might aspire to build.

"I was surprised, but I shouldn't have been," Baker says. "That's how this place works."

The reviewer is publisher of the newsletter *The Link*
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OUR VIEW

GUEST VIEW



Andhra baby incentives: dismal odds of success

India's first big state with a plan to arrest its population decline is aiming to defy a global record of demographic policy failure. Can cash handouts and promises beget a baby boom?

The government of Andhra Pradesh wants to spur families to have more children. Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has declared a plan to give families a one-time payment of ₹30,000 for having a third child and ₹40,000 for a fourth. In March, a policy had proposed ₹25,000 for a second child. The aim, as Naidu has stated, is to shift focus from population "control" to "care" in order to secure the state's "demographic future." Apart from cash incentives, a cradle-plus package may include nutritional support for mothers and young children, apart from free public education till age 18 and subsidized reproductive assistance at state-run hospitals. The state has sought public feedback on this baby-boom project.

For many who lived through India's population panic of the 1970s, paying people to have more children may seem either ironic or like a warped priority. Anxiety over 'overpopulation' can be traced to a dismal 18th century warning by Thomas Malthus that births multiply while the uptrend of food supply would fail to keep up. He failed to foresee the role of innovation, with contraception just an example. As proof piled up that human ingenuity could drive productivity and raise living standards, people began to be viewed as an asset—no matter how many. Today, the economic impact of a drop-off in births is a global concern. In all European countries, the UN-logged total fertility rate (TFR)—the average number of children a woman is expected to have in her lifetime—is below the 2.1 level needed for a stable headcount. Without an influx of immigrants, any such state stares at an ageing workforce followed by a shrunk domestic market; while both

could slow its economy down, the latter may leave a gap even AI bots cannot fill. America, with a TFR of 1.6, risks losing its dynamism behind high walls with or without jobs shifting to AI agents. In Asia, South Korea's TFR drop is a case study, but the big story is China's lurch from one extreme to another. A decade ago, it gave up its one-child policy and has since been raising birth incentives. To reverse its demographic decline, Beijing uses child care and cash support. This year, it levied a tax on contraceptives. But with a TFR of about 1, China seems stuck in a 'low-fertility trap': once a country's rate slips below 1.5, recovery is seen to get far harder. Apart from time and financial pressure, social mores and gender gaps in child-rearing tend to restrain family size too.

India is also below the replacement rate. A Sample Registration System report pegs India's TFR at 1.9 births per woman in 2024. Urban India's is at 1.5, a cliff-point. According to the Andhra government, the state's rate is also 1.5. Since it risks losing its share of voice in the Lok Sabha if seats are rejigged by population, a baby boom would be a political win too. Other low-TFR states would be watching. The global record on rate reversal suggests dismal odds of success. Having babies is so deeply personal that a birth-rate bulge is hard to foster. To arrest a TFR at 1.5 or so has begun to look like trying to roll a rock uphill even for middle-income nations. Could hearty cash handouts defy the global pattern? Andhra's subsidy cannot cover the real cost of child-rearing. Yet, cash transfers might find mass takers so long as poverty persists. If Andhra springs a surprise, it should make everyone sit up. After all, the rest of the country is also on a sharp TFR slide. And India mustn't get old before it gets rich.

The 48° Celsius ceiling: it could cap India's economic emergence

We must stop treating climate change as an environmental nuisance and address it in crisis mode



EJAZ GHANI
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Viksit Bharat is not a distant ambition; it is an active economic sprint being run on a worsening track. As record-breaking heat domes breach 48° Celsius, the Indian economy is at risk. Productivity could evaporate as people labour under a 'metabolism tax,' a levy that no administration can cut but weighs GDP growth down.

That the biological effect of heat and humidity can throttle growth is slowly becoming apparent. Just as an engine slows if its cooling system fails and it begins to overheat, a vast proportion of the Indian workforce is experiencing exhaustion. The human body's biological cooling system of evaporative perspiration breaks down if humidity and heat are both high—and if 'wet-bulb' temperature rises above the 'survival ceiling' of 35° Celsius, it could prove fatal. Climate change has gradually been raising humidity and heat both, exposing Indian workers without air-conditioning to a thermal shock.

For the country's 490 million informal workers, a tax that never appears on a ledger is threatening to crush their productive capacity. If India cannot protect this human capital, its 'demographic dividend' risks becoming a liability. By one estimate, the country loses 160 billion labour hours annually to extreme heat. This is a crisis.

Think of the metabolic Gini: The global development consensus has long

treated the Gini coefficient—a measure of income inequality—as the north star of progress. This is an accounting relic. In an era of extreme heat, the new measure of inequality is the 'metabolic Gini,' the chasm between an elite that has the air under control and the working class, who suffer worsening conditions.

The metabolic tax is bearing down heavily on the heat-stressed informal sector; its workers are ageing faster, suffering chronic kidney distress and losing cognitive performance—even as they try hard to work.

Re-clock the tropics: The nine-to-five workday is a legacy of British rule and was designed for the UK's temperate latitudes. In our 48° Celsius tropical reality, this model is oppressive. To help mitigate the productivity problem, India must adjust its work hours. In summer months, the best hours for the sectors of heavy manufacturing, construction and outdoor logistics may be from 10pm to 8am. At 2am, ambient temperatures are often 15° Celsius lower and humidity is less. As India overcomes its electricity deficits, lighting up work zones is no longer as difficult as it once was.

Focus on resilience: Before the problem worsens, governments and multi-lateral development banks (MDBs) must start focusing on human resilience. This could be achieved through a few steps. MDBs could, for example, adjust the cost of lending to states up or down on the basis of resilience metrics. This can act as an incentive system to take action in favour of the vulnerable. A municipal government that implements an 'Albedo-District' programme, under which reflective films on windows and other materials are used as a way to lower ambient temperatures, should see an improved credit rating. This would reduce the population's metabolic tax and aid productivity.

On their part, governments should treat investments in heat resilience with the same tax-favouritism reserved for heavy machinery. A company that invests in bio-resilient housing for its

factory workers—using passive cooling and optimized ventilation—should receive an appropriate tax break.

Another programme could move from a relief system based on claims and institute a framework for sensor-triggered payments. It could work like an automated insurance policy that makes payouts to identified beneficiaries on the basis of climate events that have indisputably occurred. So, if regional sensors spot a breach of a 34° Celsius wet-bulb threshold (just below the danger mark, i.e.) for an extended period of, say, 48 hours, it could trigger an automatic non-conditional transfer directly into the digital wallets of vulnerable workers. For those who live off daily wages, this welfare device could prevent people from facing a choice between starvation and heat-stroke. A well-designed welfare system to secure outdoor workers from heat could also help families put together enough money to access healthcare and acquire cooling systems.

We need a major shift in focus: The human body must not be viewed as a 'unit of labour' that can be squeezed for work until it hits the fatality limit.

Nobody would disagree with this proposition. However, awareness seems to remain low of how climate change is pushing up heat and humidity levels.

Institutions could change that by treating it like the crisis it actually is. When the World Bank or International Monetary Fund negotiates a loan deal with an emerging country, the headline conversation should not just be about 'fiscal consolidation,' but equally about climate resilience.

If the majority of a country's population suffers a 15% drop in cognitive capacity due to heat stress, such a nation would be unable to maximize its economic potential and repay its loans. Linking an economy's prospects with the ability of its workforce to withstand global warming would force a shift in priorities and serve the country's long-run interests.

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

One of the most famous motivational stories is a myth

MANU JOSEPH



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

When motivational gurus say 'believe in yourself,' they mean delude yourself. But it works. Belief can make things happen, often by overriding caution and common sense. But the sacred status of belief in the self-help genre is probably because it is often wrongly credited for poorly analysed triumphs. Much touted evidence of the glory of belief is pure nonsense. The most famous proof is in fact a poor assessment of a simple phenomenon.

In late April, Sebastian Sawe from Kenya ran a 42km marathon under two hours. It was the first time an observed human achieved the feat without the assistance of favourable wind or any banned running aid.

The sub-two-hour marathon was one of the most famous sports barriers that was, inevitably, considered not just a physiological barrier, but a 'psychological' one. But it is not the most famous 'psychological barrier' ever. That honour goes to the four-minute mile.

The story is that nobody could run a mile in under four minutes. Then an Englishman

called Roger Bannister ran a mile in 3:59.4 seconds. It was considered one of the greatest feats in sports at the time. Then, something strange happened. Just weeks later, another man ran a sub-four-minute mile. Within two years there were apparently dozens. The moral of the story came to be that Bannister had shown that something could be done, and that made other athletes believe it could be done, as a result of which they did it. This is called the 'Bannister Effect.' What he had breached was 'the psychological barrier.'

To give you an idea of how entrenched this is as an ordinary truth of our times, consider what the famous motivational speaker, Tony Robbins wrote: "After Roger Bannister ran that 4-minute mile, within just two years, 37 people also ran a 4-minute mile. And remember, no one in history had ever done that before. This is the power of imagery training—of visualizing the results over and over, as if it had already happened. We all have beliefs that limit us." One of the world's most popular writers, Malcolm Gladwell, said once, "For years, no one even comes close. Then Roger Bannister breaks the record in 1954, and suddenly, everyone can break four minutes. Did runners get 'better' in 1954? Not really. They simply became aware that running four minutes was possible."

But the Bannister Effect is hogwash. It is actually evidence that people tend to come to the most interesting conclusion while missing what is obvious underneath.

This is my theory of what really happened. In the 1940s and 50s, some people in advanced economies indulged in a niche mid-distance sport. Also, the mile is a British imperial unit. So, the one-mile race was popular chiefly in the UK. It did seem that no one could run it in under four minutes. Some came close, but four minutes appeared to be the very limit of human capability—though the measure of minutes and seconds itself is just an accident of Sumerians coming up with a 60-base number system instead of a decimal one.

Then one day in 1954, an English medical student named Roger Bannister breached the four-minute barrier. The British went berserk as they do with all their accomplishments. They were still influential then, which meant they held the powers to transmit news and opinion. It was a highly unequal world

where a small pool of people could create world news very fast. The breach became one of the greatest sporting feats of that era. Its extraordinary fame resulted in more mile races. Young men who were otherwise uninterested in running a mile gave it a shot. Suddenly, the mile race expanded across classes and societies. That is why Bannister's record could not survive long. His feat was replicated not because he demolished any psychological barrier, but because, at the highest levels of human athleticism, it was an ordinary feat. The world record for a mile today is 3:43.13.

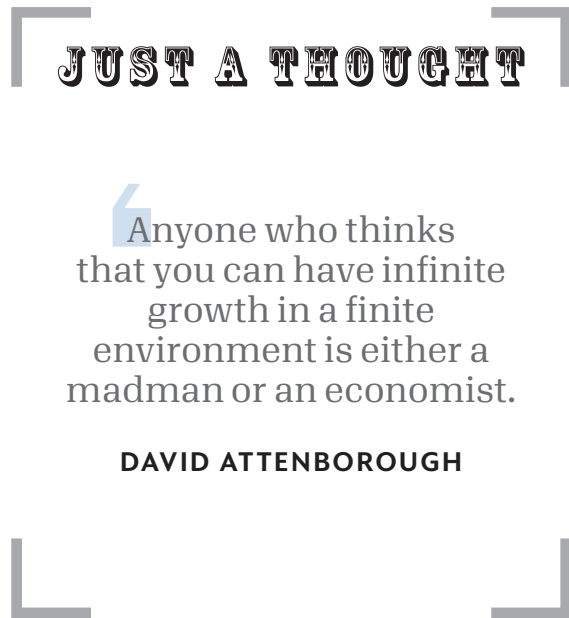
As it happens, the feats of a small group are no longer so when more people find opportunities to give them a shot. This is why the kind of people who used to win marathons and other races don't anymore; and why not as many upper-city boys break into the Indian cricket team or IITs, places they once monopolized.

You may argue that even if Europe only measured a small fraction of humanity that played a niche sport, it is still true that Ban-

nister was the first among hundreds or thousands to breach a famous barrier; there must have been a reason why no one else could before him even though the sport was timed for years and so, perhaps he did show it could be done. That is the absurd thing. Bannister may not have been the first to run a sub-four-minute mile even in his time. I am not preparing to say a Kenyan boy ran it faster than him on his way to school. Even among Caucasian Europeans, there is a simple indicator that the barrier was breached long before Bannister, just that no one looked carefully.

The more mainstream race than the mile run was the 1,500m one. A mile is just over 1,600m. In 1944, the 1,500m world record was 3:43, held by the Swede Gunder Hägg. At that pace, he would have run a mile in about 3:58, if he had been made to run just another 109m. Yet, for a decade, near hysterical hype grew around the four-minute-mile barrier.

The influence of the class that created news was so strong that they could construct a false psychological barrier, and when one of their own broke it, they could manufacture the notion that it was an extraordinary feat. And when others who were more gifted achieved it in no time, they could transmit the idea that Bannister had shown the way. And the myth still endures.



Self-belief? The 'Bannister Effect' is based on a poor analysis of a common phenomenon



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

The rupee is facing an exogenous shock: let's respond accordingly

Capital outflows can overwhelm the fundamentals of an economy but India's focus should be on appropriate policy responses



C. RANGARAJAN & N.R. BHANUMURTHY are, respectively, former chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, and former governor, RBI; and director, Madras School of Economics.

Over the last one year, the value of the rupee against the dollar has seen a sharp decline. From 85.48 in May 2025 to presently around 96.82, India's currency has depreciated by more than 13%; this is the sharpest drop since the 2013 'taper tantrum.'

Two sharp downturns have occurred, one after the hike in US tariffs and the second after the outbreak of the US-Israel war on Iran. These are purely exogenous shocks.

For the foreign exchange market, the shock came from large outflows of foreign portfolio investor (FPI) money. Since January 2026, India's net FPI outflows have been to the tune of \$22.2 billion (until 19 May). The previous fiscal year also witnessed a rise in our trade deficit as a proportion of GDP—from 2.6% in 2024-25 to 3.1% in 2025-26. This increase was mostly seen in the second half of 2025-26. The trade deficit was \$176.5 billion in the second half, compared to \$129.7 billion in the first.

We cannot ignore capital flows in a world dominated by these. What intrigues many people today is why the rupee is under pressure at a time when the Indian economy's fundamentals are sound. In a world where purchasing-power-parity theory holds, exchange rates ought to reflect economic fundamentals. But that is not so when capital flows dominate. To be sure, these flows do reflect the fundamentals in the medium- to long-term, but not necessarily in the short-term, especially when FPI flows are in play. In the current situation, a sense of trepidation appears to have driven capital outflows. China seems to have fared better despite its GDP growth slowing. Its decline in exports to the US has been compensated by increased exports to the rest of the world. But in the case of India, such export diversification appears to be modest. While our trade surplus with the US narrowed by about \$6.5 billion in 2025-26, it has not resulted in any significant reduction in deficits with West Asia and other markets.

What should be our response? The first is purely diplomatic. The war should be brought to a close soon. In such an event, the value of the rupee could recover quickly. However, over the medium-term, we should build buffers so that we can handle such situations for extended periods. Buffer stocks for essential items such as food, fuel (including gas) and fertilizers should be the focus. The alternative energy mix that India has adopted recently is another step in the direction. Second, we should work on altering the perceptions of foreign portfolio investors and draw their attention to domestic fundamentals. Recent reports by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank project India's economic growth in 2026-27 at 6.5% and 6.6%, respectively. Since recent FPI outflows may not reflect structural weaknesses in India's economy,



they could be transitory. However, the risk that it has exposed India's external account to is real; both the current account deficit and rupee are currently under strain.

As the current rupee shock is largely exogenous, it can change only if peace is restored. In 2025-26, the tariff impact was limited, as it covered only half the year. But if supply disruptions of the ongoing war continue, we must be prepared for a tougher situation. Domestic prices of petroleum products, which are being raised gradually, must be adjusted to the fullest extent of the global crude-oil price increase. A reduction in the consumption of such products is necessary. By reducing excise duty, the government has absorbed the oil shock to a major extent. But it should pass on the full impact of the shock to fuel consumers. Shielding them will widen the fiscal deficit, worsening the effects of its monetization, and must therefore be avoided.

Another concern raised is that the rupee has suffered a sharper drop than other currencies (Japan's yen weakened by 9.4% against the dollar, China's yuan by 5.5%, Indonesia's rupiah by 5% and South Korea's won by 5.5%). We have already identified capital outflows as a major reason as far as India is concerned. This may be true for other some countries too, though to a less extent. But the global perception may be that India is overly vulnerable to the oil shock, as 80% of our crude oil requirement is imported.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) appears to face a sort of 'impossible trinity' problem. So far, RBI has let the rupee fall smoothly through interven-

tion aimed at reducing volatility. Today's economic situation has been aggravated by non-economic factors. So, as long as the Strait of Hormuz is blocked for geopolitical reasons, a crude oil and gas scarcity will probably keep their prices high. India's forex reserves are not useful if hydrocarbon supply is the constraint. We must continue the present policy and let the rupee find its market level. However, we do not think that India will gain much because of the rupee's depreciation. True, exporters will gain in rupee terms in the short-term, but our export volumes are unlikely to expand. Exports with high import content, for example, will see costs rise, which will limit the price edge in export markets.

Meanwhile, if the war continues, India's production system itself could be affected. We should explore the possibility of getting crude oil and gas from sources other than West Asia. While this war holds out many lessons on crafting a medium-term strategy, we need gas and crude oil at the earliest.

India's options at the moment are very limited. A rise in inflation is inevitable. The current account deficit will also increase. We have solid forex reserves. But the fiscal situation needs to be kept under watch. The government must resist the temptation to absorb the oil shock, even though this may be difficult. As for monetary policy, authorities will face more than inflation as challenge. As US bond yields rise, India's FPI flows may get hit. If there is no relief from uncertainties and war disruptions, policymakers must be prepared to raise the policy rate of interest.

Anthropic's equity confusion: don't loosen disclosure norms

The US would err by making it easier to keep investors in the dark



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The SEC's proposals could go against the US economy's interest.

Even if armchair investors are fleeing private credit or panicking that their unlisted shares in Anthropic are now invalid, the long-term trend is clear: Public markets keep losing ground to private funds. That is one big reason for proposals in the US to ditch quarterly reporting demands for listed companies.

Big and small investors hate that idea, and they are right to. But concentrating solely on the potential rule changes misses half the story: All investors—and the watchdogs meant to protect them—should be just as focused on getting more information from private companies and the funds that own them. The trend is towards greater convergence between public and private markets; a levelling of the playing field is necessary. Fuller reporting in private markets is the only sensible policy.

The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) under Paul Atkins is pursuing a company-friendly agenda that aims to cut the costs of being a public issuer of stock or bonds and thereby promote investment and growth. That is a fine goal, although the US does not suffer from a lack of economic vitality—plenty of other countries are more in need of a boost on that front. Alongside the idea of moving to a bi-annual reporting standard, Atkins has also proposed lessening the already low reporting requirements for private funds through Form PF, the main regulatory disclosure demands on hedge funds and alternative asset managers.

But while the SEC is thinking about reducing the information available to itself and others, the push to get more retail money into private markets is well underway. In the US, it seems likely that retirement funds will eventually get access to private equity and private credit. And there are already a host of platforms that offer ways to trade in the shares of hot unlisted tech companies. Even in the UK, the London Stock Exchange Group got regulators' green light to launch its own private securities market, Pisces, late last year.

Certainly, direct access to many of these is only available to the very wealthy, family offices and institutions, but the genie is out of the bottle. Ordinary people wishing to bet on unicorns or private lending can increasingly find ways to do it. This is not a world that calls for less financial reporting.

This year's most anticipated initial public offerings (IPOs), starting with SpaceX and followed by Anthropic, OpenAI or both, are likely to reveal a mess of ownership claims—and possible disappointments. People who have found their way into these companies ahead of their IPOs

were probably not particularly fussed about revenue progression, profit margins or depreciation rates. Hopes of ever higher valuations were likely the trade. Still, with better disclosure there is no way investors would only just be learning that Anthropic believes any transactions in its shares not explicitly approved by the AI company could be deemed void.

Meanwhile in private credit, Apollo Global Management and JPMorgan are working hard to get more loans trading regularly. Apollo is also pledging to start posting daily prices for all kinds of private debt, from investment-grade corporate loans to classic mid-market buyout debt and private asset-backed bonds. The goal is to support wider access for a range of investors, especially individuals, who, unlike big institutions, will always be vulnerable to sudden and unavoidable needs to turn an investment back into cash.

If the industry is successful in making private shares and debts more reliably and easily bought and sold, more people are going to trade them. Let us imagine it is, and the trend for companies remaining private for longer continues; their popularity keeps growing among all investors, and that secondary markets in their shares and loans keep developing. What are we left with?

We would be in a world where public and private markets converge—where issuers can get funding readily in either, because a wider range of investors are there to provide it and trade out when they like. But there is one key difference between the two markets that remains: disclosure. Public markets will have it and private markets will not. Maybe that promotes investment and growth, or more likely, it encourages more companies to stay or go private so they can cut corners in reporting. That would be bad news for investors, markets and the whole economy.

This switch will not happen overnight and plenty of other rule changes would be required for public markets to be completely decimated. But it is clear which way we are currently heading: Public and private are already converging in many ways. Investors, watchdogs and even companies themselves should be looking to shine more light into dark corners rather than lowering a veil over the bits we can now see.

GUEST VIEW

Why naval supremacy is no longer optional for India

SUSHIL DAS & VIKAS SINGH



are, respectively, a retired Indian Navy veteran; and an author.

Two straits are all it took to hold the global economy hostage. The blockade of the Strait of Hormuz—through which about a quarter of the world's seaborne oil once used to flow daily—has combined with Iran's threat to close the Bab al-Mandab at the southern mouth of the Red Sea to transform a targeted military campaign into a full-spectrum maritime conflict of global consequence. Missile and drone strikes on US military installations across the Gulf region and Israeli operations reaching deep into Lebanon have further expanded the theatre; today, the distinction between the West Asia war and Indian Ocean crisis has effectively ceased to exist.

But it pays to look at what lies beneath the surface—that is, under the carrier battle groups, destroyer formations and mine-countermeasures operations. Here lies a dimension of maritime warfare that has become strategically decisive: submarine operations. Silent, nearly undetectable and capable of projecting power across entire ocean basins,

submarines have emerged as the ultimate arbiters of naval dominance in the 21st century. Even the Far East is witnessing a contest of undersea power projection, with China ranged against the Aukus alliance of Australia, the UK and US. The Arctic could become a similar zone of rivalry too. Right now, however, the global focus is on the Indian Ocean region.

For every country dependent on free passage across the high seas for trade, energy security and prosperity, the message is unambiguous: A comprehensive naval force, one that commands both surface and subsurface domains, is necessary to hold the line between economic growth based on national sovereignty and catastrophic disruption caused by adversarial forces.

This lesson from the Strait of Hormuz carries particular significance for India, whose prosperity and regional security rest to a significant extent on uncontested command of the Indian Ocean. Regional powers like India with blue-water naval aspirations (which go far beyond the country's littoral) must build multi-dimensional capability with adequate submarine and anti-submarine fleet.

The latest war's basic lesson: The current war has taught the world a critical truth: the

ocean is no longer a free waterway for ships to traverse. Decades of uncontested American maritime supremacy had allowed us to treat it as such, even take maritime movement for granted. Cargo and passengers moved freely; oil flowed without interruption; trade expanded unchecked. But this year's US-Israeli conflict with Iran has turned the Indian Ocean into an active theatre of hostility with no end in sight.

By late April, many vessels had been attacked in Gulf waters—struck by missiles, drones and torpedoes—forcing insurers, shipping companies and commodity traders to fundamentally rethink the safety of the world's most critical trade corridors. Global trade has not merely been disrupted, its character has changed, and the scars of the conflict will outlast any ceasefire by decades.

Less visible but far more consequential is the role that submarine deployments and the threat of submarine-launched attacks have played in reshaping strategic calcula-

tions across the region. The presence of even a single unlocated hostile submarine creates strategic paralysis, forcing defending navies to concentrate on defensive resources, modify operational patterns and limit the freedom of manoeuvre that surface vessels need.

Iran's deployment of its diesel-electric submarines has injected a degree of uncertainty into every US-led naval operation. For the first time in the modern era, a numerically inferior naval force, equipped with advanced submarine technology, has effectively constrained the operations of vastly superior surface fleets.

Comprehensive naval dominance is a strategic imperative for India: India's position as a regional power is inextricably linked to its capacity to maintain uncontested maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean. The region accounts for nearly 40% of global maritime trade and multiple critical shipping routes converge in these waters, even as energy flows pass through choke-points vulnerable to interdiction. India's

economic growth depends on the security and freedom of these sea lanes.

The war in West Asia and the Indian Ocean is reshaping global maritime strategy in real time. It has demonstrated that surface naval power—however formidable—is incomplete without advanced submarine capabilities. It has shown that strategic dominance in the maritime domain requires integrated operations across surface, subsurface and air dimensions. And it has made unmistakably clear that nations without comprehensive maritime power are vulnerable to coercion, interdiction and worse.

For India, which has one of the world's most strategically consequential oceans around it and remains heavily dependent on its waterways for progress, stepped up naval investment is a strategic necessity.

Our economic growth, energy security, regional dominance and national sovereignty will increasingly rely on the country's ability to project power across the Indian Ocean in order to serve its strategic interests. The investment outlay must prioritize submarines, for these are the key instrument of maritime power.

In a fractured world where old certainties are falling apart, we must move quickly. The world is watching. Will India act?



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Riding out a time of turbulence

Secretary of state Marco Rubio's visit should give a boost to India-US relations

US secretary of state Marco Rubio's visit to India should be seen as another step by the two countries to put their relationship back on an even keel after a particularly rough patch in the ties over the Trump administration's whimsical approach towards trade and tariff matters in the past year. As external affairs minister S Jaishankar put it after his talks with Rubio on Sunday, the two sides are seeking to arrive at a balance between their respective foreign policy visions of America First and India First and broaden the scope of convergences while narrowing their differences. In that sense, there will be areas where the national interests of both sides are similar, and there will be others where the focus will have to be on managing divergences.

Clearly, the bilateral relationship remains a work in progress, though faster movement on a long-delayed interim trade deal could help smooth over the rough edges and also address US President Donald Trump's focus on all matters related to trade. There continue to be differences over recent changes to the US visa regime that have hurt the prospect of Indian students and professionals, who are anyway making their way in greater numbers to European shores.

The Indian side also forcefully took up the issue of energy supply disruptions that were caused by the US and Israel's war against Iran, especially as New Delhi appears to be preparing for a looming oil and gas crisis. Trump's recent visit to Beijing and his talk of a "G2" comprising the US and China would not have been music to the ears of Indian policymakers, who are already wary about the US President's growing proximity to Pakistan army chief Asim Munir.

There will be more indications of how far the US is willing to go to address India's sensitivities and concerns when Rubio participates in the Quad foreign ministers' meeting on Tuesday, especially given New Delhi's anticipation of a signal regarding the convening of the Quad Leaders' Summit, which now hinges on Trump's decision on travelling to India. If the West Asia conflict drags on further, it will exacerbate India's energy crisis and divert the US's attention from steps that should be taken to reinvigorate and rebuild the relationship with India. It is, therefore, in India's interest to drive home the message that the time has come to wind down this conflict which has significant ramifications for the Indian economy and diaspora.

WFI on the mat in battle with Vinesh

The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) has refused to mend its ways and the Delhi High Court, after concluding that the selection policy was unfair, cleared the way for Vinesh Phogat to participate in the Asian Games trials. This is not only the latest chapter in the battle between the federation and the celebrated wrestler but also one that has once again shown how vindictive the ones in power are. Phogat, 31, is an Asian and World Championships medallist and one of the best wrestlers produced by India. She came incredibly close to winning a medal at the 2024 Paris Olympics after a brilliant run in the 50kg category that saw her beat the reigning champion, Yui Susaki. But disaster struck on the morning of the final when she was disqualified for being above the stipulated weight during the weigh-in. A heartbroken Phogat announced her retirement soon after and decided to return only in December 2025. The WFI should have welcomed her back but given their history, they have done anything but that.

The HC's order is important from the perspective that it shows how federations can't bully athletes. But at the same time, it must be remembered that sport is a meritocracy. Past achievements count for little as younger and fitter opponents are always looking to push the established greats. By giving Phogat a free run to the trials that other athletes have had to work hard to qualify for, the order can sow seeds of discontent. Since announcing her comeback, Phogat hasn't taken part in a single event. No one quite knows the level of her fitness or whether she is competition ready. That said, it is good to have Phogat back in the mix, but it must be made clear that there are no shortcuts to the top, not even for her.

{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happymon Jacob



Keep the doors open for talks with Pakistan

The case for the two nuclear-armed States to have a dialogue is strategic, not civilisational

When Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale told the *Press Trust of India* on May 12 that "doors should not be closed" for talks with Pakistan, and that there must always be "a window for dialogue", the remark deserved more attention than it received. Hosabale was speaking of the operational language of visas, sports, trade, and structured engagement.

The context of his statement is important. It came a year after Operation Sindoor, with the Indus Waters Treaty still in suspension and New Delhi unwilling to have any conversation with Islamabad. Meanwhile, the strategic environment around India has hardened in ways that make an opening with Pakistan "not an unthinkable proposition". Pakistan's defence pact with Saudi Arabia has deepened the former's ties with West Asia while India's traditional ability to balance various players in the region has become constrained. China openly supports, and US President Donald Trump continues to favour, Islamabad. Moreover, another terror attack could trigger a kinetic exchange that can take us into unknown territory.

In that sense, India's strategic

interest in keeping the lines of communication open with Pakistan, then, has less to do with Pakistan itself and more with managing the new geopolitical realities. Talks with Pakistan, in this reading, is a hedging instrument, not a concession to that country. It is what serious nuclear-armed States do as a matter of risk management.

What indeed is the state of communications between India and Pakistan a year after Operation Sindoor?

The directors general of military operations (DGMOs) remain in contact through a hotline. This channel did important work during the 88 hours of escalation during Operation Sindoor, enabling the cessation of hostilities. It continues to perform tactical deconfliction at least once every week. But, confidential military chat cannot signal political intent, carry messages between civilian leaderships, or reassure us that things are under control. Therefore, treating the DGMO line as a substitute for an India-Pakistan conversation would be a mistake.

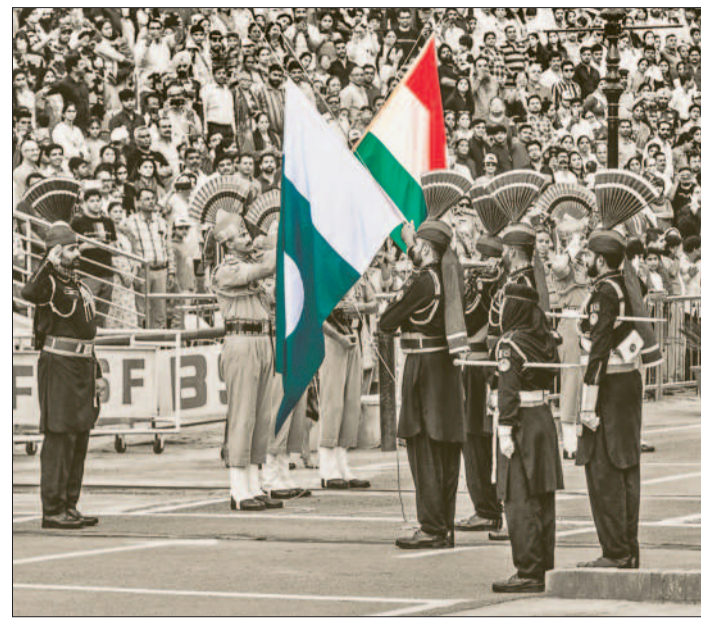
Track-II channels have been operating with greater intensity than is publicly acknowledged.

Reports in this newspaper and others have confirmed that at least four meetings between experts, parliamentarians, and former officials from India and Pakistan have taken place since July 2025. These conversations often test propositions before they reach official tables. They often give us an idea about Pakistan's military thinking, through interlocutors with access to Rawalpindi. They allow signalling

and testing the temperature that neither government can do publicly. They keep channels open so that when Track-I shuts down, the wiring is in place for an alternative line of communication. As someone who has been involved in such dialogues for the better part of two decades, I can attest to its utility, not least because the participants on the Pakistan side are able to carry messages back to General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi.

Then, there is the backchannel conversation. Records show every period of meaningful India-Pakistan progress, from the Lahore process through the composite dialogue to the 2021 ceasefire agreement, has been preceded by quiet backchannel conversations. I do not want to speculate whether such conversations are taking place now, but I will say that the absence of any such channel for an extended period is itself a strategic vulnerability.

Now is not the time for grand bargains. What we need is conflict management, not conflict resolution. Resolution requires a very different political and geopolitical climate which simply doesn't exist today. One important step towards conflict management is authorising backchannels with explicit mandates on crisis communication, as also for procedural conversations on Line of Control (LoC) management, prisoner repatriation, and the handling of incidents below the threshold of full mobilisation. None of this requires solving the Kashmir issue or even discussing it. All of these reduce the probability of the next



Now is not the time for grand bargains. What we need is conflict management.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Pahalgam triggering the next Operation Sindoor or something worse. Even if it isn't able to do this, such a channel would still be useful. Why take a chance by shutting off this option?

This is where Hosabale's statement is most useful, though limited in some ways. The instinct to keep the window open with Pakistan is astute. But the civilisational packaging that came with it, the claim that India and Pakistan have been "one nation" and that civil society can pave the way, relying on the strength of cultural relations, belongs to a different era and might not work. Hosabale is not the first senior RSS functionary to make such an argument: RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has invoked a shared civilisational geography in the past.

But that vocabulary has not worked in the past, and is unlikely to work now or in the future. The nation theory is the founding logic of the State of Pakistan. No interlocutor of consequence in Islamabad or Rawalpindi can endorse the suggestion that the two countries were

ever one nation without ending his usefulness at home. In fact, the newer generations in Pakistan have no "one nation" nostalgia. The framing also hands the Pakistan military a ready-made script for portraying every Indian opening as the Akhand Bharat ideology in another costume, which strengthens precisely that constituency in Pakistan which the RSS's more thoughtful voices say they want to bypass.

The spirit of Hosabale's argument is sound, but its packaging is dated. India needs to keep talking to Pakistan because these are two nuclear-armed States with too much that can go wrong, and too few guardrails to manage them. So, the case for the window is strategic, not civilisational. Hosabale has done the harder political work of opening the door. But the policy case now needs to be made in the language of risk, not of family reunion.

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{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



Reforms are the answer to India's present crisis

Have you heard of Bhamashah, the epitome of financial renunciation for a cause? He was the treasurer (finance minister) of Mewar in 1578, when Maharana Pratap was living in the jungle after losing to the Mughals. Bhamashah gave all of his family wealth to the Maharana who used the funds to raise a new army and reclaim most parts of his kingdom that he had lost to the Mughals. This gripping, fairytale-like turnaround story holds an important lesson. If the State and the people join hands, they can make the impossible happen.

The lesson has become extremely relevant in the present context as our world deals with a decade of crisis. It began with the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the Ukraine-Russia war and the Israel-Gaza conflict; now, the war in West Asia has blown to smithereens all the established norms and networks that built the edifice of global village over the last three decades.

A few examples are enough to understand the gravity of the situation. After three months of restraint, the prices of petrol, gas and diesel are rising. The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) inflation is at 8.30%. Despite what the government data says about retail inflation, grocery, dairy, and vegetable bills are rising. Many industries are complaining about increased input costs and decreasing profit margins. Daily-wagers are feeling the pinch.

For a reality check, let me take you to Firozabad. There are 200 glass bangle manufacturing units in the city. Three lakh labourers work in these units. The bangle business is worth close to Rs 17,000 crore. Due to the war in West Asia, their exports have dried up and a reduction in the piped natural gas (PNG) quota is affecting their production. Thanks to this double whammy, the manufacturers threatened to stop production from May 22. But, after the district administration's intervention, they postponed their decision till May 30. There are thousands of such units across the country that are suffering from a similar crisis.

This is the reason Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi asked the people to exercise restraint.

Modi wants Indians to desist from buying gold and travelling abroad for a year. Due to the Strait of Hormuz shutting down, the spectre of shortage in petroleum products and urea has raised its ugly head. Some YouTubers are busy peddling canards that a shortfall in rains and urea supply will create famine-like conditions in India. Be assured nothing like this will happen. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the Modi government is providing monthly rations to 80 crore people. We have enough food grains to continue the scheme.

The PM has also advised Indians not to buy gold to save foreign currency. We can meet our needs by stopping the import of gold. Government data is testimony that close to 25,000 tonnes of gold is "lying idle" with Indian citizens. Apart from this, religious institutions

have huge amounts of gold, silver and other ornaments. Taking inspiration from Bhamashah, we can utilise this dormant wealth.

In 1997, the government led by HD Deve Gowda brought a Special Import Licence and, in 2015, the Modi government introduced the Gold Monetisation Scheme. These schemes filled the government coffers, but were bitterly criticised. Their shortcomings can be addressed and a fresh time-bound scheme can be introduced.

India's prominent jeweller guilds and gems and ornament export processing councils have advised the government to establish a "bullion bank" with people's participation. It will reduce the dependence on gold imports and save foreign exchange. Our gold requirements will not be hampered.

Crisis in petroleum products and related issues have plagued the economy earlier too. The only long-term solution is to decrease our dependence on oil. To counter the threat, the idea of "gasification of coal" was discussed in the 1950s. India doesn't have enough oil and gas but it has abundant reserves of coal. We can make gas from it and use it to bring down the use of oil. Later, as the years passed by there were talks of solar and biogas energy. Some work was done in this direction but no strong push was made to meet the ever-growing demand of the Indian consumers. We need superhuman efforts to meet our burgeoning needs.

We are told to use public transport to save fuel and energy, but the condition of public transport is abysmal. City bus services are dead in almost every city in the Hindi heartland. Polluting three-wheelers and e-rickshaws have replaced them. Some big cities have metro services but they are inadequate considering the expanse of the city.

A few days ago, one of my senior editorial colleagues in Noida was hit by a vehicle while he was returning home on a two-wheeler. He sustained serious injuries. He had to drive a two-wheeler because there's no credible round-the-clock transport option for him in the 30-kilometre stretch that lies between his residence and the office. This is the situation in Delhi and the National Capital Region. The situation in smaller towns and those just assuming metropolitan status is worse.

I am astonished at the charade perpetuated by people in positions of power, about using public transport. We should do away with such optics and start working on long-term solutions to problems on a war-footing. Remember such conversations were initiated during Covid too, but in the heady "hockey-stick recovery" period we lost track of them. We can turn this *aapda* (crisis) into an *avsar* (opportunity). The country and society need to maintain focus and direct efforts to achieve targets, sailing through the present crisis into a glorious future.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

{ S JAISHANKAR } EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER



The work on Quad goes on and two days from now you will see us on the podium talking about the Quad. I can assure you we will have a good strong story to tell

Responding to media queries regarding the grouping at a joint press conference with US secretary of state Marco Rubio



Behind the transformation of power distribution sector

India's power distribution companies (discoms), once the weakest link in the country's electricity system, achieved a historic milestone — they recently posted a profit of ₹2,701 crore in FY 2024-25. This was the first time since Independence that discoms had such a showing. Just a year earlier, they were ₹25,553 crore in the red, and losses stood at a staggering ₹67,962 crore in FY 2013-14.

How has this remarkable turnaround come about? It results from sustained, targeted reforms by the Narendra Modi-led government, routed through the ministry of power. These interventions addressed entrenched problems such as delayed payments, cost mismatches, high losses, and poor metering, creating interlocking improvements across the sector.

Two core metrics highlight the progress: The first is the dramatic narrowing of the "cost-recovery gap" — from a loss of ₹0.78 per unit in FY 2013-14 to just ₹0.06 per unit in FY 2024-25.

The second is the significant reduction in aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) losses — from 22.62% in FY 2013-14 to 15.04% in FY 2024-25.

Apart from this, payment discipline has also improved, with the average payment cycle dropping from 178 days in FY 2020-21 to 113 days in FY 2024-25. Legacy arrears reported by 13 states fell sharply from ₹1,39,947 crore in 2022 to just ₹4,109 crore by February 10, 2026.

What are the key interventions driving the turnaround? Among others, the Electricity (Late Payment Surcharge) Rules, 2022, Electricity (Amendment) Rules, 2022 for monthly fuel cost adjustments, the Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS) that saw smart metering for nearly 20 crore consumers (3.9 crore installed by December 2025), and performance-linked incentives allowing states additional borrowing space of up to 0.5% of GDP for reforms, stand out.

This turnaround is also historic given how it has moved the power sector from an era of blackouts to record stability.

The distribution reforms listed earlier are part of a larger transformation. India has moved from the world's largest blackout in July 2012 — which plunged over 60 crore people across 20 states into darkness — to remarkable grid stability. On April 24, 2026, the country met a record 256 GW power demand without any grid failure, with solar contributing close to 22% during peak hours.

Installed power capacity has reached 520.51 GW (January 2026), while the power shortage declined from 4.2% in FY 2013-14 to just 0.03% in FY 2025-26 (till December 2025). Near-universal household electrification was achieved by 2021 through an investment of ₹1.85 lakh crore, electrifying 18,374 villages and connecting 2.86 crore households.

Rural electricity supply has also seen dramatic improvement, from an availability of 12.5 hours/day in 2014 to 22.6 hours in 2025, while urban supply now clocks 23.4 hours. Non-fossil power capacity has grown by 180% since 2014. On the record day (April 24, 2026), solar alone contributed 60.5 GW, with the larger renewables basket (solar + hydro + wind) providing over 76 GW and their share in meeting peak demand rising from 10.9% in 2023 to 15.4% in 2025. This certainly is no small achievement, and more so considering the pace of renewable generation growth over the last decade.

From crippling blackouts and daily outages to record demand met with stability and near round-the-clock supply, India's power sector has been fundamentally rewritten. Sustained reforms, smart metering, renewable integration, and strong grid infrastructure have delivered what was once unimaginable: Reliable electricity for all.

What is needed now is continued state cooperation and deeper reforms that will ensure that the progress made over the last decade achieves its own momentum and becomes a permanent feature of the country's power sector.



Shehzad Poonawalla

Shehzad Poonawalla is a national spokesperson of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The views expressed are personal



Editor's TAKE

Addressing India's jobs crisis

The employment question is not merely economic – it is deeply linked to dignity and aspiration of the youth and affects national confidence

Any nation that aspires to be super power must be backed by its youth that is meaningfully employed and has a positive mindset. Indeed, India is one of the youngest nation of the world has a sizable youthful energy. But if it is not engaged in constructive work there is a high chance of it going wayward. In keeping with his commitment to provide jobs Prime Minister Narendra Modi presided over the 19th edition of the Rozgar Mela, distributing appointment letters to over 51,000 freshly recruited government employees across 47 locations nationwide. The ceremony was warm. The intent, no doubt, is genuine. But the arithmetic is brutal. India adds roughly a million young people to its workforce every single month. Fifty-one thousand government posts, distributed once every few months, is a gesture – not a solution. Youth unemployment in India stood at 15.2 per cent as of March 2026, up from lows of 13.8 per cent just a year earlier, with young women faring far worse at nearly 18 per cent. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy(CMIE) an independent body, has consistently placed unemployment between 7-8 per cent – more than double the government's own survey figures – reflecting a chasm between how joblessness is measured and how it is experienced. Behind every statistic is a graduate sending out hundreds of applications, a young person cycling between gig stints, a family waiting on one steady income that never seems to arrive. Over 30 lakh vacancies remain unfilled in central government departments alone – even as Rozgar Melas distribute letters in the tens of thousands. The PM's original 2014 promise of two crore jobs a year now reads as a stark reminder of the distance between ambition and delivery. None of this is to say the Rozgar Mela is without value. For the 51,000 individuals who received their letters on Friday, this is life-changing. A government job in India remains a rare, coveted thing – stable, pensioned, insulated from the chaos of informal work that employs the vast majority of Indians. Every vacancy filled is a family's circumstances altered. That matters.

But the deeper crisis is structural, and ceremonial hiring drives cannot fix it. India's private sector – particularly manufacturing – has failed to absorb the demographic dividend at scale. The Production Linked Incentive scheme holds promise, and PM Modi's recent agreements with the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Italy in semiconductors, AI, and advanced manufacturing could, over time, seed high-quality employment. The keyword is time. Youth cannot wait a decade. The way forward demands three urgent shifts. First, a serious and transparent accounting of vacancies – not as political ammunition, but as a national obligation. If 30 lakh posts are empty in central government, they must be filled. Second, invest massively in quality skilling under PMKVY and allied programmes so that the millions outside government employment can compete in formal private sector jobs. Third, make it genuinely easier for small and medium enterprises to hire, expand, and formalise – because that is where the bulk of India's employment must ultimately come from.

IPL 2026: Time to Rebalance the Game

The IPL's strength lies in this very ability to reinvent attention around cricket. The task ahead, therefore, is to ensure that spectacle does not overpower skill, entertainment does not erase emotion, and commercial success nurtures cricket



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

Since its inception, every edition of IPL has brought a new wave of enthusiasm and expectation among cricket followers, passionate fans and key stakeholders. Each IPL season has brought with it a new kind of aggression, overdrive and unfiltered innovation in how cricket is played, packaged and understood in this new format.

Nonetheless, in 2026, something new seems to be missing in the IPL season. The flavour and variety are still there, yet the contrasts and the winning matrix seem to be missing in the overall IPL architecture. The general feeling among enthusiasts is that a kind of 'cricket fatigue' has entered the IPL domain, and the perception is that the IPL needs to detox to fully energise the minds and hearts of sports lovers once again.

Cricket over the years has reconfigured itself, keeping in mind the changing taste of audiences. A gentleman's game, as it was popularly called in the yesteryears, has now become part of the "Masala Cricket" bandwagon. Has the game reached a litmus testing point in the 2026 edition?

There is no doubt that the emotional connect of the format is still wired to the audiences. The outreach tools, sporting traits, ideas and entertainment touchpoints still dominate the ecosystem. Nonetheless, there is growing scepticism around IPL as a brand and an idea, with concerns that it may be overstretched, over-expanded or even over-optimised.

The fear among followers of the game is that the design quotient, or the novel experiment of the IPL format, is beginning to dry up for want of fresh ideas, over-monetisation and over-extension of cricket as a game vis-à-vis entertainment, skills and unpredictability.

The thrill factor of IPL, which acted as a catalyst in previous editions, is waning. The craze and idol worship of foreign players has perhaps outlived its utility. What was unique in the past is now the new normal. Consistency in viewing the IPL matches still commands TV advertisement, but audience attention has been divided into several segments. There is what we may call 'viewing' or 'audience burnout'. The uproar and support for franchise teams has also slid, at times due to the cricketing crossroads syndrome between the old and new generation. The connect of audiences with both the old and the new would need to be worked out for future editions.

A point to ponder for all cricket lovers: has IPL taken the wind out of the sails? This year's edition has perhaps challenged the cricket legacy, professionalism and nitty-gritties associated with the game. Twenty overs have seen skyrocketing scores, and sixes are being hit almost as casual-



THE SANCTITY ASSOCIATED WITH THE GAME HAS BEEN SHAKEN. THE TWENTY-OVER BLITZ, WITH NEW TWISTS AND TURNS, HAS OVERRUN THE 22-YARD PHILOSOPHY. THERE IS A NEW FANTASY FRONTIER BEING UNVEILED IN EVERY MATCH

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balance would need to be laid out for building perception, visibility and advertising. Extreme commercialisation has taken IPL to a point where its identity risks being lost in the attention-span ecosystem. While the advertising kitty has improved and more corporates have joined the bandwagon, the problem today for Brand IPL and brand cricket is the overcrowding of the cricketing ecosystem. The challenge still remains to ensure the legacy, freshness and continuity of cricket as a sport. IPL must and should remain the nursery and talent pool for future cricketing generations. Overexposed cricket is not the solution to this idea. A reworked social media ecosystem for IPL needs to be re-engineered through fresh minds, fresh thought and new parameters and verticals of cricketing content consumption, ideas and patterns.

"Cricket extortion" should not become the IPL mantra. The sport must not be sacrificed at the altar of the money mantra, nor become a victim of showbiz, charisma, 24x7 digital engagement and consistent spectacle without sporting depth.

Despite these concerns, it would be unfair to dismiss the IPL's larger contribution to Indian and global cricket. The league has transformed the cricketing economy, created a powerful platform for young domestic talent, strengthened India's sporting brand and given players exposure to pressure, scale and international competition at a very early stage. It has also expanded cricket's cultural vocabulary by taking the game beyond stadiums into homes, digital platforms, fan communities and everyday conversations. The IPL's strength lies in this very ability to reinvent attention around cricket.

The task ahead, therefore, is not to dilute the IPL, but to refine it, to ensure that spectacle does not overpower skill, entertainment does not erase emotion, and commercial success continues to serve the deeper purpose of nurturing cricket.

The 2026 IPL edition has to be a learning curve for the IPL strategists. While the brand identity remains unsurpassed, hugely massive and emotionally connected, there are a few takeaways for future editions.

The IPL does not need to lose its colour, glamour or energy; that has always been part of its appeal. What it needs now is a thoughtful recalibration that protects the soul of cricket while embracing the possibilities of a modern sporting spectacle. If future editions can restore the balance between bat and ball, give greater meaning to team legacies, create fresher fan narratives and continue to nurture young Indian talent, the league can enter an even stronger phase of its journey. The IPL still has the scale, imagination and emotional pull to renew itself. With the right course correction, it can remain not just cricket's biggest entertainment product, but also its most exciting nursery of talent, innovation and hope for the next generation.



PICTALK



Fishermen steer a fishing boat through sea waves at the Valiyathura coast, near Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

PHOTO: PTI



SANJAY CHANDRA

2ND OPINION

I was recently at a well-known hospital for a follow-up consultation when I noticed an elderly couple standing hesitantly near the billing counters, visibly uncertain about the procedure they were expected to follow. What struck me was the absence of anyone attentive enough to recognise their discomfort and assist them. My wife, standing some distance away, sensed their unease and quietly walked forward to help. A little later, I saw the same couple again at the coordinator's desk, trying to make sense of a junior doctor's instructions. They returned a few minutes later, still uncertain about the directions. The doctor repeated the explanation politely, though a trace of irritation had now entered his voice. Nearby, another young doctor was explaining something to a rustic-looking patient with far less patience and sensitivity.

A few days later, in another reputed hospital, I witnessed a similar moment of confusion. An elderly man and his son were standing in a long queue. The son had already completed the appointment and payment online. They need not have spent more time in the queue after waiting there so long already. I explained the process to them and directed them towards the consultation area.

Another experience stayed with me even more strongly. A hospital had recently opened a geriatric department, and impressed by the idea, I took my father there for consultation. A young doctor listened to him for a few minutes before interrupting midway and writing out a prescription without hearing the complete medical history. We had hoped he would guide us towards appropriate care. Yet, despite having no waiting patients outside, he appeared impatient to engage further.

My grey-haired cardiologist consistently gives patients the time required to understand complex medical terms and treatment options. My younger ophthalmologist embodies genuine care. She greets patients warmly, explains things calmly, and apologises personally for delays. Both these compassionate doctors work within the same hospital systems where I had witnessed impatience and indifference. The issue lies somewhere deeper in the gradual erosion of certain human abilities that are becoming increasingly critical in highly system-

driven environments. We observe a diminishing presence of patience, attentiveness, and empathy. Modern systems have become faster, more technologically efficient, and administratively streamlined, but human beings do not always move at the same speed as systems. Healthcare and other institutional spaces are increasingly transactional environments where vulnerability is handled procedurally rather than understood empathetically. The ability to listen patiently and respond with sensitivity is cultivated slowly over time. It is perhaps here that literature and the arts assume deeper relevance than we often acknowledge. Such engagement allows individuals to encounter lives beyond their own. And yet, I increasingly encounter resistance even to such ideas. Parents often oppose such initiatives related to literature and the arts in favour of narrow utilitarian pursuits. In hospitals, senior administrators sometimes ask how literature can possibly be connected to medical intervention. The issue is not whether literature cures disease, but whether societies still recognise the importance of cultivating human beings capable of understanding suffering with patience, dignity, and care. Perhaps this is where institutions must rediscover their human side.



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INDIA ISSUES TRAVEL ADVISORY AMID GROWING EBOLA OUTBREAK

India's advisory cautioning citizens against non-essential travel to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and South Sudan reflects the seriousness of the latest Ebola outbreak linked to the Bundibugyo strain. With the World Health Organisation declaring the situation a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, heightened vigilance is both timely and necessary. The absence of an approved vaccine or specific treatment for this strain makes the outbreak particularly alarming, especially for countries with strong international mobility links. The government's decision to intensify surveillance at airports and advise Indians in affected regions to strictly follow health

protocols demonstrates prudent public health preparedness. In an interconnected world, infectious diseases can spread rapidly across borders, making early caution far more effective than delayed response.

India's healthcare authorities must continue strengthening monitoring systems, quarantine preparedness and public awareness to prevent panic as well as complacency. At the same time, international cooperation remains crucial. Global health crises cannot be addressed in isolation, and coordinated action between governments, health agencies and research institutions is essential to contain the outbreak before it escalates further.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Balance US ties with strategic autonomy

The recent discussions between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Marco Rubio underline the growing importance of India-US ties in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment. Cooperation in defence, advanced technologies, trade and Indo-Pacific security offers India significant opportunities for economic growth, technological advancement and stronger global influence. Washington's continued outreach also reflects India's rising strategic importance in balancing China's assertiveness in the region. However, history reminds us that international relations are driven by national interests rather than permanent alliances. While the United States has often supported India on key issues, it has also imposed sanctions and strategic pressure whenever its priorities shifted. Therefore, India must approach this partnership with clarity and caution. India's greatest strength lies in preserving its strategic autonomy. Closer engagement with the US should not translate into overdependence. Maintaining balanced ties with Russia, Europe and other major powers remains essential for safeguarding India's long-term interests. A multi-aligned foreign policy allows India to maximise opportunities while retaining diplomatic flexibility in a rapidly changing global order.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

Satire often signals deeper public discontent

The viral "Cockroach Janata Party" phenomenon on social media may appear humorous on the surface, but it reflects a far deeper undercurrent of frustration among younger citizens. In a world marked by economic uncertainty, unemployment, technological disruption and declining trust in institutions, such digital satire has become an outlet for accumulated anxiety and alienation. History repeatedly shows that humour is not merely entertainment; it is often society's earliest warning signal. The Arab Spring, the French Revolution and even Sri Lanka's recent crisis emerged from prolonged public resentment that authorities failed to recognise in time. What begins as mockery can gradually evolve into political mobilisation when citizens feel unheard and excluded. In today's digital age, public sentiment spreads at unprecedented speed. Governments and institutions would therefore be mistaken to dismiss online satire as trivial meme culture. Beneath the jokes lies a widening trust deficit, particularly among younger generations.

Wise leadership should not fear criticism expressed through humour but instead treat it as valuable feedback. Satire frequently reveals concerns that official reports and political speeches fail to capture.

R. NARAYANAN | NAVI MUMBAI

Need to protect Tamil Nadu's core ideals

Recent political developments in Tamil Nadu have raised concerns among many who strongly identify with the state's long-standing Dravidian ideals of social justice, self-respect, women's empowerment and communal harmony.

Internal divisions within the AIADMK and changing political alliances have created uncertainty about the future direction of Dravidian politics at a time when many fear growing attempts to polarise society along religious lines. For decades, both the DMK and the AIADMK have drawn strength from the broader ideological foundation laid by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy.

Though political rivalry has shaped Tamil Nadu's electoral landscape, the core principles of social equality and rationalism have remained central to public life. Many citizens now worry that continued fragmentation may weaken these shared ideals.

In this context, leaders of both parties should place ideological continuity above political rivalry and explore ways to strengthen the Dravidian movement collectively. Constructive dialogue and cooperation could help preserve the social and political values that have long distinguished Tamil Nadu. Safeguarding these principles is more important than short-term political calculations.

MANAPADIAN JOSON | CHENNAI



Modi's Europe Push Redefines India's Global Strategy

From green technologies and semiconductors to defence cooperation, energy security, Arctic research and supply-chain resilience, the PM Modi's tour underlined New Delhi's determination to build trusted long-term partnerships with economically advanced and politically influential European powers



AMBASSADOR
ANIL TRIGUNAYAT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a five-nation visit to Europe from May 15-20, which included a short and substantive visit to UAE and strategic outreach to Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and Italy. He conferred with his counterparts not only from these host countries but also leaders

of the European Union and all five Nordic countries, including Finland, Denmark and Iceland, under the rubric of 3rd India-Nordic Summit which was held in Oslo, focusing on a green and Innovative strategic partnership. Sweden and Norway conferred their highest civilian award on PM Modi to acknowledge and reiterate the importance of India, the largest democracy and one of the fastest-growing and resilient major economies, despite unprecedented global churn and disruptions caused by the Eurasian and Middle Eastern wars. The Agricola Medal was conferred upon him by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Rome. A total of 57 agreements and MoUs were signed, and according to Randhir Jaiswal, Spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs, several deals worth at least \$ 40 bn were signed during various B2B interactions of the Prime Minister with local business leaders. The relationship with the Netherlands was turned into a strategic partnership and that with Italy into a Special Strategic Partnership, given the importance and the convenience of political, economic, technological and security interests with two major trading, inexpensive and technology partners in Europe.

Not only did he have bilateral meetings with the leaders of these countries but in Goteborg, Sweden he addressed a joint business meeting with Swedish Prime Minister and European Union Commission Chief Ursula Von der Leyen focussing on greater B2B engagement and investments in 'Make in India for the world' enterprise especially in the context of full activation of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement - the so called 'Mother of All deals' by the year end. In the Netherlands, apart from defence technology, 6G, critical minerals, semiconductors, green technologies the focus was also laid on collaboration in WAH- Water, Agriculture and Health sectors. The agreement between Tata and ASML Netherlands was path-breaking for India's Semiconductor Mission given the global edge the ASML uniquely possesses in this techno domain. Tata Electronics and ASML will partner together for India's first front-end semiconductor Fab in Gujarat. As bilateral relations have acquired a huge strategic matrix and impetus the two leaders agreed to establish a Strategic Partnership between the two countries to steer the critical projects.

His visit to Norway was the first time in 43 years by any Indian Prime Minister. Norway is also an energy rich highly developed country with a unique model of saving and judiciously investing its sovereign wealth funds for future generations. As the energy disruptions due to Iran-Israel- US war have impacted India a great deal, discussions were also held on procuring hydrocarbons from Norway and even more from UAE -as New Delhi diversifies its supply chains and risks. Speaking at the India -Nordic Summit, PM Modi highlighted that during the last decade alone the bilateral trade with these countries had increased nearly four fold. He further emphasised "Investment funds from the Nordic countries are also becoming important partners in India's rapid growth journey. Over the past decade, investments from the Nordic countries into India have grown by nearly 200 percent.". As such the India Europe FTA-TEPA with Norway, Iceland, Switzerland and Leichestine, operationalised since October 2025, has created an additional platform for closer economic engagements among the businesses. Under this Agreement \$ 100 bn project investments are expected to be made in various sectors in India

The rapidly growing trade and investment have not only contributed to India's growth story, but have also played a highly positive role in the economies of the Nordic countries and created thousands of new jobs. Building upon this strong foundation, we have



WHILE PERSONAL BONHOMIE AND RESPECT BETWEEN THE LEADERS DRIVES A RELATIONSHIP IN A TRUSTED MANNER, THE STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS OF THIS VERY IMPORTANT BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP FROM INDO-PACIFIC TO THE MEDITERRANEAN MUST BE APPRECIATED, AS INDIA FOCUSES ON IT EVEN MORE IN THE MARITIME DOMAIN

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recently undertaken several important initiatives to take our relationship to the next level, added PM Modi.

Each of these strategic partners have their unique strengths not only in green and innovative technologies and developmental partnership models where synergies have been found and a roadmap for collaboration and harnessing this potential even more has been institutionalised through five dozen agreements. PM Modi also referred to the key strategic geo-economic significance of each of our partners. He underscored that 'we have decided to shape India-Nordic relations into a Green Technology and Innovation Strategic Partnership. Through this Green Technology Partnership, we will combine Iceland's expertise in geothermal energy and fisheries, Norway's strengths in the blue economy and the Arctic, and the maritime and sustainability expertise of all the Nordic countries with India's scale, in order to secure a better future for the entire world. And through the formation of this unique strategic partnership between us, we will combine Sweden's advanced manufacturing and defence capabilities, Finland's expertise in telecommunications and digital technology, and Denmark's strengths in cybersecurity and health-tech with India's talent pool, to develop trusted solutions for the world.'. Same will apply in the new emerging geo-economically contested geography in the Arctic where Nordic countries have a critical role. As such India has been engaged in scientific expeditions and R & D in the Arctic and Antarctica and the Polar Regions with them which will be further intensified so that the shared prosperity through research and innovation could be achieved in a sustained manner.

As this 'Sambandh', which was also highlighted by PM Modi and Iceland Prime Minister as being a common word in Iceland and India, further intensifies the relationships. Both sides also discussed the wars in West Asia and Russia-Ukraine which have been a common concern and they expect India to play a greater role especially given Delhi's special and strategic partnership with Moscow. PM Modi also assured them of India's continued efforts to deescalate these crises. Since global governance and security architecture are in shambles and heading towards irrelevance, during all the interactions urgent need for their reforms and expansion of UNSC and India's legitimate place in it were re-emphasised.

On the final leg of the visit to Italy interestingly the gift of "Melody" Chocolates by PM Modi to PM Meloni got much greater social media attention. While personal bonhomie and respect between the leaders drives a relationship in a trusted manner, the strategic dimensions of this very important bilateral relationship from Indo-Pacific to the Mediterranean must be appreciated, as India focuses on it even more in the maritime domain. No wonder, it was upgraded to Special Strategic Partnership in less than three years since the exceptional convergences across the relationship spectrum from defence and security, to industry to economy to energy to high tech and design and fashion are all encompassed within the 'The India-Italy Joint Strategic Action Plan 2025-29' which provides a practical and futuristic framework for the partnership, which is being pursued in a time-bound manner. A bilateral trade target of 20 billion euros has been set from the current 14.6 Bn Euros. Italy is one of the most enthusiastic partners in the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

In a destabilising world, driven by utter unilateralism, India is continuing to expand its strategic engagement with Europe and the Nordic countries for a win-win cooperation through its strategic autonomy and multi-alignment policies for creating dependable constituencies and reliable techno friendships for the 21st century.

From hardline to handshake: RSS signals a Pakistan reset



ANIL ANAND

driven Narendra Modi regime which had embarked on a hot-pursuit against Islamabad - at least for political consumption - ever since PM Modi's futile attempt at extending an olive branch by inviting the then Pakistan Prime Minister Mr Nawaz Sharif, to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014. And later a failed unscheduled but certainly not unplanned sudden visit to Lahore to attend a family function at Mr Sharief's residence.

Even after a decade, the insiders' story on who advised Mr Modi to visit Pakistan contrary to his hardcore image, based on hyper-nationalism and Hindutva which was for everyone to see in the 2014 Lok Sabha poll campaign, has still to see light of the day. Or who fixed the timing for the same just in the beginning of his innings as Prime Minister. It did pay electoral dividend to the Modi-led BJP as it scored series of poll victories subsequently, pursuing the hardcore anti-Pakistan line. Nevertheless, it was a welcome move. It amplified the fact that the dialogue has no alternative. The only issue is how and when to hold peace talks. Here comes into play the surprise statement of one of the top leaders of the RSS. So, RSS general secretary Mr Dattaterya Hosabale's recent call for peace talks with Pakistan took everyone, including a sizable section within the broader Sangh Parivar and hardcore Hindutva support base of the BJP, by surprise. It has given rise to questions whether the move is of the RSS's own making or done at the behest of the Narendra Modi dispensation? Or more importantly, the RSS acted under an external pressure, ostensibly the USA given the overriding Donald Trump phenomena dictating terms?

Mr Hosabale's statement some interesting accompaniments attached to it. It found immediate endorsement in the words of former army chief Gen M M Naravane who underlined the importance of maintaining communication and people-to-people ties between India and Pakistan. Ordinary citizens on both sides share similar everyday concerns and aspirations, he said giving strength to the RSS move.

Indo-Pakistan relation, war or peace, has never been short of theatrics, star-studded shows and high-profile summits. Nehru-Liaquat Pact, Shimla Agreement, Vajpayee-Musharraf summit, or the famous Amritsar-Lahore Bus yatra led by the then Prime Minister Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee that included prominent persons from diverse fields including the evergreen cine-star, Mr Dev Anand, and last but not the least the controversial Inder Kumar Gujral doctrine. The Modi government did not dare to undertake a new initiative till the time the international scenario started undergoing dramatic changes particularly after Operation Sindoor and the West Asia conflict involving Iran, USA and Israel directly, and Pakistan, China and Russia by proxy. Is Mr Hosabale's ice-breaking observation an indication of a fresh peace overture in the offing?

Yet, another significant and related development has taken place across the border with Pakistan, during the same while, deciding to rename some locations in Lahore to their historic Hindu, Sikh, Jain and British colonial era origin. It has been done under the garb of a massive Lahore Heritage Areas Revival project. If Mr Hosabale's call for peace talks with Pakistan, and its endorsement by none other than a former army chief, has great significance particularly as it has received a silent endorsement from the Centre, no less important is restoration of old identity of some localities in Lahore.

Certainly, if RSS, found a fertile ground to establish itself by exploiting the sentiments in the aftermath of the 1947-partition and all-along pursued a hardline against Pakistan and a vice-versa role played by extremist Islamist elements on the other side of the border, and it now authors a peace initiative, its significance cannot be lost on anyone.

Does it reflect a tectonic shift in the Sangh Parivar- Narendra Modi government's outlook towards Pakistan? What has led to this sudden yearning for peace talks with Islamabad, and the sudden love of Pakistan's current dispensation for Hindu-Sikh-Jain heritage after its systematic destruction in pandering to the hardcore anti-India and anti-Hindu sentiment? Past history suggests that no peace effort, including ceasefire after the wars, between India and Pakistan has taken place without external pressure or mediation. It will be a naive to think that the RSS acted on its own to open a window for the Narendra Modi government to act, thereby shunning the hardcore image of the Sangh Parivar and the central dispensation. By doing so the RSS seems to have not only taken load of Prime Minister Mr Modi's shoulders but also opened a safe passage for him to wade into hitherto forbidden territory to initiative peace efforts.

Whatever be the reason or compulsion, a peace effort should be welcomed by all desiring peace in the Indian sub-continent. It is important given the vulnerability to become a flash-point and added interest shown by the world-powers due to its strategic location. Despite the fact that Mr Modi, through his sheer dominance, has created a situation where RSS needs him more than he needs the RSS, the Sangh coming on board on a sensitive issue such as peace-talks with Pakistan, is a tactical move of great significance for him also. These are the starting moments. How would Mr Hosabale's advocacy for peace with Pakistan or the restoration of old symbols particularly of Hindus, Jains and Sikhs in Lahore to be followed elsewhere in Pakistan also (as claimed in reports from Pakistan), really unfold and lay the table for peace talks, will be keenly watched.

All Prime Ministers, since 1947, including Mr Modi did take initiatives at restoration of peace with Pakistan. In fact, he went a mile ahead, keeping aside his hardcore ideological beliefs and Hindutva based politics, to visit Pakistan which many of his predecessors either avoided (for good reasons) or did not get an opportunity to do so, speaks volumes about the necessity for peace between Indian and Pakistan. This is so given the strategic location of the sub-continent and ever-growing interest of super-powers namely USA, China and Russia. This is not to suggest that hot-pursuit will not be an option if Pakistan indulged in any misadventure, directly or indirectly.

"You can change friends, but not neighbours." Former Prime Minister Mr Vajpayee's golden words hold significance and should be rooted in any future peace endeavour with Pakistan. The other side must realise that it needs two to tango and Pakistan has much to deliver to establish its credibility.

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Tiny mites, hidden viruses, and a growing threat to wheat crops



MRITUNJOY
BARMÁN

Wheat is not merely another crop in India. It is the backbone of national food security, a lifeline for millions of farming families, and a staple that feeds more than 800 million people every day. Yet scientists are increasingly warning about a hidden agricultural threat that remains largely unknown outside research circles: microscopic wheat curl mites and the dangerous viruses they transmit. Recent research from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the United States has shed light on how these mite-transmitted viruses are spreading not only through wheat but also through other cereal crops such as barley, oats, rye, and triticale. The findings have important implications for countries like India, where mixed cropping systems, climate variability, and fragmented agricultural practices may create ideal conditions for these diseases to spread silently before erupting into full-scale outbreaks.

The study focused on what scientists call the Wheat Streak Mosaic Disease Complex, a group of viral diseases spread by wheat curl mites. These tiny pests are invisible to the naked eye, but the damage they cause can be enormous. Infected plants develop yellow streaks, become stunted, and suffer severe reductions in grain yield. In major outbreaks,

entire fields can become economically unviable. In the United States alone, wheat curl mite-transmitted viruses are estimated to cause annual losses worth \$50-100 million. A single infected field can lose between 50 and 80 percent of its yield. If a similar outbreak were to occur in India, the consequences could be devastating for both farmers and consumers.

The danger lies not only in the viruses themselves but also in the way they survive between cropping seasons. Researchers describe the existence of a "green bridge" - a network of forage crops, volunteer wheat plants, grasses, and cereal crops that allow mites and viruses to persist throughout the year. In India's agricultural landscape, where multiple crops often overlap across seasons, such conditions already exist on a large scale.

What makes the threat especially alarming is that India currently has no comprehensive surveillance system for these viruses. Globally, wheat curl mite-transmitted viruses have already been documented in at least 25 countries across six continents, including the United States, Iran, Kazakhstan, Australia, Turkey, and several European and Latin American nations.

Yet India, despite being the world's second-largest wheat producer, officially shows zero documented cases. This absence of data should not be mistaken for safety. Scientists warn that it likely reflects a complete lack of systematic monitoring rather than the actual absence of disease. In many cases, symptoms caused by these viruses resemble drought stress, nutrient deficiency, or fungal infections. Farmers may dismiss the early warning



signs without realising that a viral outbreak is taking hold.

India's vulnerability is unique because of the sheer scale and structure of its wheat economy. The country produces nearly 100 million tonnes of wheat annually, valued at more than 72 lakh crore. Unlike large mechanised farms in North America, Indian wheat cultivation is spread across millions of small and marginal farmers, particularly in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. These farmers often rely on mixed cropping systems and informal seed exchanges, conditions that can unknowingly accelerate disease spread. A severe outbreak affecting even a fraction of India's wheat-growing regions could trigger widespread economic distress. For small farmers already struggling with rising input costs and climate uncertainty, a 50-80 percent crop loss would not simply mean lower profits; it could mean debt, poverty, and food insecurity. The threat also

extends beyond agriculture into the broader economy. Wheat price inflation can quickly affect household budgets, government food distribution systems, and national reserves.

Climate change is further increasing the risk. Wheat curl mites thrive in cool and dry conditions and survive on alternative host plants during off-seasons. Warmer winters and shifting rainfall patterns are extending their survival periods and expanding the range in which they can thrive. In South Asia's densely cultivated agricultural zones, mites may now survive year-round instead of dying off seasonally. Another major challenge is the lack of diagnostic infrastructure. Detecting these viruses requires advanced molecular tools and trained specialists. India, despite its strong agricultural research institutions, has no dedicated regional effort focused specifically on wheat curl mite-transmitted viruses.

This gap in preparedness could prove extremely costly. Scientists warn that by the time visible symptoms become widespread, the disease may already have spread across multiple districts or states. Without baseline surveillance data, authorities cannot estimate infection levels, identify hotspots, or implement targeted containment strategies. The problem is not confined to India alone. South Asia as a region remains dangerously underprepared. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal also depend heavily on wheat but possess limited research and monitoring capacity. Since plant diseases do not respect national borders, regional coordination will be essential. Experts are now calling for urgent preventive action

before the disease reaches crisis levels. The first step is nationwide surveillance across major wheat-growing states using modern molecular diagnostic tools. India also needs regional laboratories capable of identifying both the viruses and the mites that spread them. Equally important is the development of resistant wheat varieties. Scientists must begin screening Indian wheat strains to determine which are vulnerable and which possess natural resistance. For a country where wheat is central to food security and rural livelihoods, this is not an optional precaution but a national necessity.

The warning signs are already visible globally. The disease has spread steadily across continents, moving closer to South Asia through trade routes, climate shifts, and interconnected agricultural systems. The question is no longer whether India will eventually encounter wheat curl mite-transmitted viruses. The real question is whether the country will act early enough to prevent a silent biological threat from becoming a full-scale food and economic crisis.

Tiny mites may seem insignificant, but history has repeatedly shown that some of the greatest threats to food security begin invisibly. India still has time to prepare - but that window may not remain open for long.

The writer is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Entomology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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The Pioneer

To Stay Shipshape, Cut Regulatory Flab

Lighter compliance can build economic muscle

Narendra Modi's review last week of the progress on de-regulation underscores India's need to improve its regulatory quality to raise economic performance and achieve development metrics. While no universally accepted estimate exists of how much of India's GDP is forgone on account of red tape, GoI has moved regulation towards a more trust-based approach. Results are visible in tax receipts that are climbing despite less visible regulation. Technology is an enabler by making regulation discrete and more effective. Yet the bulk of the permit raj resides in municipal and state bureaucracies, with considerable scope for streamlining.

The compliance burden of heavy regulation discriminates against small enterprises. This is of particular concern to policymakers due to the size of India's informal economy. Less red tape can encourage the migration of a large workforce into social security networks. Deregulation is a policy tool for equitable growth so long as the compliance cost declines with rising economic output. There is also the inflationary impact of regulation, which contributes to income inequality. Elimination of licences that serve as entry barriers improves market efficiency and sets off a virtuous cycle of deregulation.

For all its economic impact, deregulation has received less policy attention than it deserves. This is evident at the local level of government, where pockets of deregulation have demonstrated favourable economic outcomes. GoI can push its agenda using an enviable stack of digital infrastructure to transition from a regime that prescribes acceptable economic behaviour to a lighter regime that merely specifies unacceptable behaviour. Analytical tools available to regulators today allow for a system based on trust. Parallel developments in governance structures reinforce the effects of technology. The PM has given India a short window to catch up with the regulatory quality found in advanced economies. His government will have to sustain the momentum for cutting red tape.

This is a Peak Win for Himalayas

Few policy choices illustrate trade-offs between development and environmental stewardship as decisions concerning hydropower projects in the ecologically sensitive Himalayan region. Last week, GoI informed the Supreme Court that no new hydroelectric projects should be permitted in the upper reaches of the Ganga in Uttarakhand, apart from the 7 commissioned or substantially completed. The decision is welcome and should mark the first step towards a more ecologically sound approach to development.

It has taken more than a decade since the 2013 Kedarnath cloudburst and numerous other disasters for the ministries of power, environment and water resources to reach a consensus on hydel projects. GoI must now ensure that projects under construction comply with safeguards aimed at mitigating life-cycle impacts while also implementing environmental and socio-economic remedial measures. The consequences of these projects, along with economic and non-economic costs incurred during years of policy indecision over the region's hydropower potential, cannot be overlooked.

Focus must now shift to restoration. The extensive body of submissions, expert reports and depositions should provide the foundation for a framework to assess the suitability of hydel and other infra projects in fragile ecosystems. Equally important is the creation of mechanisms for compliance with statutory safeguards and continuous oversight to ensure that projects do not undermine ecological stability or ecosystem services. The decision should also encourage a more rigorous accounting of the long-term environmental costs of development. Such costs, together with mitigation and remediation measures, must become integral to the appraisal and approval of all development projects.

JUST IN JEST

In these devaluing times, make currency notes products and value-add

Go On Then, Make Money With Money

Starting a business is usually about innovation, efficiency and market demand. But why bother with all that when you can literally make products out of money? Forget currency garlands at weddings and political rallies — that's amateur hour. We propose 'Cash Couture Inc.', the world's first luxury brand that manufactures high-end goods entirely from currency notes. Have HNIs strut into a boardroom with a CCI briefcase crafted from crisp ₹500 bills, or sipping espresso from a mug folded out of ₹100 notes. Not only does it scream wealth, it is wealth. The company slogan can be, 'Why invest in assets when you can accessorise with liquidity?'

The economics is flawless. A currency garland depreciates the moment it's worn. But a money-made sherwani? That's wearable capital. Inflation-proof, conversation-starting, and guaranteed to make accountants weep with joy. Sure, RBI's Sanjay Malhotra might frown. But isn't disruption the heart of entrepreneurship? CCI can even branch into origami yachts made of euros, chandeliers woven from renminbi and wallets stuffed with themselves. It's recursive finance — the product is the profit. Investors won't just buy shares but buy lampshades of legal tender. In short, it's the literal embodiment of 'money makes money'. Unlike crypto, you can actually touch it. So, go on. Pick up currency and add value to it.

Reclaiming 'commons' on which Delhi Gymkhana Club stands must be a start for other such returns

Club Rules Need Not Apply



Mohan Guruswamy

Control of Delhi Gymkhana Club has been settled with GoI taking it over lock, stock and barrel by June 5. While it's at it, it might as well take a look at all other such elite clubs where nepotism is more rampant and real estate is often bigger and more valuable.

Every major city in India has such clubs. Most of the better-known ones are relics of the Raj and were meant as a private place for the ruling elite to socialise and fraternise. Being the ruling elite, they gave themselves tracts of public land for their private enjoyment. At a time when the whole country was for their private enjoyment, this raised few questions.

After the White man departed, these clubs became a preserve of the new Indian elite — 'brown sahibs'. They, too, have gone and cannot aspire to memberships. Unlike clubs of the past, which were extensions of a ruling hierarchy, today's clubs are mostly watering holes for the well-born, more for card games than field games.

Generally speaking, an elite means a more capable group of people. In sociological terms, an elite is a group of people who control a disproportionate share of wealth or power. C Wright Mills in 'The Power Elite' describes the power elite as 'those political, economic and military circles, which as an intricate set of overlapping small but dominant groups share decisions having at least national consequences'.



Disembar members only

But most of our 'elite' clubs defy such descriptions and have ceased to be based on social or official hierarchical or professional considerations, where membership was dependent on attainments and achievements.

They are just social clubs where membership is dependent on birth. The term 'parivarvaad' used by the government in its petition describes a uniquely Indian system that combines dynastic succession and clan nepotism. Clubs all over India are being increasingly taken over by a hereditary membership. Most have framed rules for themselves, which automatically confer their children membership, by virtue of being dependent members, a classification for members' children of a certain age group.

Since these dependents are given priority, it's almost impossible for a non-dependent to become a member. Most people who become members through the direct route do so late in their life, which means their children invariably cannot become dependent members.

During the Raj, the whole country was for the ruling elite's private enjoyment, so clubs raised few questions. After the White man departed, these became a preserve of 'brown sahibs', the new Indian elite

Constitutionality of hereditary membership is questionable. But who among the members will go out and challenge it? There are other implicit issues as well. Many of India's clubs are private clubs enjoying public land or land that could be deemed as 'commons'.

The term 'commons' refers to the cultural and natural resources that should be accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water and habitable earth. 'Common good' is a utilitarian ideal, which means 'the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number of individuals'. Many like the philosopher Michael Sandel, believe that promoting the 'common good' should be the main ideal of a democracy. Implicit in this is that the 'commons' must only be for the 'common good'.

In 2014, Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, then making an entrance into national politics, specifically referred to Delhi Golf Clubs as a prime instance of corruption and cronyism that allowed a small number of people to take possession of public property. Like Delhi Gymkhana, Delhi Golf Club comes under the central government's jurisdiction.

Compared to the 27 acres of land occupied by Delhi Gymkhana, Delhi Golf Club is in possession of 220 acres of common land and enjoying it for the exclusive benefit of its 3,000 members, of whom only 900 have the right

to vote, and most are hereditary members. Secunderabad Club has 3,998 permanent members, of which 2,295 have made the cut by virtue of being members' children. Incidentally, this club only has 173 women as permanent members.

A more recent addition for cornering the 'commons' for recreation of the elite is Hyderabad Golf Association's golf course and club promoted by the Telangana government on 105 acres of Golconda Fort's 155 acres. Though a good part of its membership is for government officials, this club, too, now has a system of hereditary membership.

One irony must not be missed here. Those who become members by virtue of being government officials — and hence bypass the long waiting list of the less privileged — are able to confer hereditary benefits for posterity.



In 2014, Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal specifically referred to Delhi Golf Club as a prime instance of corruption and cronyism that allowed a small number of people to take possession of public property

ty by bequeathing automatic membership rights to their descendants. In a few decades, these public commons, too, will become the preserve of a hereditary elite. It has even gone one better than most such clubs by making its membership fungible, affording indigent members a soft landing by transferring membership to a person of his or her choice.

It is only in the fitness of things that GoI headed by a 'janata' party is now challenging this growing system of hereditary legitimacy.

The writer is former adviser to finance minister, GoI



THE SPEAKING TREE

Worldly Dangal

CHETAN SAVLA

In the movie Dangal, a young aspiring wrestler chooses to wrestle in a weight category heavier than her own. Seemingly a foolish decision, this puts her on a path to discovering wrestling techniques, leading her to win a championship medal.

In the material world, most people struggle through their working lives with the objective of reaching a stage where they have accumulated enough resources to retire peacefully. In the spiritual field, the most accomplished seekers are considered those who renounce the world and seek self-realisation far from the struggles of real life. Both worldly struggler and spiritual renouncer could be making wrong choices.

The worldly struggler may be choosing the wrong objective of a peaceful work-free retirement. Peacefulness is nothing but a stable, continuous mental state of equanimity. It has nothing to do with accumulation of resources. Due to this wrong choice of objectives, the worldly struggler fails to use laboratory-like conditions of the real world to pursue a better state of equanimity. If she builds equanimity skill through worldly struggles, she will discover retirement bliss throughout the journey, not just at the end.

The spiritual renouncer saint is perhaps missing the entire point: the Self-realisation she seeks is also based on the achievement of a state of shthitaprjna, equanimity, and that this skill, too, can be best sharpened within this worldly journey, not outside of it.

Chat Room

Global Push for Indian Crafts

Apropos the Edit 'Take Our Crafts Out Of The Gov Cottage' (May 23). Indian crafts are struggling due to competition from machine-made goods, exploitation by middlemen and weak global marketing. Low wages are pushing younger generations away, leaving traditional sectors such as textiles, carpets, shawls and pottery in distress. There is an urgent need to expand artisans' visibility through targeted promotion in global markets. Government must support them in producing market-ready goods and ensuring fair access to international buyers. *Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru*

Caution With Clarity

Apropos 'Enter the Dragon, But on Tiptoes' (May 23). India's cautious approach to Chinese investment reflects genuine strategic and security concerns, especially in sensitive sectors such as technology infrastructure and data. However, prolonged policy ambiguity risks deterring responsible investment. A transparent regulatory framework with clear sectoral guidelines can help strike a balance between national security and economic growth. *K Sakunthala, Coimbatore*

Realism in India-US Ties

Apropos 'Therein Lies the Rubio' by Seema Sirohi (May 23). India-US relations continue to face strategic complexities despite visible cooperation, and demand realism rather than inflated expectations. Differences over trade, regional security and geopolitical priorities persist and cannot be overlooked. India must retain an independent foreign policy while sustaining constructive engagement with the US. Greater focus on economic collaboration, technology partnerships and stable trade frameworks can help rebuild trust. Enduring partnerships rely on consistency and mutual respect, not short-term political signalling. *SM Jeeva, Chennai*

Letters to the editor may be addressed to edit@timesofindia.com

Slums and Informal Settlements

While the percentage of people in informal settlement and slum conditions globally has decreased, the absolute numbers have risen from 895 million in 2000 to 1.16 billion in 2024, according to UN-Habitat data. A snapshot:

GLOBAL REGIONS	Proportion of urban population living in slums or informal settlements (%)	
	2010	2024
Sub-Saharan Africa	58.9	49.4
Western Asia and Northern Africa	23.8	18.2
Central and Southern Asia	50.2	42.6
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	27.1	24.9
Europe and Northern America	1.4	0.3
Latin America and the Caribbean	21.6	17.5
Oceania*	12.8	13.5
Australia and New Zealand	0.1	0
WORLD	26.9	24.8

SELECT COUNTRIES	2010	2024
Pakistan	63.6	56.0
Bangladesh	55.1	51.5
Nigeria	61.9	45.0
India	48.8	40.8
China	29.1	26.3
South Africa	25.7	24.2

*Slum household definition based on one or more of the following four deprivations: lack of access to... improved water, sanitation, sufficient living area, housing durability
*excl. Aust. & NZ

Disease X, a Real Threat



Anurag Agrawal

The recent panic globally, following reports of person-to-person transmission of hantavirus infection on a cruise ship, was reminiscent of early events during Covid aboard another luxury cruise liner — Diamond Princess. While it is expected that the current cluster will end as previous hantavirus clusters did, with only a few deaths, it is yet another reminder that Disease X lurks around the corner.

In Feb 2020, Diamond Princess lay quarantined off Yokohama. Of roughly 3,700 passengers and crew, around 700 were infected and 14 died. Six years on, MV Hondius, returning from Argentina, has produced a cluster of severe respiratory illness, with hantavirus confirmed by PCR, three deaths and rare human-to-human transmission of what is almost certainly the Andes strain, without any threatening new mutations. There is no known spread in India, and the global risk remains low.

A small battle may have ended in our favour, but the larger war continues. Disease X — WHO's placeholder for the next unknown pathogen capable of sparking an epidemic — is not a hypothetical threat lurking in some distant jungle. It is a near certainty. Most likely, it will emerge when a respiratory virus jumps from animals to humans among whom we live, work, or trade.

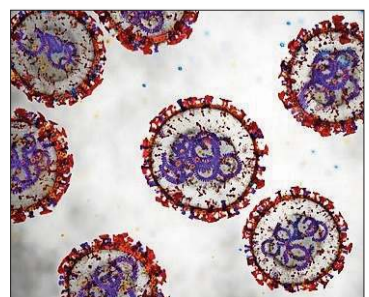
The pattern has repeated itself across half a century of emerging infectious diseases. Each originated in an animal reservoir. Each seized an opportunity created by human-animal contact, and often by delayed

recognition and response.

Hantavirus is much more mundane than it is made out to be. The virus has lived inside rodent populations for decades, transmitted to humans through inhaled aerosols of dried rodent urine, droppings, or saliva. This may happen when someone cleans a closed rodent-infested storeroom or a barn containing stored grain. Just a human being, a rodent and a lapse in hygiene. This can happen anywhere, and the reason it has never become a pandemic is that human-to-human transmission is much less frequent than with other viruses on the list. Can a new mutation change this? Yes, and indeed that is the first thing we check for.

Other than the low likelihood of a large Andes strain outbreak, Indian public health has built impressive crisis-response muscle since 2020. What remains to be built, whether in India or elsewhere, is the infrastructure of prevention. The guidance for hantavirus prevention is almost mundane: do not sweep or vacuum dry rodent droppings, wet the area first with disinfectant, ventilate enclosed spaces for 30 minutes before cleaning, wear gloves and a mask, seal gaps around doors, pipes and roofs, and store food in rodent-proof containers. All of it requires awareness and an environment in which acting on that awareness is realistic.

This is where India faces a struc-



Hanta shows the day

tural challenge. In a country of 1.5 bn people, human-animal contact is not an exception but a baseline of daily life. Stray dogs and cattle share our streets. Monkeys raid kitchens. Rodents are endemic to grain storage facilities, food markets, railway stations and residential basements. Open drains, uncollected waste and informal slaughter points compound the exposure. The density and proximity are what make a Disease X event more likely here.

Public health messaging in India tends to switch on when a virus is named in the news and switch off when the news cycle moves on. Awareness spikes for a few weeks, then recedes. Hantavirus will follow the same arc unless we treat this moment as an opportunity to do something different.

Three shifts would help. 1. Sanitation and waste management must be reframed as frontline disease prevention. This is in line with already declared priorities, but more is needed. 2. Surveillance must expand in the background, continuing consistently and widely between news cycles. Again, we have made impressive strides, but not enough.

3. We need greater public awareness that becomes ingrained as a way of life through a better understanding of and mitigation of exposure risks. This hantavirus cluster, like the ones before it, will fade from the front pages within weeks. But fading from the news is not the same as the disappearance of pandemic risk. Disease X will almost certainly emerge from the blurred frontier between humans and animals. Our actions will be judged not by how fast we mobilise once it arrives, but by how much we did in the quieter years before.

The writer is dean, biosciences and health research, Trivedi School of Biosciences, Ashoka University

MEME'S THE WORD



MELODY FOR MONDAY

Pour Some Sugar on Me Def Leppard

Def Leppard's 'Pour Some Sugar on Me,' from the band's 1987 album Hysteria, is pure adrenaline bottled into 4-odd minutes of rock euphoria. The track delivers a hormonal rush that feels both rebellious and intoxicating that's very palpable even in our pop-a-Melody Chocolate times.

From the opening riff, there's swag that builds anticipation. When Joe Elliott's vocals kick in, the song transforms into a



full-throttle ride. The chorus — 'Pour some sugar on me, in the name of love' — is the perfect Molotov cocktail of playful indulgence and raw energy. It's simple, sticky and impossible not to shout along with. The repetition amplifies the rush until it feels like a stadium-sized explosion of sound.

The blend of gritty guitar, pounding drums and Elliott's commanding vocals makes the track feel like a celebration of excess, a soundtrack for letting go. 'Pour Some Sugar on Me' captures the essence of late-80s rock — bold, unapologetic and designed to make you feel alive. It's Def Leppard's most iconic hit, a timeless sugar rush for the senses — that would probably be considered harmful now.

**CONTRAPUNTO**

Someone, somewhere, is playing the violin
in the background of violence

— SARA ABOU RASHED, poem

What Twisha Told Us

Why do parents tell daughters to adjust to dowry demands or cruelty?

Three cases, last week, burst the bubble, yet again, for many who assumed India's getting ahead of its most regressive practice—dowry. How wrong were they! Supreme Court will hear today, suo motu, Twisha Sharma's case, the young woman, whose 'death' in MP is less marked by grief, and more by murky allegations and slander exchanged between Twisha's marital and parental families.

The other two cases, in UP and MP again, and the approx 16 daily dowry deaths in India, speak just one truth. That women's security, or empowerment, is not a sum of parts, which are markers of progress or modernity. Their education/professional achievements, financial security or prosperity, social profile, access to healthcare, awareness of rights, none of this helped in the face of dowry demands, harassment, micro-aggressions, mental and physical torture, murder. Women risk all of this as part of the marriage pact between two families, tragically, even in 'love' marriages. No role, perhaps,



bears as much burden as the young 'bahu', trained and conditioned from childhood, dangerously, to 'adjust'. It's what endangers their lives.

What are parents thinking when they turn away when a daughter communicates fear for her life? Indians, and govts, gloat about girls' achievements of schooling, college enrolment. Women's safety is such a talking point today. But what about

when that 'safety' is missing within the family? Who is turning away when the married woman in her 20s-40s, seeks help? Dowry is near normalised, despite being illegal for decades, especially in northern states—UP, Haryana, Delhi, Rajasthan, MP, but growing across India.

Studies of modern dowry practices, from researchers in BHU and Azim Premji Univ, for example, show dowry deaths are underreported, that dowry harassment and cruelty come to light often after the woman's death—the victim reduced to a tool of extraction/transaction between two families. Incidence of dowry harassment (1.2L per NCRB 2024) and reporting is up, showing law's being used. But anti-dowry legislation is only as good as its implementation. 87% of cases end in chargesheets. Courts are sitting on 90% pendency. Acquittals in dowry deaths, over 50%, outnumber convictions. Sector experts say 'suicide' is becoming what 'bride-burning' was in 1980s-1990s; abetment is notorious to prove. Another chilling stat—47% of all convictions in 'crimes against women' were of those accused of dowry harassment. In-family cruelty is real. Financial coercion knows no economic strata. Dowry remains the single biggest source of harm to women's lives. Why can't bahus who feel threatened walk out from a dangerous marital home? That's a question for brides' parents. And cops. And govts.

National Embarrassment

WFI's more interested in vendetta than sport, so
Vinesh Phogat has to keep fighting off the mat

Ideally, each of India's 60-odd sport federations should be a genuine custodian of its respective sport. But if this was so, so many athletes wouldn't be knocking on courts' doors, against their federations. On Friday, Delhi HC ruled that Vinesh Phogat's challenge to WFI, to be allowed to compete in the Asian Games 2026 selection trials, was "in the interest of sport and justice". What's troubling is, why would a sport federation serve any other interest?

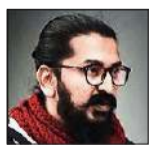
Vinesh's case is both unique and representative. She's the first Indian woman wrestler to win an Asian Games gold, she's also got three Commonwealth Games golds, and she's competed in three Olympics. But her most gruelling contest has been off the mat. When she joined the 2023 wrestlers' protest, accusing Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexual harassment, he was a BJP MP, a powerful federation chief, and running WFI out of his home. While that case is still in court, his parliamentary seat has passed to his son, the federation's now headed by his close associate, and, after a brief parting, the WFI office has reportedly returned to his home.

So, Vinesh's fight biography is singular, but her subjugation isn't. The "mala fide" vindictiveness Delhi HC found in WFI's actions against her, can't be separated from her complaint of sexual harassment. The show-cause notice that weaponised her motherhood against her also fits a familiar pattern—federations hiding arbitrary decisions behind opaque criteria. But the most nakedly mala fide detail was this: WFI described her Paris disqualification as a "national embarrassment". This was the first Indian woman wrestler to fight her way to an Olympic final, where she was gut-wrenchingly found 100g over the weight limit. While the international wrestling community rallied around her, her own federation's chosen to vilify her. This single act reveals everything about WFI's motivations. And until such petty, vindictive cliquedoms run Indian sport, excellence will remain out of reach.

Fatal Dose: Paneer Edition

An FIR filed in good taste and appetite

Chethan.Kumar@timesofindia.com



Police Station: Bengaluru (Darshini division), Complaint No: 99/VARIETIES/DROHA, Section: 109 of BNS (Attempt to murder), Complainant/s: People of Bengaluru.

Victim: Dose (pronounced Doh-say), alias Dosa, as people outside the victim's immediate circle know the victim as.

Identity: Crisp, fermented, complete; last seen in sound condition at Darshini eatery, exact location known to every auto driver in the city.

Accused: Persons unknown, operating under the banner of "Innovation".
Statement of Complaint: That on a date which cannot be pinpointed precisely, because the crime was not committed at once but accumulated slowly, methodically, and with alarming enthusiasm, the accused did wilfully, deliberately, and with apparent good cheer, cause grievous harm to Dose.

That Dose, a long-standing resident of this city's breakfast hours, had an unblemished record. It had never been late, or complicated. It had asked only for a hot tawa, a good batter, and to be left alone with its chutney and sambhar.

Complainants testify that this arrangement worked, very, very well. Yet, the accused proceeded with a redesign. With confidence. And menus.
List of Offences, in approx chronological order: The accused first introduced the concept of varieties—99 of them, displayed on boards large enough to require municipal approval. They then introduced noodles. Inside Dose. Next, cheese was applied. Then paneer of uncertain biography. Then sauces whose origins couldn't be traced to any known cuisine or conscience.

The accused, growing bolder, escalated to ice cream—placed on top of Dose, in full public view, at temperatures inconsistent with logic or dignity.

Even Masala Dose, a really respected member of the community, was not spared.

Relief Sought: That the accused be required to sit in a good Darshini and eat Plain Dose in silence, without photographing it. That menus exceeding one page be reviewed by a competent authority, preferably someone with direct ties to Dose. That the tawa be recognised as a protected surface, not a lab. That the words "fusion" and "Dose" not appear within three inches of each other, ever! Investigation requested on priority. Sambhar is getting cold.

Musical Chairs At The Gymkhana

Yes, colonial era clubs are a privilege overdue for an eviction. But then what? Do the honours simply pass on to a new elite? What citizens must ask of any reform is, now do we get to sit on the lawns?

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi



In the childhood game of passing the parcel, the gift moves from hand to hand while the music plays. Each child holds it for a moment, hoping the song will stop. When it does, the child holding the parcel wins.

Privilege in India is a bit like that—whimsical, unpredictable, transient. The controversy around Delhi Gymkhana Club is the lawn party where privilege jumps from hand to hand: from colonial official to civil servant, from club committee to govt file, from old elite to new guard. While the hand changes, the music remains the same: Power.

Of course, to defend Delhi Gymkhana would make me a colonial relic rooting for preferential access, dynastic privilege, and waiting periods that stretch for 30 years for non-members. Even the court took a stand: In 2024, Delhi high court held that this Club issuing "green cards" to over-21 dependents lacked any legal basis.

In a sense, Delhi Gymkhana was inviting its own eviction. Rejecting govt servants who seek its membership is, well, a reckless move. Ministry of corporate affairs had moved against the club years earlier, alleging mismanagement and conduct contrary to public interest. NCLT allowed govt intervention, and in 2024, NCLAT upheld GOI control and directed a govt-appointed committee to complete corrective measures before elections were held.

In the official spin, this is a story of reform: A mismanaged, colonial era club on public land is finally made to answer for its accounts. But here is the real question: When the state takes something from an old elite, does it return it to the people, or merely inherit it?

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen identified sport, consumption, and display as the code that status uses to establish itself. Over the decades, Delhi Gymkhana signalled leisure, the power to do nothing, the people who define who gets to do nothing, and where. Certainly, Delhi Gymkhana does not deserve immunity. But scrutiny is not the same as giving up

judgement to the state. The old elite called it 'tradition' while the new power calls it a 'public purpose'. But as citizens, we must ask: Do we get to sit on the lawns?

Mumbai offers a corollary: Mahalaxmi Racecourse. An elite-coded space for equestrian enthusiasts is all set to be reclaimed by BMC, which plans to turn its 120 acres into a Central Park-style project. On paper, BMC's intentions sound noble (and maybe a bit delusional): Provide the city with trees, shade, air, walking paths. But in practice, civic virtue always arrives with a contractor behind it.

Farther north in Mumbai is the Flying Club, operated by AAI, holding one of the largest tranches of

David Harvey argued, is not merely the right to have the state own land on one's behalf. Rather, it is the right of citizens to co-create the city, inhabit it, use it, and belong to it. A few days ago, in Paris, I experienced this as I walked down the avenues, designed for cars to pass, sidewalks for pedestrians to walk, flanked by green turf where citizens might picnic. Where are such equivalents in our metros?

Public ownership here can still produce public alienation. A citizen may be dispossessed not only by a club gate, but by overdesign, surveillance, and "beautification" schemes that make a place soul-dead. And so ugly you can faint from it. Our govt beautification programmes have yielded little beauty in verifiable, enjoyable, honourable terms. Think big gross statues; public art that makes little kids cry.

The fear is not that Mahalaxmi Racecourse will be taken from Mumbai's racing gentry, but that, after being reclaimed in the name of the people, it may be returned to them as monetised, floodlit, branded, and aesthetically vacant. One can already imagine our attention-hungry billionnaires vying to put their family plaques on whatever green survives.

James C Scott warned that the state likes the world flattened into a map: Countable, taxable, securable, buildable. In our cities, that flattening also arrives with barricades, VIP entrances, ornamental shrubs, and hard paving. After all, contracts have to be handed out—the money is in the contracts. A govt can reclaim a club from the privileged but still refuse to return it to the people. And even if it does, would anyone wish to linger there?

Hindu traditions speak of cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction. Shiva's destruction prefaces renewal. Sacred destruction does not destroy to possess, but to transform. And so, the old must burn down, the high walls must fall, the gate must be open.

At the end of passing the parcel, the child holding the gift wins. But in public life, a deeper question persists. Not who is holding the parcel when the music stops. But who chose the music, who was allowed into the room—and whether the game was ever meant for everyone.



Image: AI

open land in Mumbai. This was the backyard of my childhood. I fished in Juhu Lake even as it was slowly filled up before my own eyes. Today, the lake is reduced to a pond. And the land, which was originally a green zone on the development plan, appears to have been mysteriously reclassified.

Many residents suspect that the builder lobby has resented the Flying Club: Aviation and radar restrictions limit the building height—and therefore profit—of surrounding construction. If BMC were genuinely intent on securing open spaces for the public, there are many options, including safeguarding Aarey Milk Colony, which is still, despite everything, Mumbai's green lungs.

The right to one's city, as Henri Lefebvre and later

Ready When You Are, Pardner!

US is finding out it needs India. That's why Rubio is here. India should play its cards well, and leverage strategic complementarities, especially to balance China. Washington knows the math doesn't work minus New Delhi

Indrani Bagchi



Visiting US secretary of state Marco Rubio is gamely battling the Delhi heat in more ways than one. Across the table, Indian interlocutors are looking for words to describe "trust deficit" to him.

India and US find themselves facing each other at a fascinating inflection point. Washington is confronting realities that many in US preferred to postpone. Trump has had a distinctly underwhelming summit with Xi in Beijing. There was little meaningful concession from the Chinese, but there was a sobering acknowledgement in Washington that US is dealing with a genuine peer competitor. US finds itself without the leverage it needs to compel China to play by some rules. Instead, China has gamed globalisation on its own terms. The appeal of "sasta-and-sundar" Chinese products concealed a more uncomfortable reality: of weaponised supply chains and strategic dependencies.

Trump faces a similar strategic dilemma in Iran to the one Nixon and Kissinger confronted in Vietnam in the early 1970s. In a prescient essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Gideon Rose argues that "Like the fate of South Vietnam, the ultimate fate of the Iranian nuclear programme, along with that of the Iranian regime itself, will end up being decided another day." The Trump administration is relearning a lesson that great powers periodically forget: wars are often won or lost not by the ability to inflict pain, but by the capacity to absorb it. Military superiority matters, but endurance matters more.

Third, US is finding itself with fewer friends. Pakistan remains a familiar tactical partner. Others continue to engage Washington selectively. Yet the broader sense of confidence in American leadership has eroded. It may also explain why PM Modi may not be considering a trip to the White House anytime soon, notwithstanding Rubio's invite.

US is revisiting a recurring theme in its history: the temptation of splendid isolation. It wants greater protection at home and fewer burdens abroad. Trump is not an aberration so much as a product of these

domestic pressures and voter preferences. Yet, recent strategic setbacks suggest that isolation may be harder to achieve than many Americans imagine. A country cannot easily detach itself from the world when it remains deeply dependent on its principal adversary for manufacturing capacity, critical inputs, and supply chains. A strategic rethink in Washington may, therefore, be inevitable.

For India, these developments offer both cautionary lessons and opportunities. Resilience is not built overnight. It's embedded in industrial systems, and baked into economic, technological, and regulatory policies. India is learning this lesson in real time.



At the bilateral level, the investments that India and US have made in each other over decades cannot disappear overnight. US remains one of the largest sources of FDI into India. American capital, technology, and higher education continue to matter enormously. Indian companies still see US as their most important market, and a crucial source of validation for innovation. None of this is likely to change.

What India needs instead is a sophisticated "plus one" strategy. Japan and India are already moving in that direction. Australia is also seeking reliable partners. This is why Quad remains vital for India. It's not in India's interests to allow the 'Indo-Pacific' to slide back into the narrower 'Asia-Pacific' framework.

Such an outcome would hand China a significant strategic victory.

I have argued that the health of Quad depends substantially on the health of the India-US relationship. But it also depends on India's willingness to provide leadership and define the grouping's purpose. Too often, Quad has operated on vague premises: What will China think? How will Asean react? Those questions matter, but they cannot substitute for a positive agenda.

Quad has an opportunity to shape the future, if it openly embraces the convergence of its geoeconomic and strategic interests. How do we balance China's dominance in advanced manufacturing; build resilient supply chains for critical minerals and strategic technologies; harmonise regulations involving intellectual property, licensing, and investment; and protect data sovereignty while enabling trusted data sharing that drives innovation? Most importantly, how do the four countries build meaningful defence technology and defence manufacturing partnerships?

Yes, Quad is struggling at present. Washington's hubris is clouding strategic vision. But voices are cutting through the clutter. Mike Kuiken, a member of the US-China Security Review Commission, recently observed that India is building industrial corridors and nurturing a defence technology ecosystem that is already exporting. "This matters because the industrial math still does not work in America's favour: China's manufacturing base is now larger than those of the United States, Japan, and Germany combined...India is the only way the math begins to work."

India should double down on this opportunity. A deeper defence-industrial ecosystem could create serious strategic leverage.

The political turbulence in Washington is real, but it is ultimately America's problem to solve. US has been a difficult partner for India—insensitive, frequently transactional, and at odds with Indian interests. A better approach is neither outrage nor adulation. As external affairs minister Jaishankar advised during Trump's first term: analyse, don't demonise. That remains useful advice.

The writer is CEO, Ananta Centre. Views are personal

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



The more one can leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision.

Edward W Said

Pursuit Of Jade, Seeking Power & Virtue

Narayani Ganesh

Largely communities of OTT audiences across age groups and demographics are swooning over the new Mandarin Chinese historical drama series, titled *Pursuit of Jade*, starring two attractive leads—a disgraced nobleman and a woman pig butcher. A gripping storyline and beautiful choreography, litting theme song, superb performances and lots of eye candy—what more could one ask for?

The title was intriguing, leading me to explore the different aspects of jade. The title itself, refers to exploring the quest for power and hidden virtue. AI tells me that in Chinese culture, an 'unpolished jade' represents a talented person who is not yet trained. *Pursuit of Jade* represents the uncovering of this potential, that is as precious as jade.

As a gemstone, jade is semi-precious but is valued more than gold in China.

Its colour ranges between dark and light green, sometimes it is even whitish, but the significance is more in terms of what it represents in the psyche of people who value its spiritual import relating to soul and immortality. In the mundane world, jade is associated with political power and religious authority. Experts on Chinese culture say that jade symbolises Chinese ethics and ideologies and therefore it mirrors that progression of Chinese culture. There have been many uses of this exalted gem, including using it for tools, writing material, decorative pieces, jewellery, money and even burial pipes. Mouthpieces of some opium pipes were crafted with jade to ensure longevity by breathing through it.

The royal seal in the drama *Pursuit of Jade*, the ownership of which will

signify the one who sits on the throne, is made of jade. And so the stone has a multi-faceted history of meaning and usage. Jade has always meant something higher, stronger, spiritual, meaningful. Does it have anything at all to do with the word 'jaded' which has negative meaning? In fourteenth century Europe, mainly Iceland and Scotland, the term 'jaded' referred to a 'broken-down, worthless, vicious horse.'

In contemporary usage, the word 'jaded' has come to mean tired, weary, uninterested, unenthusiastic and so on, as in 'a jaded movie star' or 'a public jaded by political scandal.' So jade the stone, and 'jaded' the adjective, have no link at all.

Interestingly, jade, the tough stone, has hidden musical qualities. The following saying sums it up: "If you take a hammer and hit a diamond, the

diamond will shatter into a dozen pieces. Hit a piece of quartz and it will split in two. But if you hit a piece of jade, it will ring like a bell." And so it came to be that jade was used in the making of musical instruments like xylophones and also gongs and chimes. According to the International Gem Society, some use these instruments to produce 'heavenly' tones for ritual practices. Chinese poets have compared jade's melodious sound to the voice of a loved one, calling it "the concentrated essence of love". A truly spiritual, romantic, ethereal interpretation of jade, adding to its enigma and aura.

Starting off with the goal of self-entertainment and engagement, *Pursuit of Jade* led me on an enchanting path of discovery and knowledge of ancient Chinese culture, jade philosophy and its contemporary import—in the course of exploring the meaning of the title!

ganeshnarayani@yahoo.com

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Cockroach to the fore

Protest movement should lead to introspection

AMID an economic crisis and the NEET fiasco, the traction gained by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) on social media reflects the discontent among India's youth, particularly the jobless ones. This online movement has revealed that a generation frustrated by unemployment, exam scandals and political apathy is turning to satire as a form of democratic expression. What began as a sharp response to the Chief Justice of India's remark comparing a section of youngsters with "cockroaches" has quickly evolved into a wider conversation about youth unrest, accountability and freedom of dissent. The symbolism of the cockroach is central to the movement's appeal. Usually seen as a pest, the insect has been reimagined by CJP supporters as a metaphor for resilience. Their message is loud and clear: the ignored young citizens of India have somehow survived, and they will have their say.

The CJP's rapid popularity has prompted the ruling BJP to launch a counter-attack. Several party leaders have alleged that the platform is drawing social media support from Pakistan. However, the CJP's founder, Abhijeet Dipke, has claimed that over 94 per cent of its followers are from India. Dipke's allegations of account restrictions, hacking and platform takedowns have raised uncomfortable questions about democratic space in the digital age. Attempts to suppress satire strengthen the perception that the government is not receptive to criticism. Democracies are considered healthy when dissent is allowed to be expressed peacefully.

The rise of this protest movement should prompt all stakeholders to look within, be it the political class, the bureaucracy, the judiciary or the media. The CJP may or may not be able to establish itself as a durable force, but its emergence carries an unmistakable warning; beneath the memes lies a generation demanding dignity, opportunity and a voice in shaping the nation's future.

Wrestling justice

Vinesh verdict puts fairness above vendetta

THE Delhi High Court's decision allowing Vinesh Phogat to participate in the Asian Games trials is about more than the fate of just one athlete. It underscores that sporting institutions cannot function through opaque rules, selective application and personal vendetta. The court's sharp remarks against the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), including its observation that the federation appeared "vindictive", should worry everyone invested in Indian sport. Federations exist to nurture talent and ensure fairness, not to settle scores with athletes who challenge authority. The attempt to deny Vinesh a fair opportunity after her return from maternity leave and injury recovery exposed how Indian sports administration lacks transparent, humane and gender-sensitive policies.

India has celebrated sporting mothers before. Mary Kom returned after motherhood to win world titles and an Olympic medal, while Sania Mirza made a successful comeback to international tennis after childbirth. Globally, champions like Serena Williams and Allyson Felix transformed conversations around maternity rights in sport through their extraordinary post-pregnancy performances. Motherhood, therefore, cannot become a professional handicap or an excuse for bureaucratic exclusion. The controversy also reflects the continuing fallout of the wrestlers' protest movement, where several athletes accused powerful officials of intimidation and misconduct. When outspoken sportspersons begin facing administrative roadblocks, public confidence in sporting bodies erodes rapidly.

India celebrates women athletes when they win medals, but often abandons them when they confront institutional power or biological realities such as pregnancy and recovery. Courts should not have to repeatedly intervene in athlete selection. Federations must evolve credible, transparent systems that reduce arbitrariness and inspire trust. Indian sport cannot aspire to global excellence while remaining trapped in internal politics and institutional insecurity. Athletes must be judged by merit and performance, not by their conformity or silence.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, MAY 25, 1926

Advice to Muslims

SPEAKING on the necessity and purpose of education for the Muslim community, Marmaduke Pickthall, in the course of his interesting address as President of the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham held at Tellicherry a few days ago, a fuller summary of which is now available, offered sound advice as regards the principles and ideals which should govern the conduct of a true Muslim, particularly his relations with the followers and members of other creeds and communities inhabiting the same country with him. In these days, when even leaders like Maulanas Shaikat Ali and Mohammad Ali, who had hitherto represented the sober element amongst the Muslims, have openly assumed the role of aggressive communalism, as was evidenced by their speeches at the last special session of the Khilafat Conference at Delhi, and when the atmosphere is surcharged with communal bitterness, it is refreshing to find salutary advice of mutual amity and toleration coming from a person of the position of Pickthall, "Fighting," he said, "is no good for such purpose and in such a plight as ours; and fighting in itself was never any good for the great central purpose of Islam. It was not the warlike prowess of the early Muslims but the example of their righteous conduct which converted half the world." Again, "to attack men on account of their religion; that is not allowed." Contrast this with the plea advanced by several Maulanas assembled at Delhi, whom unthinking communal bitterness led to recommend to their co-religionists a narrow course of intolerance, which is fraught with the gravest consequences to all communities, including the Muslims.

Nuclear consensus remains elusive

Non-Proliferation Treaty's Review Conference ends on a predictably disappointing note



C UDAY BHASKAR
DIRECTOR, SOCIETY
FOR POLICY STUDIES

THE 2026 Review Conference (RevCon) of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) concluded at the United Nations in New York on May 22 without adopting a final consensus document.

This is a major setback to the equitable regulation of the global nuclear domain, which is in considerable disarray due to the deep geopolitical discord among the major powers; the steady loss of trust about the intent and commitment of the five nuclear weapon states (NWS) towards disarmament; and the uncertainties induced by the emergence of new technologies, including AI (artificial intelligence) that can muddy the tenets of nuclear deterrence.

The inability to reach a consensus was no surprise. It marks the third consecutive review cycle (following 2015 and 2022) to end without an agreed-upon statement among the 191 NPT member states.

India, Pakistan and Israel are non-signatories to the NPT, while North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003. It is instructive that these four nations are nuclear weapon states, with Israel maintaining ambiguity about nuclear tests, unlike the other three.

The NPT, a very unequal treaty, came into force in 1970. It sought to segregate the five nuclear haves or NWS (nuclear weapon states) — the US, erstwhile USSR (now Russia), UK, France and China — from the rest of the world, which was expected to remain non-NWS (NNWS) in perpetuity. The five NWS are also the permanent members of the UN Security



MISSION : The world needs resolute stakeholders to repair the treaty's pillars in an equitable, empathetic manner. AP/PTI

Council, the P5, deemed to be the executive apex of the UN system and responsible for global peace and security.

The NPT scaffolding was built around three pillars that sought to balance rights and obligations among the NWS and the NNWS — nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament and the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

The five NWS agreed not to transfer nuclear weapons or help others acquire them, while the NNWS agreed not to acquire or develop nuclear weapons. The objective was to stop the spread of nuclear weapons beyond the original five.

The disarmament pillar was framed as the NWS committed to pursue negotiations "in good faith" towards nuclear disarmament, leading to general and complete disarmament. This is the Article VI obligation and the reason why NNWS agreed to forgo acquiring the apocalyptic nuclear weapon capability — the onerous promise by the NWS that existing arsenals would eventually be reduced to zero.

The third pillar is the peaceful use of nuclear energy, wherein all parties have the "inalienable right" to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. In return, non-nuclear states must

The 2026 Review Conference's failure underscored the need to restore the sanctity of deterrence norms.

accept IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards to verify that enriched material is not being diverted towards weapons.

In essence, the NPT bargain was basically a template that was imposed on the NNWS by the "first five", whose diktat to the rest of the world was: you are not to build bombs; you get help with peaceful nuclear energy and we, the countries that have bombs, will work to get rid of them.

Regrettably, all three pillars have been weakened or distorted over the decades. The most blatant transgression was in relation to proliferation. The five NWS closed ranks to allow vertical proliferation of their respective arsenals, but groused in unison to prevent horizontal proliferation. The first violation of the NPT was the covert assistance provided by NWS to enable Israel, Pakistan and North Korea to acquire nuclear weapons during the Cold War decades.

The disarmament commitment and the pledge by the NWS not to use or threaten to use their nuclear weapon capability against NNWS have also been tainted. In recent years, this has been evident in the actions of Russia and the US in the Ukraine and Iran wars, respectively.

Both Ukraine and Iran have revealed the manner in which the core NPT provisions have been sullied. Paradoxically, Ukraine, which had nuclear weapons when it was part of the USSR, became a de facto NWS when the Cold War ended in December 1991; it was prevailed upon to renounce this status and become a NNWS. Solemn pledges were made that its sov-

ereignty would not be violated, but then the February 2022 Russian invasion happened. And in the early stages of the war, Moscow engaged in not-so-subtle nuclear sabre-rattling.

Iran, which is a signatory to the NPT as a NNWS and had accepted IAEA safeguards under the (P5 plus 1) negotiated nuclear deal during the Barack Obama years, was blatantly attacked by the US and Israel on "trumped-up" charges earlier this year. The "inalienable right" of a NNWS to peaceful nuclear pursuit is in tatters.

India has no de jure locus apropos of the NPT since it is a non-signatory, but it has a de facto dialectical relationship with the global nuclear order. Since the 1950s, when Jawaharlal Nehru was at the helm, India was in the vanguard of global disarmament advocacy and contributed to the Partial Test Ban Treaty.

However, Delhi was cast as a nuclear outlier by the US till it became a nuclear weapon state in May 1998 and was then accorded an exceptional status in late 2008. This extraordinary modus vivendi was enabled in large measure by then US President George W Bush; it has given India a distinctive perch in the global nuclear architecture.

The 2026 RevCon ended on a predictably disappointing note, but the failure underscored the need to restore the sanctity of deterrence norms — it is more urgent now than ever before. The US, Russia and China have abdicated their responsibility in different ways. Alas, they are no longer the guardians they were expected to be. The world needs resolute stakeholders to repair the NPT pillars in an equitable, empathetic and consensual manner.

In the mid-1960s, the Indian representative to the Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament (ENDC) in Geneva, Ambassador VC Trivedi, described the nascent NPT as a means to "disarm the unarmed." Sixty years later, the NPT should not morph into a treaty aimed at destroying the unarmed.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us. — John F Kennedy

Population control and incentives

PUSHPENDER SINGH GUSAIN

I was in Class X when I first heard the slogan, "Hum Do Hamare Do." It was a regular on the radio, while hoardings advertising "small family" norms could be seen at prominent places and on the back of roadways buses. During the Emergency, the government pursued the birth control programme with vigour. Reports of forced sterilisation were received from parts of North India. This became a major plank of the Janata Party, which went on to win the 1977 elections. After forming the government, the ruling party introduced a population policy that laid emphasis on voluntary birth control and comprehensive community healthcare.

However, as the population growth rate remained high even during the 1980s and 1990s, Central and state governments adopted policies focusing on incentives and disincentives to achieve sustainable levels. I worked in a public sector organisation that implemented a scheme to promote family planning. An incentive was paid monthly to married employees with two or fewer children. They were envied by their unmarried colleagues — for obvious reasons.

There were a few unmarried staffers among us who were in their thirties or older. They made a plea: since they were aiding in limiting the population growth by remaining single, they also deserved the incentive. The management, in its wisdom, did not relent as the scheme was meant only for married employees.

In the meantime, a peculiar case occurred. An employee was blessed with triplets. Since the eligibility criterion for the scheme was up to two children, he was denied the monetary benefit. The employee, who had to take care of his three newborn babies, was naturally unhappy about the treatment meted out to him. He took up his case with the management, which decided in his favour as a "special case".

Recently, N Chandrababu Naidu, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, announced incentives for people having a second, third, and fourth child in order to promote population growth, considering the low Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 1.5 in the southern state. There are several other states whose TFR has gone below 2.1, the figure required for sustainable population growth.

India was the first country to launch a programme (in the 1950s) to stabilise population at a level consistent with the requirements of the national economy. The turnaround in population growth is a tribute to our policymakers who framed policies that helped achieve the target in many states.

In view of the current situation — India's TFR has fallen below the replacement level — the "small family" incentive is set to make way for the "large family" bonus.

The writer is a Chandigarh-based, freelance contributor

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Diplomatic challenges

Apropos of 'India returns to its geopolitical centre' (*The Great Game*); the article presents an insightful analysis of India's re-emerging role in global geopolitics and its increasing influence in international fora like BRICS and the Quad. India's balanced foreign policy and strategic diplomacy have helped strengthen its position globally. The country is maintaining relations with various nations while safeguarding its national interests and promoting regional stability. Such developments reflect India's growing importance on the world stage. India must continue pursuing a policy based on diplomacy, peace and national development. The article highlights both the opportunities and the challenges before India and helps readers better understand contemporary international relations.

VAIDANT MEHNDIRATTA, AMBALA

Timely revision of foreign policy

Refer to 'India returns to its geopolitical centre'; our foreign policy reflects a timely correction amid shifting global alignments. Engagement with both BRICS and the Quad highlights a pragmatic pursuit of multi-alignment. However, occasional diplomatic missteps risk diluting India's global credibility. Moreover, rising superpower rivalries demand sharper, more calibrated statecraft from New Delhi. The government must bolster diplomacy, sustain balance and reinforce domestic cohesion for a stable, assertive and independent global role.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

CJP illustrative of youth's rage

Refer to 'The cockroach has spoken. India should listen'; the exponential rise in the number of Cockroach Janta Party members is stunning. It reminds one of Walt Whitman's quote: "I was simmering, simmering, simmering till Emerson made me boil." Our neighbouring countries have already seen this boil. Given the youthful demographic dividend of India grappling with unemployment, the nation stands at a crossroads. Casteist politics, non-developmental issues and communal undercurrents in our polity are adding fuel to the fire. Greener pastures abroad are also withering.

ABHYAM SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Reverence vs legislation

Refer to 'Faith, fear and Punjab's sacrilege debate'; the Guru Granth Sahib has long served as a profound ethical and cultural anchor in Punjabi society. The article thoughtfully examines the tensions between reverence and legislation. Deliberate desecration or public undermining of the Granth's authority risks accelerating a drift towards unrestrained materialism. Historical experience in several socialist countries demonstrates how difficult it is to transform deeply religious societies. Protecting the sanctity of the Granth is not abstract idealism but a political necessity to preserve social cohesion amid real material contradictions and to prevent reactionary exploitation of spiritual disorientation.

MANU KANT, BY MAIL

WFI's act of vengeance

The Delhi High Court has rightly pulled up the Wrestling Federation of India over its ploy to keep Vinesh Phogat out of the Asian Games selection trials. The court has observed that it was a retrograde step and an act of vengeance. If the sports body treats its international players in this manner, one can imagine how it treats beginners. The nation can't forget the shabby treatment meted out to national wrestlers while protesting at Jantar Mantar against then WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who was accused of sexual harassment. They had to approach the Supreme Court to get an FIR lodged.

BHUPINDER KOCHHAR, PANCHKULA

An island of privilege

The Centre's decision to reclaim the sprawling Delhi Gymkhana Club has ignited a larger national debate. For decades, the colonial-era institution symbolised exclusivity, influence and elite access to the heart of Lutyens' Delhi. The government says the site is needed for defence infrastructure, yet public sentiment increasingly demands that such centrally located national assets serve broader public welfare. Parks, cultural institutions, public facilities or national infrastructure accessible to ordinary citizens would resonate far more deeply than preserving yet another island of privilege.

RS NARULA, PATIALA


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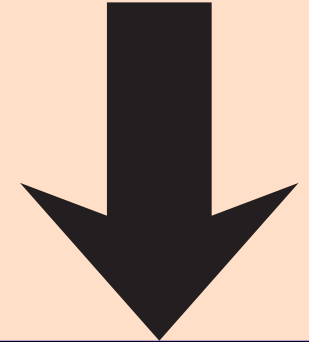
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Safeguarding India from religious disputes



MANOJ KUMAR JHA
RAJYA SABHA MP, RJD

NATIONS progress when they address education, public health, unemployment, inequality, climate vulnerability and the dignity of ordinary citizens. Not when they perpetually summon ghosts from history to dominate the present. The tragedy is that such disputes rarely remain confined to courtrooms.

Once historical anxieties are released into public discourse, they travel rapidly into neighbourhoods, colour social relations, power electoral campaigns and seep into everyday conversations. The damage then is not merely institutional but also societal, destroying the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

There are moments in the life of a republic when the letter of the law survives, but its spirit erodes through reinterpretation, circumvention and selective political invocation. The ongoing debates and litigations surrounding places of worship in India represent one such moment. The question before us is much more

than legal. It is civilisational and constitutional. And it is likely to impact our nation and people in profound ways.

The Places of Worship Act, 1991, was enacted in extraordinary times. It was born amidst one of the most volatile phases of post-Independence India, when communal anxieties had begun acquiring organised political expression and 'historical grievances' were being transformed into contemporary political mobilisations. Parliament, through this legislation, sought to draw a constitutional *Lakshman Rekha*. The law essentially conveyed that independent India would not become a battlefield for relitigating medieval history. At its core, the 1991 Act was an appeal for national maturity.

The wisdom of the law lay in recognising that ours is not a land of singular histories. Our cities, shrines and monuments carry layers of memory of empire-building, trade, exchange, assimilation, coexistence, destruction and reconstruction. If every generation decides to reopen the wounds of the past in search of historical purification, the republic itself risks becoming permanently unsettled. Yet what we increasingly witness today is a gradual weakening of its ethical and constitutional intent. Its spirit is being bypassed through a climate where symbolic disputes are resurrected, historical claims are amplified for political mobilisation and the language of faith is



SELF-DESTRUCTION: The idea of India cannot be reduced to a project of historical rectification. ANI

deployed in ways that deepen social suspicion rather than democratic fraternity.

And the courts, which were supposed to defend the 1991 Act in letter and spirit, have appeared to waver in their commitment. Instead of treating the law as the decisive starting point, courts have increasingly anchored their reasoning in archaeological surveys, contested historical narratives and procedural workarounds, treating the statute as one consideration among many rather than the governing rule. When the governing law becomes the final reference rather than the starting point, adjudication ceases to enforce the legislative bar and quietly enables its circumvention.

The 1991 Act prohibits the conversion of the religious

character of a place of worship and imposes an obligation on the state to maintain that character as it existed on August 15, 1947. The law preserves non-retrogression as an essential feature of our secular values.

However, the recent decision of the MP High Court and several similar petitions pending in courts across India eviscerate the very core of the law. One must ask: what exactly is the republic attempting to achieve through this excavation of contested pasts? No democracy can move forward if governance becomes captive to civilisational score-settling.

The Constitution does not ask citizens to forget history; it asks them not to become captive to it. There is a difference between remembering history and weaponising it. BR

Every civilisation carries scars, but no modern republic can survive if each inherited wound is transformed into a political project.

A hatred of trees & collapse of moral imagination



SIDDHARTH PANDEY
HISTORIAN & CULTURAL CRITIC

AS a historian of Shimla, one of my favourite stories of the town relates to a certain Nasreen Azhar, the Pakistani human rights activist. A schoolgirl in the 1940s, Azhar and her family had resided in colonial 'Simla' before being whisked away to Pakistan a few months after the Partition.

Half a century later, in an interview, she remembered her departure after midnight through her mother's injunction to "bid farewell to Simla." The family dearly loved the town, but the final memory didn't hark to buildings, for it was reserved for the steadily deodars flanking the roadside. "Dono taraf pahaadon ke lambe lambe darakht andheron mein khaday huay thhe..." Only the trees remained standing on both sides of the road in the thick of the night, witnesses to one of the most harrowing, heartbreaking events in human history.

Trees, as Robert Macfarlane poetically puts, "are curators of time." But in measuring lifespans far exceeding the human age limit, they also become signposts and anchors for

human growth itself. Isn't it true that many of our best memories relate to the outdoors, which is never barren but always infused with greenery? And trees, surely, are the triumph of that greenery, holding in their shade and strength the proofs of an enriching life that joyfully brings together the human and non-human. As German thinker Goethe pithily remarked, "All is leaf."

And all was leaf, or at least so it felt until the early years of my childhood, before the turn of the century. Mostly growing up in Himachal and for a few years in present-day Uttarakhand, I was unaware of any modern infrastructure whose height dramatically surpassed the tallness of deodars, oaks, chestnuts or sals. Even the occasional visit to metropolises in the plains until the end of the 90s would typically bring us face-to-face with 'flats' that were 'manageable' (read 'navigable') by foot and not a total affront to the eye. They also seemed to match the height of trees.

It was only later that I realised that urbanism dominated by real estate megalomania had already been underway since the onset of liberalisation. But its instant visibility in the form of what are known as urban heat islands was relatively absent until two to three decades ago. These densely packed metropolitan zones of glass, concrete and tar experience far higher temperatures than their vicinities, and they metamorphosed into the defining symbols of



DISPENSABLE: There is something crass and crude about the ways in which we treat trees now. FILE

modern development post 2000. This model of development colonised entire landscapes with narcissistic disregard for greenery, unless it fulfilled the token role of ornamentation. This plain-based model of progress also spread to the hills in the new millennium. Had Kipling been alive, the title of his anthology *Plain Tales from the Hills* would have certainly taken on a new, worrisome import.

There is something overwhelmingly coarse, crass and crude about the ways in which we as a species and especially as a country have come to treat natural vegetation in the last few decades. While a detailed historical perspective is beyond the scope of this article, a cursory look at the umpteen recent developments proves beyond doubt that we have successfully settled on a new collective enemy: trees.

Pick up any part of India, and examples spill forth with a dan-

Recent umpteen developments prove that we have successfully settled on a new collective enemy: trees.

gerous ease. From the 7,500 trees cut for the recently inaugurated Delhi-Dehradun Expressway and over 8,600 in Pune for various departmental works during the past four years, to more than 45,000 mangroves slated to die for the Versova-Bhayandar Coastal Road project in Mumbai, and one crore trees facing the same fate in the Great Nicobar Project (this being an ecologist's estimate, as against the government's projection of 8.5 lakh), the numbers are staggering. Similarly, Nashik's Kumbh Mela preparations have already seen hundreds of trunks felled and millions are at risk of extinction in Madhya Pradesh's Ken-Betwa River Linking project.

It isn't that the ordinary layman hasn't taken notice. In fact, some of the most moving news from recent times relates to the multiple protests erupting across states against these ill-conceived endeavours. The Chhita Andolan led by tribal women

and indigenous families with regard to Ken-Betwa has already grabbed headlines, poignantly showing people lying on mock funeral pyres, demanding justice and adequate compensation. But, as has become the norm over the past decades, almost every other protest courts the ire of authorities and paves the way for newer threats and intimidation instead of dialogue or introspection.

It is tragic that we have reached a situation where the authorities themselves — a case in point being the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) — openly admit that they have run "out of space" within the city limits of Mumbai for large-scale compensatory plantation. And only a month ago, it was reported that 43% of the trees transplanted for the Central government's Rs 20,000-crore Central Vista Redevelopment Project have also perished. On the other hand, we are supposed to marvel at India's first 'Algae Tree', an artificial solar-powered bioreactor installed in Bhopal a few days ago, that absorbs carbon dioxide and releases oxygen with the help of micro-algae. What an irony.

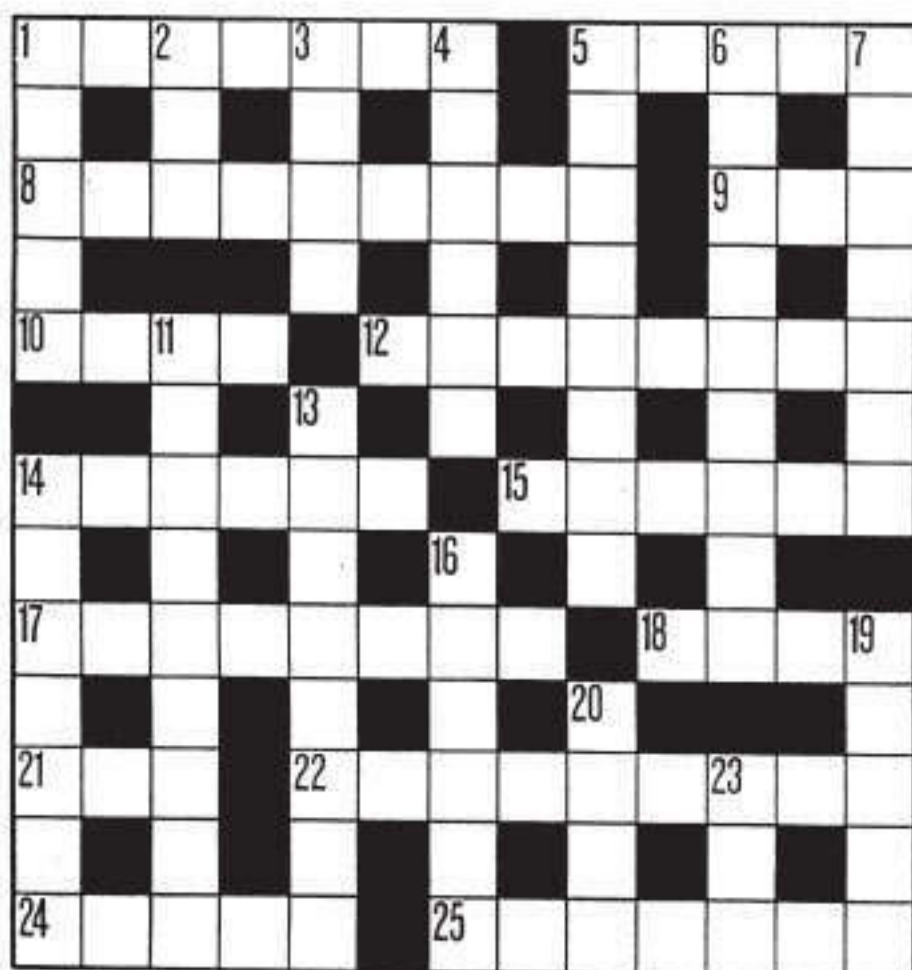
Coming back to Shimla, I can never forget how the terrifying monsoon of 2023 spurred so many residents to go on a tree-cutting spree like never before. All of a sudden, the very tree that the state of Himachal had worshipped for centuries — the deodar — turned into a receptacle of evil, and was mindbogglingly attributed as a major

reason for landslides (thereby triggering the massive chopping). Months later, in January 2024, the highest court of the country went against the National Green Tribunal's pause on the disastrous Shimla Development Plan 2041 (the NGT had previously termed it "illegal," given the SDP's aim of building in the 17 green belts), and approved it for implementation. A year and a half later, when calamity again struck the state, the same Supreme Court defended Himachal's ecology and warned that if strict measures weren't taken, "the entire state may vanish into thin air."

How do we make sense of such blatant contradictions? What and whom do we believe? As authorities await forest clearance to fell more deodars in order to install a gigantic statue of Lord Ram adjacent to the world's tallest Hanuman statue atop Shimla's highest hill, I am gripped by a burgeoning sense of horror and anxiety. How is it that we constantly forget that it isn't the presence of mythology that readily renders a mountain divine? Rather, it is the mountain, complete with its microclimate, that lends divinity to real and imagined stories.

In these dark times, one may do well to heed the writer JRR Tolkien's words via one of his fictional characters who, interestingly, is depicted as a god: "Would that the trees might speak on behalf of all things that have roots, and punish those that wrong them!"

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Begin correspondence with (7)
 - Waste matter (5)
 - Major 17th-century Spanish painter (9)
 - Aficionado (3)
 - Orderly (4)
 - Manner of speaking (8)
 - Free from pretence (7)
 - Of the teeth (6)
 - Hazardous (6)
 - Transiently brilliant (8)
 - Close friend (4)
 - Ailing (3)
 - Author of Treasure Island (9)
 - Magnificence (5)
 - Domesticated fowls (7)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Primeval, 5 Deep, 9 Mused, 10 However, 11 Self-employed, 13 Catchy, 14 Stubbs, 17 In all but name, 20 Begonia, 21 Glade, 22 Eire, 23 Factotum.

Down: 1 Pomp, 2 Inspect, 3 End of the line, 4 At home, 6 Envoy, 7 Paradise, 8 Twelfth Night, 12 Scribble, 15 Bombast, 16 Lusaka, 18 Augur, 19 Term.

- DOWN**
- Wish for enviously (5)
 - Nothing (3)
 - Too (4)
 - Tropical American huge-beaked bird (6)
 - Almost blindingly bright (8)
 - German operetta composer (9)
 - Free from pretence (7)
 - Italian sculptor of the bronze David (9)
 - As is widely known (8)
 - Condemnatory (7)
 - Gather together in readiness (4,2)
 - Wealth (5)
 - Bill of fare (4)
 - Impose (3)

SU DO KU



SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MAY 25, 2026, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Jyeshtha Shaka 4
- Jyeshtha Parvishite 11
- Hijari 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 10, up to 5:11 am
- Vajra Yoga up to 3:15 am
- Uttirphalguni Nakshatra up to 4:09 am
- Moon enters Virgo sign 9:07 am

FORECAST

SUNSET:	MONDAY	19:15 HRS
SUNRISE:	TUESDAY	05:24 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	42	25
New Delhi	44	30
Amritsar	41	26
Bathinda	44	26
Jalandhar	41	26
Ludhiana	42	26
Bhiwani	41	28
Hisar	43	26
Sirsa	45	29
Dharamsala	35	18
Manali	27	12
Shimla	26	19
Srinagar	24	12
Jammu	40	26
Kargil	22	08
Leh	20	07
Dehradun	39	23
Mussoorie	39	19

TEMPERATURE IN °C

DECCAN Chronicle

25 MAY 2026

Rubio sets ball rolling on reshaping India-US ties

Marco Rubio has been tasked with grappling a kind of Rubik's Cube on the US-India relationship after what was thought to be one of the most consequential West-East ties even a decade ago had become as complex as the puzzle of colourful cubes.

Charmingly optimistic as the US secretary of state was on his first official trip to India about taking a strategic partnership ahead and out of a recent bumpy path, the fact remains that it is his boss, Mr Donald Trump, who will decide if indeed the ties will go forward as envisaged.

The impression that Mr Trump effectively shot down any Indian ambition to become an influential power without quite being in the US axis has lingered. His tariffs on Indian goods were the biggest dampener on ties that may have had ups and downs, but trade was never a bone of contention before Mr Trump's second term. India's time-tested defence ties with Russia may be the unspoken point of contention, if not quite conflict between India and the US.

Mr Rubio's visit, ahead of a trade delegation from the US that is scheduled to visit in June, is the prospective starting point of reshaping ties that hit a diplomatic downturn thanks to Mr Trump's view of India that may have been coloured by India's Operation Sindoor in May 2025 which further exposed Pakistan's use of terror by proxy as a weapon of state.

With a Quad meeting to be hosted by India later this year, it is possible the ties will be on an upswing from here, especially if the trade agreement is signed and India also responds in terms of buying American oil

Since then, Mr Trump favouring his "favourite" general in Pakistan — which however has been playing a positive role in mediation with Iran — has only darkened the diplomatic ties between Washington and New Delhi. India perceives a gap between US policy and performance thanks to the unpredictability factor accentuated in Mr Trump's chimerical stance.

Mending the ties and bringing them back to a high level of strategic relationship in which India was supposed to be a balancing factor to America's superpower rivalry with China is a daunting task, but one at which Mr Rubio has been prominent in playing a constructive role. The trust deficit with India might seem insurmountable right now, but it is a good sign that Mr Rubio has conveyed Mr Trump's willingness to host Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an early date in the White House.

It has, however, not been all doom and gloom as trade in terms of India's exports have not suffered as much as the posturing with threatened punitive tariffs on use of cheap Russian crude. In fact, India has been on the positive side in trade surplus even as exports remained stable at \$87.3 billion in the year ending March 2026. The US goods trade deficit with India was \$58.2bn in 2025, a 27.1 per cent increase on 2024. No wonder Mr Rubio acted as a salesman for US energy with India on this trip.

With a Quad meeting to be hosted by India later this year following the foreign ministers' meeting this week, it is possible the ties will be on an upswing from here, especially if the trade agreement is signed and India also responds in terms of buying American oil.

In his meeting with the PM and external affairs minister, Mr Rubio seems to have covered much ground on the points of view of both sides, from visa issues to the choking of the Strait of Hormuz and energy and supply chain issues. The signs are propitious and progress in ties may revolve around Mr Trump opting to be consistently positive towards India.

CBSE chaos: Govt must step in

Students who wrote the Class 12 examination of the CBSE had long completed their part of the job but are being made to run from one website to another to ensure that the answers have been properly evaluated and marks granted. This has come after several thousands of them felt that they got much lower marks than what they had expected leading to a disaster in their academic lives as these marks could impact their admissions in the graduate programmes. If social media responses are an indication, then even those who have cleared tough and highly competitive entrance tests have fallen behind in their Class 12 examination!

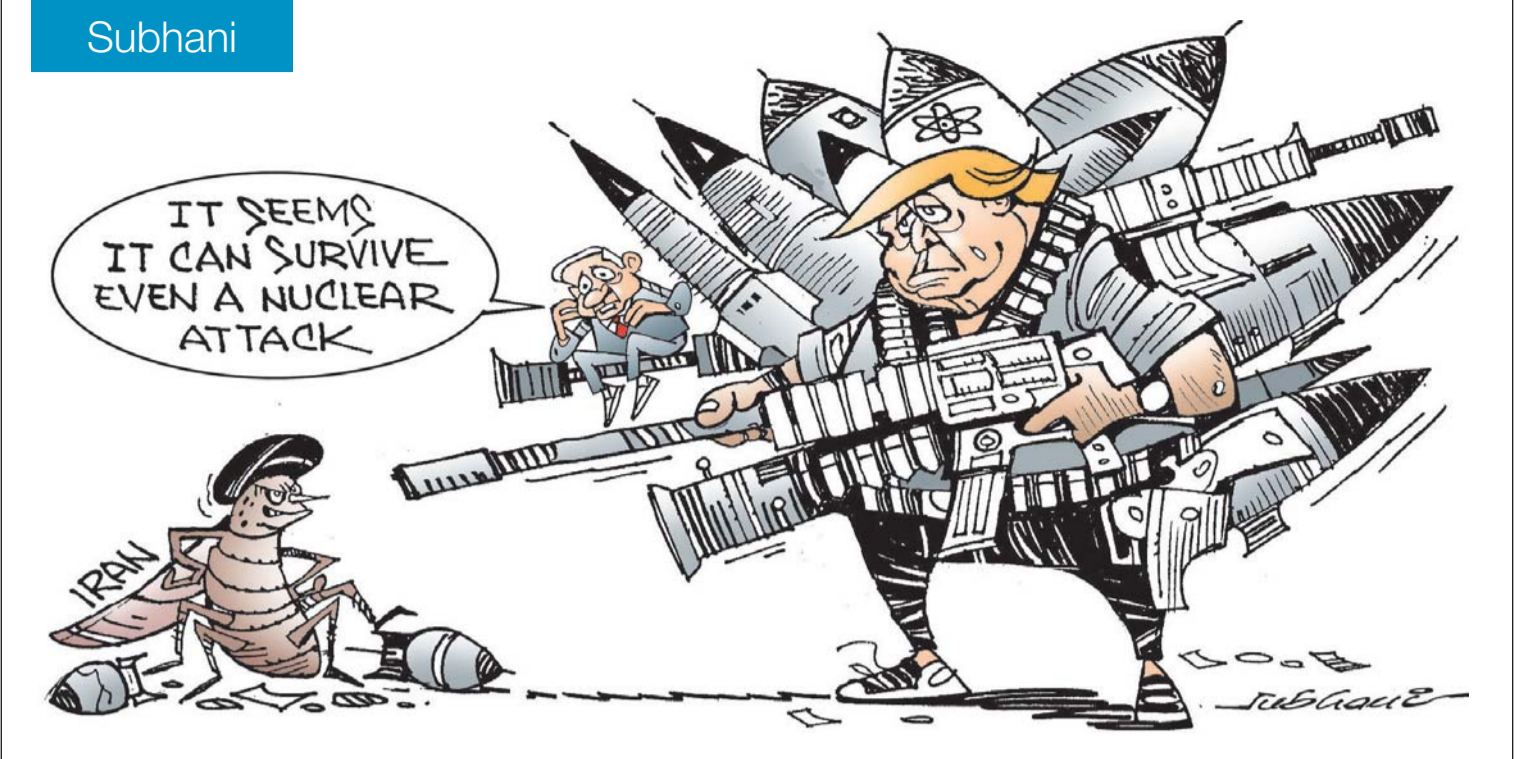
There can be many a slip that made a mess of a normal, routine affair: the newly-introduced On-Screen Marking (OSM), uninformed students, the technical glitches that failed to cover the shortcomings and faulty processes that followed but the real villain in the piece are the callous, irresponsible and inefficient CBSE authorities and the Union government which failed to intervene in time and set things right. OSM is a system where teachers evaluate papers scanned and sent to them in pdf format. It appears that several students who got their answer sheets found them unclear, which they believe could have stopped the teachers from evaluating them properly and granting the marks due to them.

It is shocking that neither the Board nor the government found it exigent enough to intervene; the issue has become worse than before after students who attempted to apply for reevaluation found one too many glitches: difficulty in accessing the portal, website crashes and payment gateway failure. They also found the charges for reevaluation too high, often running into thousands of rupees.

The government must step in at least now. It must marshal all the technical resources at its command and help the students complete the process. It must extend the time for applying for reevaluation and scrap the fee. Most importantly, the government must identify what caused the glitches and ensure that those who played with the future of the students are made to pay for their indiscretion.

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Farewell to a friend, a Hyd environmentalist



Sanjaya Baru
Sanjayovacha

It is a nondescript street. Not more than half a kilometre. From the Hyderabad YMCA to Barkatpura circle. Driving down that street a couple of months ago brought a flood of memories. I was going to meet a friend from my school and college days who was battling cancer. In a metropolis where so much has changed, little had on this street where I had spent many a youthful evening with him. Bliss was it in that "dusk", with apologies to Wordsworth, to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.

An evening walk up and down that street was filled with conversations on neighbourhood girls, the Vietnam war, Karl Marx and the songs of Mohammad Rafi — *yeh duniya agar milbhi jaye to kya hai?* There was Umakant and Pradeep and sometimes even Sitaram (who became famous as Yechury). But the voice that dominated all conversation was of Komandur Santana Gopal. Some called him KS, others just Gopal. There was only one Gopal of any consequence in that city, at that time. He passed away on May 16, 2026, aged 74.

We went to different schools and later different colleges, but in the late 1960s and early 1970s we came together as enthusiastic debaters. Members of a debating club. The Mock Parliament and Mock Assembly were organised and participated in witnessed impressive performances. Gopal always excelled as leader of an Opposition party, uncomfortable in the role of a chief minister. That summed up his personality.

Every evening we would meet at an Irani café in Narayanguda, and occasionally walk to the modest apartment of Communist ideologue Mohit Sen.

That is where I first met the late George Reddy, the slain student leader, who like Gaddar inspired many of my generation. We were as comfortable in that cosy flat, sitting on the floor, imbibing knowledge from Comrade Mohit, as we would be at the well-appointed home of Sen's brother, N.P. "Potla" Sen, in one of the palaces of an erstwhile nawab that became the campus of the Administrative Staff College of India (ASCI).

As ASCI's principal, N.P. Sen, once chairman of Air India, kept his doors open to visitors from around the world and invited young students from Osmania University to his soirees. We would meet Harry Magdoff, editor of *The Monthly Review*, and converse with a Joan Robinson, one of the tallest economists of her time, teacher of Manmohan Singh at Cambridge. We were mostly dishevelled youth, not awed by the elegance of the evening but inquisitive to question and learn.

When we interacted with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at a Youth Congress convention in 1972, we would boldly question her on many issues, but would be mesmerised by her elegant response. There was no fear of authority. It was an era of questioning, the high noon before the Emergency. As youth gave way to young adulthood, we went in different directions.

Gopal did all manner of things but it is what he finally set out to do that deserved national recognition and honour. That, alas, did not come his way. I filled the online forms that the Narendra Modi government introduced for the Padma awards and uploaded his bio-data.

Some called him KS, others just Gopal. There was only one Gopal of any consequence in that city, at that time. He passed away on May 16, 2026, aged 74.

Some lowly Intelligence Bureau functionary vetting the recommendation may have discovered and disapproved of Gopal's political past and the leftist company he kept. That is how the State rewards civil society. It was then left to the French to recognize Gopal's contribution to our shared future.

At the Paris International Agriculture Exposition, he was awarded the Global Champion Water Innovation Prize. Gopal's interest in rural development and water conservation was stimulated during his time at the Deccan Development Society, an organisation that he became critical of in recent years, alleging lack of financial transparency. He then set up his own organisation, Centre for Environment Concerns and developed a water saving system that he called SWAR, for System of Water for Agriculture Rejuvenation.

He would take anyone interested for a demonstration, spending long hours explaining how the system works. It is an innovation that has taken drip irrigation to the next level of water conservation, ensuring moisture for plants. Rather than poke holes in the pipe and let the water drip on the ground, allowing for wastage due to evaporation and not ensuring that the roots received adequate moisture, Gopal's SWAR linked pipes to mud pots embedded below the ground that would "sweat" and ensure adequate and sustained supply of water. The ground around the plant would appear dry, but dig a foot or two and the roots would all be embedded in nurturing moisture,

yielding a bounty.

Beginning as a student of commerce and trade, Gopal became a self-educated agronomist. His knowledge of soils and plants was incredible. After the French award, he received an American award. His innovation began to attract attention around the country but it was in Telangana that he remained rooted. He was passionate about defending the reputation of a non-government organisation at a time when governments were harassing them for all manner of reasons. That, and the urge to help thousands of women in Zaheerabad taluk, pit Gopal against trustees of the Deccan Development Society, who he alleged had not delivered on their promise. The women he mobilised adored him for his commitment to their welfare.

My father, a member of the Indian Administrative Service, did not particularly approve or disapprove of the company I kept during my college days. However, years later, when I was in the Prime Minister's Office, he would tell me that Gopal was spending his time in better ways. In his retirement my father devoted considerable time to support various NGOs. With Gopal he spent time not just talking about his work but about the world. "I find your father more interesting these days than I find you," Gopal would tease me. I was an armchair columnist. He had mud on his hands.

When Sitaram Yechury passed away, Gopal organised an online memorial for him, gathering many of our school and college day friends from around the world.

Each one of us has lived a very different life, but the Hyderabad of the 1960s and 1970s had shaped all of us. We remained irreverent romantics, concerned citizens and good friends, like true Hyderabadis.

Sanjaya Baru, a journalist and a writer, is a graduate of Nizam College, Hyderabad, and was an adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

LETTERS
KURNOOL'S RAIN
 Real development means storm-proof civic infrastructure. Kurnool's four-hour blackout after rain and lightning shows why underground cabling for power, water, gas and communication lines is no longer optional but essential.
Dr Javed Rasheed
Kurnool

HOLIDAY IN SUMMER
 Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's move to declare local holidays during extreme heat is welcome. Public safety must come first as heat rises due to deforestation, pollution and fuel and plastic use. Governments must curb these and promote tree plantation seriously.
Chunduri Satya
Visakhapatnam

SANJEEVANI IN AP
 The Sanjeevani digital healthcare Project is a welcome step that can ease medical costs, especially for the poor, and improve access to timely treatment (*Sanjeevani across AP from Aug. 15; May 24*). Its success, however, will depend on proper training, accurate data entry and effective statewide implementation.
Dr E.R. Subrahmanyam
Amalapuram

THE CJP PLOT
 The NEET-UG paper leak was not the first. Where was Abhijeet Dipke when the paper got leaked in 2024? This exposes the hidden hand of opposition parties in this year's episode and the floating of the Cockroach Janta Party. Dipke has a clear AAP background and the Congress as well as the Samajwadi Party and TMC have leveraged the trend to mock the BJP.
Govardhana Myneedu
Vijayawada

INDIA AND THE U.S.
 The strengthening of India-US relations reflects New Delhi's significant role in the Indo-Pacific region (*Rubio meets Modi, starts fresh push to repair ties, May 24*). The US requires India's support to carry forward regional peace, secure trade routes, and stand against strategic threats.
Raju Kolluru
Kakinada

Email your letters to
 info@deccanmail.com,
 editor@deccanmail.com.



NEET paper leak & cancellation signals systemic failure, collapse

The cancellation of the NEET-UG is not just another administrative embarrassment. It is the public collapse of a system that promised fairness and meritocracy but has delivered anxiety, inequality and institutional failure.

More than 22 lakh students sat for this examination, believing that years of sacrifice would finally be judged through a credible national process. Instead, the government was forced to scrap the exam after investigators found significant overlaps between the actual question paper and a "guess paper" circulated through paid WhatsApp groups. The National Testing Agency (NTA), which conducts the examination, itself admitted that the sanctity of the exam had been thoroughly compromised. That admission matters because this is no longer just about a criminal conspiracy. It is about the collapse of institutional credibility, and the question of whether that credibility was ever as robust as we were told.

What the NEET crisis exposes, more than anything, is the dangerous fragility of India's obsession with hyper-centralised examinations. What was sold as "One Nation, One Exam" has, in practice, become one nation, one catastrophic point of failure. A single breach now destabilises the futures of millions. This is not an unforeseen accident. The early warning signs were plain. After the 2024 NEET scandal, a committee headed by former ISRO chairman K. Radhakrishnan reportedly recommended major structural reforms, including computer-based testing, multiple exam sessions, stronger digital safeguards and decentralised security mechanisms. Thankfully, the government has now agreed to com-

puter-based testing.

The committee explicitly flagged that transporting physical question papers across thousands of centres creates enormous vulnerabilities. Most of those recommendations were delayed, diluted or quietly shelved. The authorities recognised the risks and chose administrative convenience.

For years, NEET was projected as a reform that would eliminate corruption in medical admissions, standardise merit and democratise opportunity. The reality has been different. The exam may be uniform, but the conditions producing candidates are profoundly unequal. A student from an elite CBSE institution in Kota or Chennai equipped with expensive coaching, English-language fluency and years of specialised preparation does not compete on equal terms with a rural government school student from Bihar or Odisha. Equality of examination is emphatically not equality of opportunity. This was precisely the concern repeatedly raised by states like Tamil Nadu, whose opposition was routinely dismissed as political resistance or anti-merit populism. Time has largely vindicated that fear.

The Neet has not dismantled inequality. It has reorganised inequality around access to coaching.

Medical entrance preparation has evolved into a gigantic commercial industry. Entire cities survive on Neet anxiety. Families spend lakhs on residential coaching centres, repeat batches, test series and personalised mentoring. Students begin preparation years in advance, often sacrificing their adolescence entirely. Ironically, a reform introduced to curb commercialisation in admissions has produced unpre-

cedented commercialisation in examination preparation. And when a single exam becomes the gateway to nearly every medical seat in the country, the incentives for malpractice become enormous. Paper leaks are no longer isolated acts of cheating. They are organised economic enterprises, the logical product of a system that concentrates extraordinary power in a single high-stakes event.

The NTA, meanwhile, has become an overburdened super-agency handling Neet, JEE, CUET, UGC-NET, and multiple other national examinations. Every glitch or security breach now affects millions simultaneously. The problem is not simply incompetence. It is structural overconcentration of power and responsibility. No institution, however well-run, can indefinitely sustain such massive centralisation.

There is also a larger question India continues to avoid: Should the entire future of a student be reduced to performance in a single high-pressure examination? Medicine is not a profession based solely on MCQ elimination and memory-based recall. It requires empathy, ethical judgment, communication, resilience and sustained intellectual maturity. Besides, 12 years of schooling are effectively compressed into one examination day. Even the so-called objectivity of Neet has grown unstable. Every year brings fresh disputes over paper difficulty, cut-offs, grace marks or administrative irregularities. The system that promised certainty now produces recurring litigation and confusion.

Sadly, the cruellest burden falls on the students. The emotional devastation caused by this cancella-

tion cannot be dismissed as collateral inconvenience. Many aspirants had already endured multiple attempts. Some relocated to coaching hubs far from home. Others came from families that had exhausted their savings. At least one student is reported to have committed suicide after the cancellation.

Yet accountability within the system remains remarkably thin. When scandals emerge, responsibility diffuses conveniently across logistics vendors, local officials, private contractors and criminal intermediaries. Institutional accountability rarely travels upward. Arrests are showcased, committees are announced and structural reform remains painfully slow.

India truly needs a more honest conversation than the one it is currently having. Surely, the answer is not the uncritical defence of a collapsing centralised model, nor is it the simple abolition of national standards. What is needed is a layered admissions framework that balances national benchmarks with regional flexibility, weights school performance alongside entrance scores, and spreads both infrastructure and risk across multiple testing windows. Above all, we must abandon the illusion that centralisation guarantees fairness. In a country of deep educational inequality, it tends to guarantee the opposite. And when millions of young people lose faith in the process that decides their futures, the crisis is no longer merely educational.

The writer is retired professor and former dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Christ University in Bengaluru

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India - founded 1818

Unsafe Plates

India's food economy is entering a dangerous phase - not necessarily because adulteration is new, but because public trust is beginning to collapse faster than the state can restore it. Across urban India, middle-class households are quietly changing behavioral patterns. Families are grinding spices at home, sourcing milk from farms, abandoning loose packaged staples and paying premiums for products they believe are safer. These are not lifestyle choices driven by nostalgia or wellness culture. They are defensive adaptations to a market increasingly viewed with suspicion.

That should alarm policymakers far more than periodic raids or sensational videos. India does not lack food safety laws. The Food Safety and Standards Act of 2006 created one of the most ambitious regulatory frameworks in the developing world. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) was created to modernise oversight, standardise manufacturing practices and build accountability across the food chain. Yet the persistence of adulteration reveals a deeper institutional contradiction: India has built a modern regulatory architecture on top of a largely informal economy. That mismatch is at the heart of the crisis. Much of India's food trade still operates through fragmented supply chains involving small vendors, unregistered processors, repackaging units and local distributors with limited documentation. Loose spices, edible oils, sweets and dairy products often pass through multiple hands before reaching consumers. In such an ecosystem, tracing contamination becomes extraordinarily difficult. By the time regulators identify a problem, the products may already have spread across several cities. The challenge is not merely criminality. It is scale. No regulatory agency can effectively supervise millions of small eateries, informal kitchens and decentralised supply networks with limited manpower and uneven state capacity. Even routine testing regimes are vulnerable to manipulation when compliance becomes episodic rather than continuous. India's enforcement model remains overwhelmingly reactive - triggered by complaints, raids or public outrage rather than preventive monitoring.

The consequences are economic as much as medical. Trust is itself an economic asset. Once consumers begin assuming that ordinary products are unsafe, markets fragment into "trusted" and "untrusted" categories. Large brands gain an advantage because fear pushes consumers towards recognisable names, certifications and premium supply chains. Meanwhile, poorer Indians - unable to pay higher prices for perceived safety - remain trapped inside the least regulated segments of the market. This risks creating a two-tier food system where safety becomes a privilege. India's broader economic ambitions also raise the stakes. A country aspiring to become a global manufacturing and export hub cannot afford recurring doubts over food quality, traceability and standards compliance.

International scrutiny of Indian spices and processed foods in recent years has already demonstrated how domestic regulatory weaknesses can quickly become geopolitical and trade liabilities. Ultimately, food safety is not just a public health issue. It is a governance test. When citizens stop trusting what reaches their kitchen shelves, they are also beginning to question the state's ability to enforce basic standards in everyday life.

Difficult questions

The sharp exchange between an Indian diplomat and a Norwegian journalist in Oslo this week was not really about one question shouted at a Prime Minister. It was about two radically different understandings of democracy colliding in public view. For much of the Western press, adversarial questioning is considered a professional obligation. Political leaders are expected to face uncomfortable queries, particularly on issues involving civil liberties, dissent and institutional accountability. The refusal of a head of government to engage with unscripted media questions over an extended period inevitably becomes a story in itself. India now finds itself confronting that reality abroad.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi remains one of the world's most electorally successful and politically dominant leaders. His government can legitimately point to India's democratic scale, noisy electoral culture and constitutional protections. Yet none of that automatically shields it from international scrutiny over press freedom, minority anxieties or the shrinking space for dissent perceived by critics. What made the Oslo episode striking was not merely the journalist's persistence but the intensity of the reaction it provoked among sections of India's online ecosystem. A routine if confrontational journalistic intervention was quickly transformed into a nationalist controversy. The journalist was denounced as a hostile foreign actor, accused of insulting India and subjected to coordinated online attacks. Reports that her social media accounts were later suspended - regardless of the exact reasons - only deepened the optics problem for India internationally.

This reflects a broader political shift visible across many democracies, where criticism of governments increasingly becomes conflated with attacks on the nation itself. In such climates, journalism is judged less by whether questions are legitimate and more by whether they are considered loyal.

The problem with this approach is strategic as much as democratic. India today seeks greater geopolitical influence, leadership of the Global South, expanded Western partnerships and a larger voice in global governance institutions. Such ambitions inevitably bring closer international examination of domestic institutions. Economic size and diplomatic weight do not reduce scrutiny; they intensify it.

Moreover, India's image abroad is no longer shaped only by governments or traditional diplomacy. Viral videos, social media reactions and global press narratives increasingly define perceptions in real time. A government confident in its democratic legitimacy should ideally see difficult questions not as threats but as manageable features of open political life.

The irony is that India's democratic resilience has historically rested precisely on its ability to absorb criticism without appearing insecure. From parliamentary upheavals to judicial activism and an often chaotic media culture, India's political system long projected argumentative confidence rather than controlled unanimity. That is why the Oslo incident matters beyond a few tense minutes outside a press event. It highlighted an emerging contradiction between India's aspiration to be seen as a mature global power and the growing discomfort around adversarial scrutiny. Strong states do not merely project authority; they also demonstrate tolerance for dissenting voices, including inconvenient foreign ones.

Soil to Salon ~ II

The original Left movement was anchored in rural land reforms that understood the fundamental relationship between the man and the land. With Jyoti Basu, the movement's focus began to drift toward the urban and the intellectual elites, and discourses began to migrate from the open fields of rural Bengal into insular intellectual circles. While the Old Left had a visceral understanding of hunger and poverty, this new Salon became preoccupied with narrative making, prioritising academic debate over the basic needs of the common man

The story of Bengal's decline is not merely an economic one - it is a narrative of complete cultural and intellectual transformation. We can call this a shift from the "Soil to the Salon", which represents a pivotal transformation whereby the intellectual class became the architects of their own irrelevance by abandoning the masses. Initially, leaders like Hare Krishna Konar - an Andaman Cellular Jail returned revolutionary from an affluent background - symbolized a politics rooted in ground reality. This "Old Left" focused on the fundamental struggles of the masses or basic needs, in rural fields and urban factories. However, this grounded leadership eventually transitioned into the era of Jyoti Basu, when the centre of gravity in politics shifted from the rural fields to affluent urban salons.

Originating in eighteenth-century France, salon - an informal intellectual gathering of writers, artists, academics, and thinkers - became a space that shaped literature, philosophy, and politics. Salon was also integral to a vibrant Bengali culture, but it became a problem when the salon became detached from economic realism and transformed itself only into a forum for ideological discourse.

The original Left movement was anchored in rural land reforms that understood the fundamental relationship between the man and the land. With Jyoti Basu, the movement's focus began to drift toward the urban and the intellectual elites, and discourses began to migrate from the open fields of rural Bengal into insular intellectual circles. While the Old Left had a visceral understanding of hunger and poverty, this new Salon became preoccupied with narrative making, prioritising academic debate over the basic needs of the common man. This transition had profound consequences for the state's socio-political fabric and would ultimately result in driving industries away, retreating into a cocoon of make-believe ideological space that glorified poverty, abjured modernisation and computerisation, and severely neglected infrastructure.

That was how the 1991 reforms bypassed the state - the states which had invested in human capital and had built advanced infrastructure surged ahead, taking advantage of the liberalised and globalised environment, while Bengal continued to languish in its old ways, way behind states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, or Karnataka.

Industrialists increasingly encountered an environment where political negotiations mattered more than managerial efficiency. Labour militancy became normalized and the gherao culture came to symbolise absolute industrial anarchy. The entrepreneur became morally suspect, while



the jhola-wala intellectual acquired disproportionate social prestige. Ideological purity, literary sophistication, and political rhetoric came to be valued above commerce and wealth creation, producing a society that became rich in debate, but weak in capital formation and bankrupt in imagination. The "salon" became a culture in which symbolism, ideology and cultural self-image substituted the need for productive economic transformation.

Idealistic cadres came to be gradually replaced by a system that prioritized vote-bank politics and minority appeasement over genuine social progress. The salon replaced the factory floor as the centre of progress, and ideology displaced pragmatism. Hours without count spent in purposeless adda were cherished over engagement in purposeful economic activities. Holidays in schools, colleges and government offices proliferated unchecked, while the rest of India was curtailing these and reinventing a work ethic that prioritised hard work and efficiency above everything else. This era also marked the beginning of a heavily politicised intelligentsia. Historically, conscience keepers like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Mahasweta Devi



GOVIND BHATTACHARJEE



SINDHU NIL BARMAN ROY

The writers, schoolmates once, are, respectively, former Director General at the CAG of India, and Distinguished Professor, RKMVERI, Belur

portrayed the authentic socio-political landscape of Bengal. But now the Left shifted from representing the people to judging them, viewing traditional values and faith as backward structures. It was a civilizational and cultural shift that increasingly disowned Bengal's past rich history of religious revivalism.

Ancient Indian knowledge was derided as obsolete mythology, towering religious figures like Sri Chaitanya, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were treated as embarrassments, to be ashamed of and conveniently forgotten. The Salon practiced a selective morality, where outrage was a curated commodity that catered to global causes, while being strictly rationed at home and turning a blind eye to the limitless atrocities being unleashed in their own backyards.

The state's decline was further hastened by a collapsing education system that never recovered from the damage inflicted by the Left after they came to power. Bengal possessed one of India's strongest intellectual ecosystems - anchored by excellent institutions such as the University

of Calcutta, Jadavpur University or Presidency College and a dense culture of scholarship that attracted talent from outside. But the 1980s saw a near-total politicisation of all public universities and institutions, when ideology was given preference over merit. Ever since, the system has been continuing its slide down the slippery slope of decay. Government schools, once the backbone of the middle and lower classes, lost their vitality and pre-eminence in the new social milieu. As intellectual independence gave way to political patronage, institutional norms that prioritised merit were substituted by political loyalty that became the most important factor of advancement in state-run institutions. Thus, institutions that were once centres of excellence lost their vitality and became infested with extreme student and teacher politics, becoming pale shadows of their past glory. Education increasingly became subordinated to ideological mobilisation and cadre politics that determined recruitment, promotions, campus administration and academic culture.

Bengal's economic stagnation has also sharply reduced the absorptive capacity for an educated workforce that was naturally forced to flee towards advanced states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and overseas. This created a vicious cycle: as economic opportunities evaporated, incentives for academic excellence declined, while the outmigration of talent further weakened Bengal's intellectual capital. Under the 15-years of the TMC era, campuses increasingly became arenas of factional contestation rather than centres of learning and scholarship, and students from Bengal no longer dreamt of studying in Bengal. The decline was not merely academic - it was deeply intertwined with the state's broader decline.

The decline of industrial Bengal, therefore, cannot be seen merely through the lens of economics. It represented the fading of an entire ecosystem where the decays in education, industry, culture, and public institutions reinforced one another. Only a society that has turned completely inwards can prioritise ideological purity and rhetoric over wealth creation and capital formation.

The "salonisation" of Bengal's politics and society reached its zenith during the TMC era. Economic modernization became secondary to narrative management about identity, culture and political spectacle. Even Bengali identity came to be redefined and made synonymous with loyalty to the ruling party. While economic opportunities disappeared, a sinister, patronage-driven "syndicate culture" flourished.

The Salon class - comprising poets, academics, painters, theatre personalities, actors and film figures - became insulated from the people they derived sustenance from and positioned themselves in their "glass houses of foreign ideologies". They had no shame in trading their intellectual integrity for state patronage, awards, committee appointments and state-sponsored perks and privileges. These gatekeepers of our culture infiltrated institutions and engaged in shaping minds and narratives favouring the ruling party, while public discourses dissolved into the domain of absurdity, degenerating into high-command-scripted shouting matches.

The Salon culture became inseparable from the Syndicate culture in their objectives - one extorted conscience from those who are supposed to be society's conscience keepers, while the other extorted money from ordinary people's pockets. For far too long, Bengal has been sliding towards an endless abyss of degeneration and despondency. We remember Tagore, "Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark." Bengal badly needs that faith now along with the courage to halt its long decline and reclaim some hope for the future.

(Concluded)

The Korea Herald

Parenting teens in the AI era

A universal truth about parenting is that the second you think you've got a handle on a difficult stage in your child's development - sleepless nights, the terrible twos, puberty - everything changes. For parents of teens, nothing captures that constant scramble more than trying to keep up with technology. First the worry was phones, then wave after wave of social media. Now? Artificial intelligence.

AI is suddenly omnipresent in teens' lives, unleashed on their devices without any real guardrails. We are, in effect, running a full-scale experiment on teens' social, emotional and cognitive development, and parents are the main backstop for their safety. That's a daunting role when so many parents (myself included) don't fully understand AI.

For advice, I turned to clinical psychologist Lisa Damour. There are few people I trust more on this issue than Damour: She has devoted her career to supporting adolescents

and has written the book - three of them, in fact - on teens. When my daughter unwrapped her first phone at Christmas, it came with a set of rules drawn from Damour's last book, "The Emotional Lives of Teenagers."

Damour doesn't offer an easy checklist of dos and don'ts, or bright lines about when kids are ready for certain types of AI. Instead, she lays out a guide to opening up communication. That starts with resetting how parents talk to their teens about technology.

Whether the topic is phones or AI, many of us reflexively pit ourselves against our kids instead of approaching these conversations in a way that strengthens our relationship with them.

The goal is to act as teammates rather than adversaries - for parents and teens to face the technology together, rather than confronting each other. "Our posture

matters," she says. So instead of saying, "Don't let me catch you using AI," a better approach is to gauge their attitudes about AI. That can be as simple as asking the right questions, Damour says. She offers a few examples for parents, such as, "What's your idea of acceptable AI use?" "What do adults need to know about AI?" or "What are your friends doing with this that kind of freaks you out?" A parent can then build off their teen's views to develop boundaries around AI rather than impose their own doctrine.

Establishing that channel of communication doesn't just help kids make better decisions when using AI. It also creates space for teens to come to their parents when they make a mistake or see something wrong - say, a classmate circulating an explicit AI-generated image. And new technology offers plenty of opportunities to make mistakes - some where the stakes feel unnervingly high. That's especially true

for areas where AI might seem to make life easier for teens, yet could stunt their social and cognitive growth.

For example, a recent Pew survey found that more than half of teens are turning to AI for help with their homework - and one in 10 say they rely on chatbots for all or most of their schoolwork. The problem isn't simply that kids are taking shortcuts. It's that AI might allow them to skip over the parts that feel hard.

A key part of adolescence is developing the capacity to grapple with difficulty - to tolerate discomfort and find a way through it, Damour says. She recommends parents talk to teens about how they are using AI for homework, discussing when that could be holding them back.

"AI can make things frictionless," she suggests saying. "It can make your homework frictionless. When is that a good thing and when is it actually a bad thing? Because friction is actually where we get growth."

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Political will

Sir, This refers to the article, "Nostalgia Will Not Build Chips," published today. The article raises a concern that deserves far more serious attention than it currently receives in public discourse.

Scientific temper is not a phrase from a civics textbook - it is a functional necessity for a country that wants to compete in biotechnology, semiconductors, and artificial intelligence.

The erosion of evidence-based reasoning is not happening in spite of our educational system; in many ways, it is happening because of it. Rote learning, exam-oriented curricula, and the marginalisation of inquiry and doubt have left generations poorly equipped to distinguish between a verifiable claim and a compelling story.

The IIT Dhanbad conference on ancient Indian science is a symptom of a broader drift where institutional prestige is being

lent to revisionism. The solutions the article proposes are sound - curriculum reform, autonomy for research institutions, incentives for public science communication.

But political will is the missing ingredient. Scientists and academics must also be more willing to enter public debate rather than retreat into peer-reviewed insularity.

A democracy navigating an age of misinformation needs its scientific community to be visible, vocal, and unambiguous about where evidence actually leads.

Yours, etc., Swathi Senthilkumar, Coimbatore, 21 May.

Power sector

Sir, India's rising electricity demand highlights the urgent need to strengthen the backbone of the power sector. Expanding energy production alone can't guarantee uninterrupted supply unless transmission systems are modern, efficient and adaptable.

Frequent power losses, overloaded transformers and local outages continue to affect both industries and households, especially during extreme weather conditions.

The focus must now shift towards building tech-enabled networks capable of responding quickly to fluctuations in demand and supply. Greater use of automation, data analytics and storage solutions can improve reliability while reducing wastage.

At the same time, encouraging rooftop solar users and local communities to contribute surplus electricity can ease pressure on power systems.

Public and private funding in advanced infra will decide how effectively India meets future energy needs. A reliable and intelligent power network is essential not only for economic growth but also for ensuring long-term energy sustainability and consumer confidence.

Yours, etc., Vandana, Chandigarh, 21 May.

Commendable

Sir, The newly elected BJP government has recently decided to stop the honorarium being given in the state to Imams and Purohits. On Monday, 18 May, at the second meeting of the new cabinet at Nabanna, this decision was approved. This is a commendable step.

The honorarium provided to Imams and Purohits by the previous government was a clear example of a religious appeasement policy.

In 2012, the decision to provide honorarium based on religion was challenged in the court of law. However, the then state government did not stop the honorarium and continued to provide it through the Madrasa Education Department.

In 2020, honorarium for Purohits was also introduced.

Yours, etc., Anu Barman, Nadia, 21 May.



Teachers must help students cope with NEET setback

BHASKAR NATH BISWAL

The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) is far more than a routine administrative exercise; it is the ultimate repository of dreams for millions of young Indians striving to enter the medical profession. For an aspirant, securing a seat through this examination represents the culmination of years of relentless toil, sacrificed childhoods and the immense financial and emotional hopes of families across the socio-economic spectrum. In the collective Indian consciousness, NEET is the singular, merit-based bridge between a modest background and a life dedicated to healing.

The sheer magnitude of this examination is underscored by its staggering growth over the past five years. In 2022, registrations stood at approximately 18.72 lakh, which climbed significantly to 20.87 lakh in 2023 and surged to an unprecedented 23.81 lakh candidates in 2024. By 2025, numbers hovered near the 24-lakh mark and for the ill-fated 3 May 2026 attempt, over 22.79 lakh students registered across thousands of domestic and international centers. This consistent trajectory emphasizes the immense responsibility resting on the testing apparatus to maintain absolute sanctity for an exercise that involves a significant chunk of the nation's population on a single day.

However, the history of question paper leaks and logistical failures over the last five years has transformed this bridge into a precarious tightrope, repeatedly shattering the trust of the student community. From localized cheating rings and proxy candidate rackets exposed in 2021 and 2022, to the widespread institutional controversies regarding grace marks and paper compromises in 2024,

the integrity of the process has faced constant erosion. The ultimate crisis unfolded with the outright cancellation of the May 2026 attempt, after a confirmed pan-India leak orchestrated through leaked digital files and compromised insiders left the country stunned.

Naturally, public outrage has converged entirely on the National Testing Agency (NTA). While the fury directed at the NTA is completely justified and structural accountability, including thorough investigations by central agencies is essential, we must recognize that public indignation alone will not solve the immediate crisis facing our children. Rage cannot readmit a student, nor can administrative blame restore a broken spirit. Right now, a silent, dangerous psychological emergency is unfolding in study rooms, coaching hubs and households across India and our immediate, non-negotiable priority must shift from punishing the guilty to preserving the mental well-being of the innocent.

The current mental status of medical aspirants is one of profound disillusionment, acute anxiety and utter exhaustion. When the promise of a fair trial is broken after years of rigorous preparation, the psychological impact on an eighteen-year-old mind can be utterly catastrophic. Facing the reality that their hard work was compromised by a criminal network, students naturally descend into a sense of nihilism and severe depression, believing that merit no longer carries value.

In this volatile atmosphere, the NTA's announcement that the nationwide re-examination will be held on Sunday, 21 June 2026, presents a massive logistical and emotional hurdle. Forcing a traumatized, exhausted student to return to their books and summon peak performance

within a matter of weeks is a monumental task. If we do not intervene immediately with profound empathy, many vulnerable aspirants will completely lose their mental balance, potentially leading to an increase in student self-harm and suicide. This is an unprecedented testing time for students, parents and teachers alike, requiring us to act as a protective collective shield.

While parents must transform their homes into absolute sanctuaries of unconditional support, ensuring their children know their lives are infinitely more precious than any rank or OMR sheet, the ultimate burden of mitigation falls squarely upon the teaching community. In this systemic disaster, the role of the teacher must pivot completely from academic instructor to that of a spiritual guardian and psychological first-aid responder.

Teachers possess a unique, authoritative yet comforting position in a student's life; they are the architects of the student's routine and the custodians of their intellectual confidence. Therefore, the teaching fraternity cannot afford to be passive spectators to this trauma. They must actively design and implement intensive counseling frameworks within their classrooms or online, addressing the deep-seated anger and betrayal that these young minds are harboring. A teacher's voice right now must be louder than the chaos of the media, steadily reassuring students that while the evaluation system may be temporarily broken, their internal knowledge, capacity for hard work and intrinsic human worth remain entirely intact and unassailable.

Furthermore, the responsibility of the teaching community extends to a dual domain of counseling, where guiding the parents is just as



critical as healing the students. Parents are often paralyzed by their own anxieties, financial investments and societal pressures, which can inadvertently manifest as additional stress on an already fragile child. Teachers must step into this breach, holding urgent, empathetic dialogues with parents to de-escalate the pressure cookers within households. They must explicitly instruct parents on how to identify the subtle red flags of clinical depression, academic burnout, and suicidal ideation, such as sudden isolation, loss of appetite or expressions of worthlessness.

By organizing collective support circles and maintaining open, transparent channels of daily communication, educators can create a unified front that insulates the student from despair. Teachers must skillfully reframe the narrative around the June 21 re-examination, convincing fatigued aspirants that this is not a punitive measure or an unfair penalty but a vital, protective intervention designed to ensure that no compromised

score can steal their legitimate future. This is an educational disaster of national proportions and the teaching community has a profound moral obligation to minimize its impact. They are the only professionals equipped to translate this systemic failure into a lesson on resilience, transforming a moment of absolute vulnerability into a demonstration of psychological strength. We cannot allow the administrative failures of an agency to become a death sentence for our brightest minds. By acting immediately as compassionate anchors, validating the students' grief while gently but firmly redirecting their focus toward the upcoming re-test, the teaching fraternity can prevent a massive mental health catastrophe. Let us rise together in this crucial hour, look past the unhelpful noise of pure outrage and actively save our students from the darkness of despair.

(The writer is a former college principal and founder of Supporting Shoulders.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 25 May 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

It might be imagined that there has been so much reasoned protest against the chain letter nuisance that it would have died a natural death. These things when once they are started are not to be stayed by reason, argument, or indignation. They go rolling on, swelling the postal revenues of the world to no good purpose. The one way to stop them is for the recipient to refuse to continue the chain, and that appears to require more resolution in combating superstition than most people possess. Another of these chain letters has broken into Calcutta and has come into our hands. So far as we are concerned it goes no further. It appears to have been wandering in and out of America, Japan, Germany, and India, returning occasionally to the point from which it started, and being sent out again on its travels. In that way it forms an interesting study in human credulity, which seems as prevalent in the newer countries as in the oldest.

News Items

ORGANIZATION WANTED

UNECONOMICAL RUNNING OF SHOPS

Referring to the first term of reference, viz., "The capacity or otherwise of the existing workshops of State Railways to deal economically and expeditiously with the maintenance of rolling-stock at the present time," the Committee state. The existing workshops of State railways have been able to maintain the rolling-stock in a safe running condition but, with one or two exceptions, have not been doing so either economically or expeditiously. Among the many contributory causes are paucity of supervision, inadequate equipment, bad layout, but by far the most fruitful cause of inefficiency has been the absence of proper internal organisation for systematic working. The State railway workshops are generally singularly deficient in such matters as scheduling to repairs, planning and progressing of work, inspection, and gauging. The immediate introduction of the necessary facilities for rectifying this has been recommended.

BRITISH CONSUL INJURED

SERIOUS INCIDENT AT SWATOW

Peking, May. While the British Consul at Swatow (Mr. O. C. A. Kirke) was removing Communist posters plastered on the walls of the Consulate yesterday, seven pickets attacked him. The Consul defended himself with a stick and retired inside the compound. Subsequently he summoned an armed guard from a British gunboat in the harbour and informed the Chinese Foreign Commissioner that the guard would remain until an official apology and satisfactory assurances were forthcoming. The Consul was injured though not seriously.—Reuter.

WAR IN CHINA

NATIONAL TROOPS ATTACK IN FORCE

Peking, May. The dilemma of the National Army which was driven to the north-west of Peking and was subsisting on starvation rations at Kalgan is evidently forcing them to hazard the invasion of the Shansi Province while the allied commanders are deliberating as to the best method for their extermination. The allies have received a telegram from the alarmed Governor of Shansi stating that 30,000 National Army men are attacking six positions in the mountainous regions of Shansi while another 30,000 have penetrated the province as far as Fengchen, which is being vigorously attacked, and a further 20,000 are assaulting Chaikaopao. The Shansi defenders, estimated at 50,000, are offering resistance, but the Governor appeals for immediate allied action to relieve the pressure.—Reuter.

SIR R. HOUSTON

LONDONER'S CLAIM TO FORTUNE

London, May. There was a surprise development at the Jersey Royal Court in connexion with the fortune of the supposed multimillionaire, Sir Robert Houston, a Liverpool shipowner. A Londoner named Mr. Cecil Skinner, a grandson of the deceased's sister, and who claims to be the principal heir, has secured a decision for drawing up a legal inventory of the estate, notwithstanding the executor's opposition. Skinner is not a legatee under either of the wills.—Reuter's Special Service.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

The secret I held in my palm



You can't live in India without encountering palmists. They read the lines in your palm and, for a modest fee, tell you your past and present and, most tantalizingly, your future. I never believed the stuff. I took my cue from a Bernard Shaw memoir.

A friend had sent a palmist to Shaw's London residence, recommending the man as a true wizard. A cursory examination of Shaw's palm and the palmist started telling Shaw things from his life that amazed him. Some of those memories were very private and Shaw had never shared those with anyone. It was astounding that the palmist had divined those from a few lines in Shaw's palm.

The following week a publisher's representative came to talk to Shaw. After their discussion, on a sudden hunch, Shaw told the rep, falsely, that he had been studying palms and would like to see his. After a look at the rep's palm, Shaw started telling the man just what he had heard the previous week about himself. The rep was stunned. He complimented Shaw on his skill and told him that he had narrated very private things that the rep had never told anybody.

Given my skepticism about palmistry, I couldn't resist approaching a

colleague at the university when I found he had developed a reputation as a palm reader.

"My future looks pretty dismal," I told him. "Why don't you take a look at my palm?"

"Are you serious?" he asked.

When I nodded vigorously, he surprised me. "If you are serious, you should see my friend, Roy, who truly knows the subject." He gave me a card giving Roy's address and added, "You will find the house easily on Lakeview Road. It has a strange olive-green door."

I had expected a fun time listening to his prognosis. Denied that, I simply placed the card in my briefcase. I had no interest in tracking his friend, Roy, behind an olive-green door.

A week later, I was having breakfast with a cousin who was visiting me, and she started narrating a strange dream she had. "I was passing by Lakeview Road in a taxi when I saw a house with an olive-green door..."

I interrupted her, for this was a bizarre coincidence. "Did you for any reason open my briefcase?" I asked.

"Certainly not," she said resentfully, "why would I rifle your briefcase?"

The strange coincidence stuck in my mind. That weekend I made it a

point to drive by Lakeview Road and stop at the number of Roy's home. It had indeed an olive-green door of an outlandish design. I pondered and hesitated, but my curiosity got the better of me. I stopped the car, crossed the street and went to the door and rang the bell.

A grey-haired man of sixty opened the door. When I said my name, he led me, through the living room, to what looked like a small library.

"I was told to expect you," he said. "Do you have the exact date and time of your birth?" He then worked out the exact latitude and longitude of the city of my birth. He wanted to see both my palms, which he examined with a magnifying glass, aided by a powerful lamp.

Finally, he consulted his diary and gave me an appointment a week later.

"Aren't you going to tell me anything now?" I asked, a little disappointed.

Roy said, "For me, this is a subject of special study. I don't charge and I never offer an instant analysis. I will study your data carefully for a week. When you come next week, I will give you a written report detailing everything. This is to make sure there is no ambiguity. All I ask is that you write and tell me in future if my calculations work out."



Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

I was thoroughly intrigued. I went back after a week and collected Roy's report. I had been impressed by his earnest effort and I sincerely thanked him before returning home.

The very first sentence of Roy's report put me off: he saw no significant change in the coming year. I lost all interest. Who cared what would happen in some distant, misty future?

Eighteen months later I was sitting with a woman who had brought a radical change in my life, and I remembered the report. It anticipated the advent of a person who would

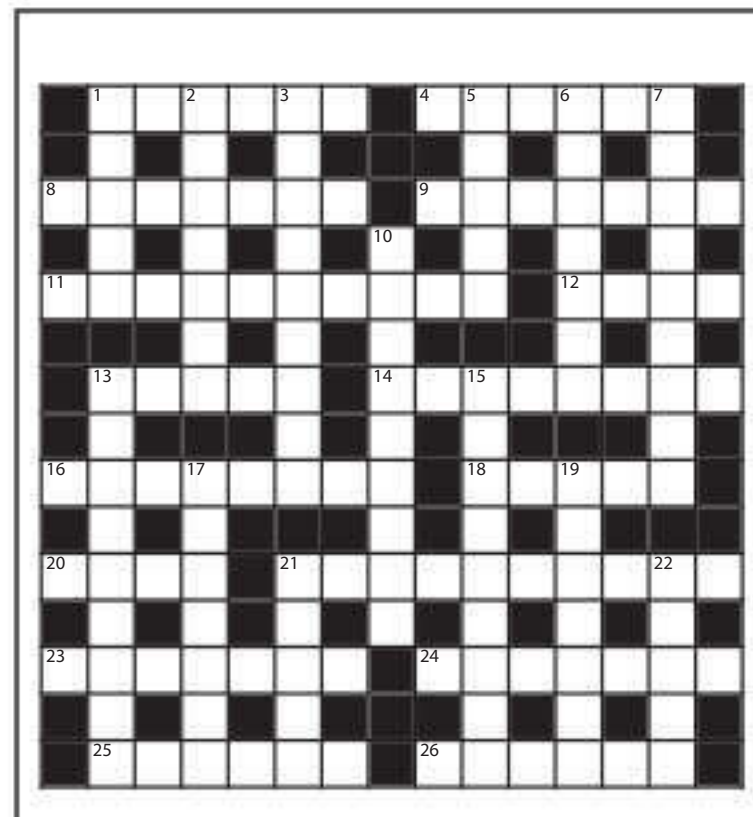
cause a major variation in my life. Uncannily, it had stated the unusual colour of her eyes.

It took another six months before — since my fiancée was a foreigner and a diplomat — I bought a one-way plane ticket for a foreign land.

As promised, I wrote to Roy that he had correctly foreseen both my exile and my marriage.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)

Crossword | No. 293471



Last Saturday's Solution



ACROSS

- 1 Naturalist sketch almost having repelled artist (6)
- 4 Small German greeting a female informally (6)
- 8 Bill might be ready for a singalong (7)
- 9 Threw up on street. Blimey! (7)
- 11 Agent has individual book every surfing hotspot (5,5)
- 12 Insects originally exterminated snakes (4)

DOWN

- 13 Most awful meat reported by some (5)
- 14 Criminal is led out in isolation (8)
- 16 Fitting vocal work after hollow choral bilge (8)
- 18 Couples pop by tax department in USA (5)
- 20 Head left periodically for a swift one? (4)
- 21 10 creatures from lake a boar's ravaged (5,5)

DOWN

- 23 1000mm3 found in car? Blow into this (7)
- 24 Animal character from Greece captured by Dame (7)
- 25 City strategy damn easy — all to be evacuated (6)
- 26 Imbecile split on doctor working (6)
- 1 Instrument missing middle note? Choose again (7)
- 3 Safe place for eggs on island hill (9)
- 5 Devise mark with intersecting lines (5)
- 6 Not quite right in previous performance (7)
- 7 Southern Climes article with hints about poetry (9)
- 10 One with a pouch to cook plau under ruins (9)
- 13 Team of leaderless infants lifting barrier (9)
- 15 Pal craned awkwardly to see club worker (3,6)
- 17 Humourless fellow meets expert in school (2,5)
- 19 From Spain maybe tallless goat fled across Italy (7)
- 21 Boy finally stops dancing like Dannii's sister? (5)
- 22 Circular piece of wood Norwegian put up (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Chicago Tribune
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EDITORIALS

What's really at stake in the Pritzker-Johnson cold war

The consequences of the feud range far beyond where the Bears play football

As we witness the current dysfunction between Chicago City Hall and Springfield, we easily forget that for most of the past 60 years Illinois governors were Republicans while Chicago mayors were Democrats.

There was some tension in those relationships. But for the most part those GOP governors and Chicago mayors cooperated effectively on matters of importance to Chicago. Chicago mayors — for the bulk of that time period, their last names were Daley — understood how to prioritize their requests to Springfield for assistance to ensure they could get to “yes.” And GOP governors — Jim Thompson in the 1980s, Jim Edgar for much of the ‘90s and then George Ryan in the early 2000s — understood that a growing and economically strong Chicago was a boon for the entire state.

During Illinois’ brutal budget wars of the 2010s, Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner and Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel were frequently at odds on a host of issues. But everyone understood the real warring parties at the time were Rauner and Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan. For all the verbal broadsides, no one ever believed Rauner and Emanuel, who were friends for years before that era, couldn’t communicate with each other reasonably even if striking deals was challenging.

Which bring us to right now.

What is there to say about the relationship between Mayor Brandon Johnson and Gov. JB Pritzker, both Democrats?

What relationship? There doesn’t appear to be any.

It was remarkable last week to see the two take their simmering feud to the boiling point over the course of multiple days. The triggering issue was the new stadium for the Chicago Bears. Pritzker is struggling to get legislation in Springfield across the goal line that the team claims it needs to construct a domed stadium on land it already owns in Arlington Heights. It’s a high priority for a governor running for reelection and contemplating a presidential campaign. He doesn’t want the losing of the beloved Bears to a neighboring red state to be on his record.

Johnson hasn’t yet formally declared his intention to run in the February 2027 mayoral election, but all signs say that he will. Like Pritzker, he doesn’t want presiding over the Bears’ departure from Chicago on his résumé, either.

The problem for Johnson is that ship sailed long ago.

The mayor fumbled his attempt at winning approval for a new lakefront stadium in Chicago in 2024 by failing to notify Springfield ahead



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and Illinois Gov. George Ryan testify on expansion at O'Hare International Airport before a Senate subcommittee on Capitol Hill, March 21, 2002. PETE SOUZA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

of time that he intended to use state money to make it happen; he has been seething ever since. For many months now, the Bears and the NFL have made it abundantly clear that there only are two options to move on from Soldier Field, the team’s home for more than five decades. As we have exhaustively observed, those are Arlington Heights and a site in Hammond, just over the Chicago border, where Indiana has approved a generous Bears-friendly package for a domed stadium.

Team Johnson has insisted that Chicago should be — and in their minds still is — the first option. The mayor and his top people, mainly senior political adviser Jason Lee, have worked hard — in public and behind the scenes with state lawmakers from Chicago — to torpedo the enabling legisla-

tion for Arlington Heights, which would freeze property taxes for the Bears stadium, permit local taxing bodies in the area to negotiate annual payments in lieu of taxes from the Bears to support schools and so forth, and provide hundreds of millions for infrastructure around the project.

A more politically deft mayor long ago would have seen the Chicago stadium as a lost cause and instead would have focused on obtaining concessions for Chicago. Infrastructure support for a post-Bears Soldier Field, say, or a boost for the nearby Museum Campus would have been obvious asks.

No doubt we are seeing the lingering resentment from Johnson’s camp over Pritzker’s refusal over the past three years to back any of their many proposed progressive tax proposals to fill

the coffers of the city and its public schools. Johnson’s track record in Springfield is abysmal, and a frustrated Pritzker this week explicitly called out that fact.

Asked about a half-baked, eleventh-hour Johnson administration idea for the city to take over the state agency that has overseen stadium financing in Illinois, Pritzker said no one from the mayor’s office had even contacted him about it.

“In fact, this is kind of typical,” Pritzker said. “The mayor has shown up every spring at the end of session to pronounce what he would like to see happen.”

That was unusually blunt from the typically genial Pritzker, who’s mainly tried to keep a public lid on his obvious irritation with Johnson. The mayor responded in a radio interview with an odd attack on Pritzker’s familial wealth, saying that the governor (unlike the mayor) “doesn’t know what it’s like to open a refrigerator and, ain’t no food in it.”

What all that has to do with where Caleb Williams calls signals we don’t know. But it sure was revealing of a relationship now turned fully toxic for all the world to see.

So he we are, as the General Assembly’s spring session nears its scheduled conclusion at the end of this month. Bill Cunningham of Chicago, the state senator leading stadium negotiations, late last week admitted Johnson’s

recent involvement had stalled progress. Should Johnson succeed in sending the Bears into the arms of Hammond, he will have made his relationship with Pritzker that much worse, harming the chances of striking future deals in the city’s interest so long as these two are involved.

The governor has deemed a Bears stadium in Arlington Heights a top priority, and a fellow Democrat is trying to scotch it. Politics in this state doesn’t get much rougher than that.

For Chicagoans, many of whom care little precisely where the Bears play in the future, this spectacle should be cause for reflection. How can we get this city moving in the right direction again?

Pritzker is far more popular with Chicagoans than is their own mayor, judging by polling. Pritzker also is overwhelmingly favored to win reelection to a third term in November.

Thus whoever wins Chicago’s mayoral election next year almost certainly will be dealing with Pritzker as governor for the vast majority of their term. A healthy and productive relationship with the governor won’t be optional if Chicago is to surmount its formidable fiscal challenges.

Can Johnson rehabilitate such a relationship, whether or not Pritzker’s Bears deal survives the mayor’s attacks? Nothing’s impossible in politics, but it sure feels unlikely.

Quotes of the week

“I have gambled. I would not describe myself as a gambling man.”

GOV. JB PRITZKER

“I’m not a billionaire. I’m not the heir of billions of dollars. I’m a working-class brotha that was teaching middle school a handful of years ago.”

MAYOR BRANDON JOHNSON RESPONDING TO CRITICISM FROM PRITZKER OVER HIS PUSH TO KEEP THE BEARS IN CHICAGO

“I just regret my choice of words the most, and who that affects in my life. So I’m just bummed out about the word choice, and that a bunch of little kids go and probably find their way to social media and see that as well.”

PETE CROW-ARMSTRONG, CUBS CENTER FIELDER

“This administration does things like this because it thinks it can silence us, but it’s not going to work. We fought back and we won.”

KAT ABUGHAZALEH, BROADVIEW SIX DEFENDANT

“I will tell your honor that as upset as you are, and have been, I too had not seen conduct like that, and it upset me which is why we did dismiss that indictment.”

U.S. ATTORNEY ANDREW BOUTROS

“The energy that you’ve given us, we sincerely need that to have done the best possible show we could have for you for the last 11 years. You’ve given it to us. We’ve given it all right back to you.”

STEPHEN COLBERT

OPINION



President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama tour the great hall of the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library with U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., right, and Mark Updegrave, left, director of the library, on April 10, 2014, in Austin, Texas. **BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/GETTY-AFP**

What presidential libraries reveal about American politics today

By William Muck
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

As the opening of the Barack Obama Presidential Center approaches and renderings of a future Donald Trump presidential library circulate, presidential libraries are back in the news — raising a broader question about what they reveal about our politics today. They also invite reflection on how we tell our political history.

I thought about those questions recently on a visit to three presidential libraries in Texas — those of Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson and Republicans George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. I expected to find sharp differences between these presidencies. Yet what struck me most was not the contrast but the commonality.

To be sure, these were very different presidents. George H.W. Bush approached foreign policy as a cautious realist, while his son embraced a far more ambitious vision, seeking to use American power to reshape the international order after 9/11. Johnson's expansive domestic agenda and escalation in Vietnam stood in sharp contrast to both.

But for all their differences, these presidents appeared to operate within a common political framework — one

grounded in accountability to facts, responsibility for outcomes and acceptance of democratic processes.

Even in these carefully constructed spaces, each library confronts the most controversial aspects of its presidency. At the George W. Bush Presidential Library, for example, one display plainly acknowledges: “No stockpiles of (weapons of mass destruction in Iraq) were found.” It is brief and contextualized — but it is there. The Johnson library opens by confronting the Vietnam War as central to understanding his presidency, acknowledging how it ultimately consumed and compromised his time in office. And at the George H.W. Bush library, a closing video reflects on his loss to Bill Clinton, with Bush praising his opponent and affirming the legitimacy of his defeat.

I wonder whether such uncomfortable facts would be possible in future presidential libraries.

Individually, these moments are modest. Collectively, they point to something larger: a political culture shaped by expectations of accountability to facts, outcomes and democratic processes. However much they disagreed, these presidents operated within a shared understanding that power required justification, that failure could not simply be ignored and

that electoral defeat was legitimate.

What is equally striking is the tone of presidential language. Presidential libraries are filled with recordings that let you hear these presidents in their own words. Even at their most forceful — LBJ's “Johnson treatment” was real and unmistakable — their language did not carry the kind of open contempt or dehumanization that now shapes much of our political discourse. Across these recordings, there is a consistent emphasis on responsibility, character and a shared sense of humanity.

Much of this will not be surprising. We all understand that our politics have changed. Yet it is often difficult to fully grasp the extent of that shift in real time. Political norms rarely collapse all at once. They erode gradually, as each new violation becomes easier to accept than the last. What once would have been shocking begins to feel routine.

Part of Trump's political success has depended on this process. Norm violations that might once have been disqualifying have become familiar. Resistance to acknowledging error, challenges to electoral outcomes and a more personalized, grievance-driven approach to politics no longer land with the same force — not because they are less significant but because they have become normalized.

That is what made visiting these libraries so striking. They offered a kind of compressed historical contrast — a reminder of a political culture in which acknowledging failure, accepting electoral outcomes and engaging with uncomfortable truths were not extraordinary acts, but expected ones. This is not simply a story about three presidents. It is a window into how expectations surrounding political leadership — especially around truth, accountability and service — have changed in ways we may be too close to fully see.

The point is not that the past was better or that these presidents were beyond reproach. It is that the standards by which we judge political leadership are shifting in ways that can be difficult to fully perceive in real time. Sometimes it takes stepping outside the present — walking through a different political world — to see how much our own has changed.

My trip to Texas offered just such a perspective. It also serves as a reminder of the importance of history — and of telling it honestly. Without that, we risk losing the ability to recognize change, both good and bad.

William Muck is a professor of political science at North Central College.

The answer to rising antisemitism is to stand proud, not silent

By Debra Newman Kamin
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

After 36 years of leading my congregation in Northfield, a recent Friday night shook me in a way I can only describe as quietly and profoundly earth-shattering. Our sanctuary was packed, and as we do every spring, we were gifting our graduating seniors T-shirts in Hebrew with the names of their soon-to-be universities. We always laugh because it can be hard to figure out the English names transliterated in Hebrew — Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin.

Everyone laughs. But this year, none of it felt funny anymore.

Would a T-shirt with Hebrew letters make those students targets on campus? After all, many college students in our congregation have returned home over the past several years with stories of harassment, intimidation and isolation because they are Jewish. Indeed, many colleges and universities have been roiled by frequent antisemitic incidents, Title VI antisemitism investigations and dismal grades from antisemitism watchdogs. I found myself wondering if this was still an appropriate gift.

I told the students that I hoped their campuses were working to protect them and that they should take pride in their strong Jewish identities. As we sat down for the traditional Shabbat dinner, I quickly realized I had hit a nerve. Two congregants, seasoned public high school teachers, shared that the antisemitism they have faced — from fellow teachers, national organizations and their union — is unlike anything they have ever seen. They are profoundly



Students from Ida Crown Jewish Academy sing and dance during an Israel flag-raising ceremony at Daley Plaza on April 22. **JOSH BOLAND/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

worried about the future of public education for Jews, even here on the North Shore of Chicago, where Jews have long felt comfortable.

Later, while I stood in line for dessert, a mother from one of our new young families spoke to me about scheduling her son's upcoming bar mitzvah. When planning this milestone, it is natural to reminisce about your own rite of passage. That's when she said, simply, “My bat mitzvah was at Tree of Life.”

There are dozens of synagogues across America named Tree of Life, but in the Jewish community, in these conversations, a heaviness

removes the need to specify that she was referring to the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. This is where 11 Jews were murdered for the crime of being Jewish during Shabbat services in October 2018. It now feels like ground zero for the assault on Jewish spaces.

At the end of the evening, one of our congregants who had long ago emigrated from the Soviet Union asked, “Did you hear about the incident in a park in Skokie a few weeks ago?”

I had not.

“That was my daughter,” she said.

Her daughter and her friend were attacked for being Jewish. Despite hiding her small Star of David necklace under her shirt and denying she was Jewish, her daughter was hit. The other girl's hair was pulled. A report was filed, and the police went to the house of one of the assailants, but there was nothing they could do to the minor who had assaulted her.

The mother told me that when she lived in the Soviet Union, she never imagined that a daughter of hers would face this type of antisemitism in the United States.

“I want my daughter to be proud,” she said. “I don't want her

to feel like she needs to hide her Jewish star in public. I'm enrolling her in a self-defense class.” She's 12 years old.

I didn't face antisemitism growing up here. I thought it was a thing of the past. Never in a million years did I think our children would be facing this. How am I to guide the young people growing up in an era of increasing antisemitism? How am I to respond to college students who come to me with questions about antisemitism that I struggle to answer myself?

At the end of the night, one of our young adult congregants approached me. He was the son of one of the teachers who spoke to me earlier in the evening, and he had just finished his freshman year at the University of Georgia. Last year, we gave him a T-shirt, and this year, he reciprocated with a T-shirt for me and our head of school from his college. It read: “University of Georgia, School of Jewish Studies.”

That gave me some hope. For all the fear and uncertainty that filled that evening, this young man had answered the question I had been struggling with all night. The response to rising antisemitism is not retreat. It is standing up for your identity, and being proud enough to remain visibly, publicly and unapologetically Jewish.

This is the resilience that will carry us through.

Rabbi Debra Newman Kamin is the leader of Am Yisrael Congregation in Northfield and past president of The Rabbinical Assembly, the international association of Conservative rabbis.

OPINION

On his 100th anniversary, Miles Davis provides hope for a divided America

By Steven D. Reske
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

On the 100th anniversary of his birth this Tuesday, we should listen to jazz icon Miles Davis. It's a good time to hear not only the trumpeter's music but also his surprising message. It can help heal our discordant democracy.

Davis thought it's not the note you play but the next note that makes it "right" or "wrong." This echoes an old concept in jazz: When you hit, or get hit by, a "wrong" note, it's your response that promotes either harmony or dissonance.

Today, the entire country faces far too much discord. But as with jazz, we have a choice — and a responsibility — in how we respond.

A famous story about Davis reflects this philosophy. It's recounted by his young pianist from a 1963 concert. Herbie Hancock played a chord that clashed appallingly with the conversational call and response of Davis' signature composition "So What."

Hancock was mortified. Davis paused momentarily to digest the dissonance, then countered with a melody making Hancock's "wrong" chord sound "right." Davis' ability to reflect and respond with his pithy probing of the disagreeing chord turned chaos into something cogent. Hancock said Davis' musical lesson even taught him about life itself. "The important thing is that we grow and ... turn poison into medicine."

Of course, the problems confronting us are far graver than hitting a bum note. One fundamental issue is extreme tribalism's destructive momentum toward distrust and disdain of others. Still, principles from America's forgotten music can help preserve the world's oldest continuing democracy.

A century ago, jazz was America's popular music. Today, many may view it as a relic. Similarly, just because 250 years ago America's constitutional republic was founded on democratic principles



Jazz legend Miles Davis plays in Grant Park on Aug. 22, 1991. JOHN BARTLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

doesn't mean it, too, can't erode until it's a distant memory.

Jazz values each member's unique voice. But for this collective freedom to work, there must be some understanding among the group about basic structure. Agreeing on things such as the song, the key, the soloists' order — and, most importantly, listening to each other — is essential. Absent this, it's just noise.

In this way, democracy parallels jazz. For it to function, both citizens and government officials must commit to acting within its indispensable bounds.

Some of these requirements include free and fair elections, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, equal rights, separation of powers, accountability of

leaders, political pluralism, a free press, majority rule tempered by minority rights and thoughtful citizen participation.

That's a lot of complicated, and at times conflicting, objectives to try to balance. But ensuring our democracy endures requires working toward reconciling our individual rights with our responsibilities as collective citizens of a pluralistic society. As with jazz, when we can approach some form of equilibrium, it creates something rare that we should cherish and strive to preserve.

Davis' music embraces the tenuous but inescapable tension between freedom and form, and the individual and the group. Democracies must do the same. Existentialist Søren Kierkegaard captures a

key part of this challenge. He wrote we need "to be objective towards oneself and subjective towards all others." Good civic engagement requires us to see ourselves as harshly as we view others and to see others with the humanity we view in ourselves.

Doing this allows us to hear and accommodate differing voices and views. A warning just before America's Civil War reminds us today why this is so crucial. In examining liberty and the tyranny of the majority, philosopher John Stuart Mill observed: "Only through diversity of opinion is there ... a chance of fair play to all sides of the truth."

In any diverse group, we're never going to — or supposed to — like everything we hear. Davis under-

stood dissonance wasn't a drawback but an opportunity to explore. Applying his insight to the mosaic of American democracy creates a gestalt in which the whole of all our distinct viewpoints is greater than the mere sum of everyone's perspective in isolation.

So, what ... do we do? We don't need to agree on everything, but we must commit to shedding more light — and far less heat — while disagreeing.

Taking this step puts us, in a manner of speaking, miles ahead.

Steven D. Reske is an attorney in Minneapolis and a former jazz journalist for local and national publications. He served as legal editor-at-large for the magazine Minnesota Law & Politics.

Voice of the people

Equitable funding for universities

It's often said that budgeting is a reflection of priorities, and that is particularly true when it comes to policies and programs the Illinois General Assembly determines is worthy of investment. As lawmakers enter the final days of the spring legislative session, they have a unique opportunity to reset the way the state funds higher education and prioritize the success of our students and communities.

Higher education provides the most direct path for economic mobility, especially for underserved students, including minority, low-income and first-generation students. But decades of underfunding for public universities have increasingly put higher education out of reach for many, forcing tuition rates up while also leading to fewer support services for students most in need. The Adequate and Equitable Public University Funding Formula (HB1581) could help reverse these troubling trends by increasing support for public universities, making higher education more accessible for students of all backgrounds — not just those who have more resources.

Faith communities come together to care for one another and stand for what is right. We meet people where they are and seek to meet their needs while helping them toward a better path. Likewise, not all students arrive at their university with their basic needs fully met. Universities can help bridge the gap by providing wraparound services such as academic support and mental health programs, but without additional funding, these programs are at risk. That means some students can't get the support they need to complete their degree, which is not a reflection of their academic abilities but rather a reality of engrained economic barriers. Compounding these challenges, Monetary Award Program grants that support low-income students have already been fully allocated for the next school year. For many, this aid is what makes the difference between pursuing a degree and being forced to forgo it.

It's time for lawmakers to act. Delaying equitable funding for public universities only harms students and the promise they hold for our state. Let's priori-



Criminology graduates wear decorative caps during the University of Illinois Chicago College of Liberal Arts and Sciences commencement at Credit Union 1 Arena on May 9. About 1,300 students graduated from the College of LSA. JOSH BOLAND/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

tize economic opportunity for all, especially those who have long been overlooked.

— *The Rev. Michael Pfleger, senior pastor, St. Sabina Catholic Church, Chicago*

Tent clearing was traumatic

At a cleaning last month at Field (Eugene) Park, I witnessed Chicago Department of Family & Support Services and Park District staff act unreasonably and cruelly toward our unhoused neighbors. DFSS has since claimed observers were harassing staff. But I was there.

The people whose few belongings were being arbitrarily picked up and thrown by a crane into the trash were not harassing staff. They were fighting to keep their supplies, clothes, art and lifelines. We were there to help them and document what was happening. I watched a resident's paintings, tapestries and decorations lifted into the air with a crane and dropped into the trash. The resident asked why over and over, and no one could give a real answer beyond saying there were "pallets constituting a structure," so everything had to go. I asked if they could simply remove the pallets instead and was sharply told no.

By then, there were at least a dozen officers present, along with many or more DFSS and Park District employees. An excellent use of our tax dollars.

Two observers, braver than I was, tried to stay within the perimeter, asking for documentation and reminding staff of the Homeless Bill of Rights. They

ultimately helped residents rescue their cat and a few belongings before the crane destroyed their homes. People were sobbing. I couldn't help but cry with them.

On May 20 and 21, Field Park was cleaned again. Observers were directed to stand behind the now-infamous crane truck and in the overgrown grasslands, making it impossible to see what was happening. When the truck left, two tents were gone — neither of which was tagged. Efforts to retrieve the belongings in those tents were ignored. There does not even seem to be a process for doing so.

The punishment for going to work during a cleaning was losing everything the residents owned.

These cleanings were devastating, and they are a visceral reminder that the greatest crime under capitalism is being poor.

While this was difficult for me to witness, the real victims are the people who had to plead for their belongings and were left with even less than what little they had. We can and should expect better from ourselves and from city leadership.

We need consistency in policymaking and enforcement around cleanings and sweeps. We need alternative models of safety and care. Parks are common spaces where our collective good should be prioritized.

— *Tamara Fouché, Chicago*

Preventing relapse after treatment

Illinois continues confronting rising behavioral health demands

while state and federal policymakers debate Medicaid eligibility rules, work requirements and spending reductions. Much of that discussion still assumes people become stable immediately after leaving addiction treatment programs.

Recovery providers across Illinois know that is rarely the case.

The weeks immediately following discharge from residential treatment remain one of the highest-risk periods for relapse or overdose. Many people leave treatment committed to rebuilding their lives — but without stable housing, transportation, employment or reliable support systems.

At the same time, the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services continues processing Medicaid eligibility redeterminations following the end of pandemic-era continuous-coverage protections. Nationally, millions of people have already lost Medicaid coverage during the unwinding process, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Many lost coverage because of paperwork problems or administrative communication failures rather than confirmed ineligibility.

For people in early recovery, even temporary coverage interruptions can destabilize progress.

Gaps in Medicaid coverage can delay counseling appointments, medication-assisted treatment, psychiatric care and transportation access. Recovery housing providers often help residents resolve these issues because many are still rebuilding the ability to manage appointments, paperwork and daily responsibilities consistently.

The conversation surrounding work requirements also deserves greater realism. Employment remains an important part of long-term recovery, and many recovery housing programs already require residents to pursue work and participate in structured daily responsibilities. But recovery timelines rarely move in predictable stages. People leaving treatment often need transitional support before they can consistently maintain full-time employment.

When continuity of care breaks down, the consequences eventually reappear inside emergency

rooms, homeless shelters and criminal justice systems. Cook County and suburban municipalities continue managing repeated behavioral health crises that become more expensive once people lose access to stable treatment and recovery support.

Recovery rarely stabilizes within a 30-day treatment window. Illinois should align Medicaid policy and long-term recovery support around the realities of addiction recovery rather than administrative assumptions about immediate independence. — *Jim O'Connor, certified alcohol and drug counselor and founder, The Second Story Foundation*

Restrict phones in classrooms

Phones are a modern problem for educational learning. Students are continuously tempted to use their phone throughout the school day, causing disruptions in the learning environment. Many school leaders believe phones have caused a negative impact on students' learning; therefore, schools should embrace policies to restrict access to phones during the school day.

Even with policies in place to prevent phone usage during classes, many students still bring their phones into the classroom and use them. A decline in mental health and attention span creates a learning environment that is hostile to teachers.

Teachers and parents should voice their concerns to their local schools about applying policies that would better restrict phone access in the classroom. For example, phone pouches could prevent students from succumbing to the urge to look at their phones.

Together, we can ensure the educational prosperity for this generation and all to come. — *Zohaib Mustafa, Carpentersville*

Note to readers

We'd like to hear from CTA riders about what frustrates you about the CTA as well as what you're grateful for. (Sincere thoughts only.) Send a letter by Thursday, May 28 of no more than 400 words to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and city/town.

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

انظر و فكر في ما تملفت به
إن الأريب المفكر الفطن
(ابن أبي عيينة)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Observe and reflect upon what is said, for the wise one is both thoughtful and perceptive.
Ibn Abi Uyyaynah
(Eighth-century Islamic scholar)

Opinion

EU sanctions should prompt soul-searching among Israelis

YOSSI MEKELBERG



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It may well be that those within the settlers' movement were the only ones who believed they were shielded from EU sanctions. However, following last week's announcement by European Commission Vice President Kaja Kallas that EU foreign ministers had agreed to impose sanctions on violent Israeli settlers, it may finally dawn on them that this is no longer the case. Kallas noted: "It was high time we moved from deadlock to delivery. Extremism and violence carry consequences." Many, however, would argue that the decision amounts to too little, too late.

Yet the timing is no coincidence. To begin with, most EU member states have grown increasingly frustrated by the rising number of attacks carried out by Israeli settlers, often with near-total impunity. Then there is the recent rise to power in Hungary of the pro-European Peter Magyar, replacing the EU-skeptic Viktor Orban, an admirer of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. These two

developments enabled what one MEP described as a "baby step." In the months leading up to the Israeli election, due no later than the end of October, this move alone is unlikely to make a dramatic difference. Still, it is a declaration of intent: Unless there is a fundamental change, beginning with the Israeli government taking serious action against this ugly phenomenon, it will prove to be the first step, not the last.

Reports suggest the sanctions will target the settlement organization Amana, the far-right settler group Nachala and its leader Daniella Weiss, the West Bank settler security group Hashomer Yesh and its former CEO Avichai Suissa, as well as the right-wing organization Regavim and its director Meir Deutsch. All are allegedly involved in supporting settlements, euphemistically referred by the government as "outposts," the source of many violent incidents.

Officially, these outposts are illegal even under Israeli law, yet some Cabinet

ministers are doing their utmost to "legalize" them. Moreover, many have for years received water, electricity, and security protection from the Israel Defense Forces. Since when does a state treat outlaws with such consideration?

Part of the answer lies in the doublespeak that has long characterized Israeli policy on settlements, and not only under right-wing governments. Even at the height of peace negotiations, settlements continued to expand and the settler population steadily grew, and under the current government, shamelessly so. Another explanation is that several senior ministers and members of the Knesset in the current coalition effectively serve as direct political representatives of the settler movement, encouraging behavior that is even more unlawful. By "more unlawful," I mean that under international law all Israeli settlements are considered illegal, and for those who genuinely support a two-state solution, all of them represent a deliberate obstacle to achieving that goal.

According to the Israeli NGO Peace Now, there are hundreds of testimonies and videos from recent years documenting violence associated with these outposts, some allegedly supported by organizations now sanctioned by the EU.

Last month, two Palestinians, including a 14-year-old schoolboy, were killed in the village of Al-Mughayyir, reportedly without provocation.

This is only a small, though deeply disturbing, sample of attacks on innocent people whose only "crime" is not being Jewish. The argument that such acts are carried out only by fringe groups representing a tiny minority of the Jewish population has long since lost moral and political credibility.

Rather than condemning the EU, Netanyahu would do better to engage in some soul-searching. He should reflect on how his government's policies are damaging Israel's standing in the world, straining relations with its allies, and contributing to a profound moral deterioration.

Since when does a state treat outlaws with such consideration?



COURTESY: AMALIO RAMOS/ISHARQ AL-AMSIAT

Rasmi

The Rohingya crisis has exposed the moral failure of the international system

Myanmar massacre reveals new Rohingya nightmare

DR. AZEEM IBRAHIM



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For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

For years, the Rohingya crisis has been understood through one central lens: The Myanmar military committed genocide against a stateless Muslim minority and drove more than a million people from their homes. That remains true. But it is no longer the whole truth. A new Human Rights Watch report on the massacre of Rohingya civilians by the Arakan Army in Rakhine State exposes a darker and more complicated phase of the crisis. The Rohingya are not simply trapped by the old genocidal state; they are now also vulnerable to the ethnic nationalist forces seeking to inherit power in its place.

This is the new nightmare facing the Rohingya. Even where the junta loses control, they may still have no safety, no citizenship, no protection, and no future.

Human Rights Watch has documented the May 2, 2024 attack on Hoyyar Siri village in Buthidaung township, where Arakan Army fighters allegedly fired on unarmed

Rohingya civilians who were trying to flee fighting near Myanmar military bases. The organization says it has compiled a list of more than 170 villagers killed or missing, including about 90 children, and that the real toll is likely higher. Survivors described bodies left in ditches, homes burned, and the village destroyed. The details emerged only after some survivors managed to flee to Bangladesh and Malaysia. The rights group says the attack amounted to grave violations of the laws of war.

This matters not only because of the horror of the massacre itself, but also because of what it reveals about the future of Rakhine State. The Arakan Army is not a marginal actor. It has become one of the most powerful armed forces in Myanmar's civil war and has taken control of large parts of Rakhine. Many international observers have viewed it mainly through the prism of its fight against the junta. That is understandable, but dangerously incomplete. An armed group can oppose the military

dictatorship and still persecute minorities. It can fight the junta and still commit atrocities. It can seek legitimacy abroad while still denying basic rights to the people under its control.

The Rohingya know this better than anyone. They have spent decades being treated as foreigners in their own land. The Myanmar state stripped them of citizenship, confined them through apartheid-like restrictions, denied them freedom of movement, and subjected them to waves of violence. In 2017, the military's campaign of mass killing, rape, and village burning forced hundreds of thousands to flee to Bangladesh. The world eventually recognized the scale of the crime. The US declared that genocide had been committed. Cases moved forward at the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. Yet accountability has been slow, and protection on the ground remains almost nonexistent.

Now the balance of power in Rakhine

is changing, but the underlying logic of exclusion has not disappeared. The Arakan Army presents itself as a revolutionary force fighting for Rakhine self-determination. But if its vision of self-determination excludes the Rohingya, then it is not liberation but simply another form of ethnic domination. The test of any future authority in Rakhine is not whether it opposes the junta but whether it protects all civilians, recognizes the rights of all communities, and accepts accountability for crimes committed under its command.

This is where international policy has failed to keep up. Much of the diplomatic conversation still treats the Rohingya crisis as if the main question is whether refugees can return once conditions improve. But conditions are not improving if the territory to which they would return is controlled by forces accused of killing Rohingya civilians.

The Rohingya crisis has exposed the moral failure of the international system.

Opinion

Beijing seeks to benefit from its 'soft power' platform

ANDREW HAMMOND

The US has traditionally excelled at developing soft power. However, those historical patterns appear to be shifting, significantly, under Donald Trump's second presidency, creating opportunities for other powers, especially China.

Indeed, this could even be a generational moment that has not been as favorable to Beijing since perhaps the closing years of George W. Bush's presidency. That was in the midst of the global economic crisis of 2007-08, and the aftermath of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

To be sure, China's grand strategy has been founded on a longer-term, extended transition to power. However, unexpected political gifts will not be shunned by Beijing along its gradualist journey.

Following Trump's summit with President Xi Jinping last week, which demonstrated China's growing confidence on the world stage, one such window may exist to significantly boost Beijing's prestige given the tumult in international relations. The opportunity is at least on two levels: the first in the growing numbers of world leaders traveling to China to meet senior

officials. These meetings often feature discussions about recasting international relations given the shocks to global affairs for at least the past 15 months.

In addition, public opinion data shows a dramatic change in sentiment. Take the example of a European Council on Foreign Relations report released in January. This polled almost 26,000 respondents across 21 countries last November, around 12 months after Trump's presidential reelection victory.



Pew found that favorable views of China have improved significantly

Even before key global controversies of this year, polling pointed to growing warmth toward Beijing. So much so that the council asserts a "China First" world is on the

horizon. This is based on opinion trends which show less concern about a rising China in much of the world. More people now see Beijing as a necessary partner or even ally, including in India, where almost half the populace hold this view, despite historical tensions between the two powers.

Moreover, a growing number of populations in key geographical areas also anticipate deeper ties with China over the next half decade. This is perhaps no big surprise in Russia given the close relationship



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between Xi and President Vladimir Putin. What is more striking is that clear majorities in other key emerging markets expect the same, including South Africa, with 71 percent, and Brazil, with 52 percent.

This sentiment is combined with growing expectations that China's already significant global influence will grow over the next five years — not only politically, but also in its tech and wider economic strength.

In major Western powers such as the US and EU, Beijing is widely seen to be increasingly preponderant in renewable energy tech. In the EU, too, China is perceived as having a growing global edge on electric vehicles, and this is an increasing, although not yet a majority, view in the US.

Pew also found more people, in the 25 surveyed nations, now perceive Beijing as the world's leading economic power, a significant shift from two years ago when considerably more people saw the US in this role. A median of 41 percent now view China as the top economic power, compared with a median of 39 percent giving that mantle to the US.

While the trends are broadly positive for China, they are not uniform in their

direction, and could potentially also result in headaches for Beijing. On the first point, both the ECFR and Pew surveys show that the data about perceptions of China are patchy in places.

The Pew survey found, for instance, that despite the growing sense that China is now the leading global economy, people in nearly all countries surveyed prioritize strong economic ties with Washington over Beijing.

Moreover, Pew found that favorable views of China have improved significantly, especially in middle-income nations, but less in higher-income nations. This latter finding probably reflects, in part, the emphasis that China increasingly puts on "democratizing" the Western-led global order. This message, other things being equal, will tend to appeal more to low and mid-income nations.

On the second point, there have been other occasions in the past, including during Trump's first presidency, when many internationally believed the global balance of power had swung in China's favor. This sometimes created tensions, and not only in Beijing's relations with Washington.



More people perceive Beijing as the world's leading economic power

Why AI market euphoria might be misplaced

RAGHURAM G. RAJAN

AI tools will undoubtedly transform the nature of work. Large language models can already generate referee reports on my own research papers that rival those by human referees. Unlike humans, who are always pressed for time, an LLM "knows" or can access much more of the literature in an instant, and often exhibits fewer biases. AI points out my analytical weaknesses, checks proofs, and makes suggestions for improvement. Only rarely are human reports better, typically because they connect the dots and offer new insights.

Nonetheless, the market euphoria around AI has become worrisome, especially given the extent of large-scale debt issuance by the sector. It is, therefore, worth considering where in the AI supply chain things could go wrong.

The supply chain starts with producers and designers of AI infrastructure: firms like TSMC and Samsung, which fabricate chips; Nvidia, which designs them; and Cisco, which provides connectivity. Then come the hyperscalers such as Amazon, Google, and Microsoft. They are building data centers both for the use of their own AI models and in order to sell compute, or processing power, to others. In addition

to the hyperscalers are more specialized companies like Equinix and, of course, Anthropic and OpenAI, developers of foundational LLMs.

Finally, there are the individual and corporate end users of AI services. Individual use is growing fast, and corporate use in some areas, such as software development and customer support, is exploding.

But most large businesses, while experimenting intensely, have yet to implement end-to-end uses. Many still need to organize their historical data



No model seems to have gained a sustained advantage

to train AI for their own purposes, and to restructure their traditional operations so that AI can be deployed to improve with experience. Moreover, many firms rightly worry about data security, AI errors, and hallucinations that could destroy their brand image. Still, as less conservative younger companies find more AI uses, they will put competitive pressure on older, larger firms to change.

The AI rollout could nevertheless be interrupted in a number of ways, generating risk for debt-funded players. For instance, if graphics processing units, central processing units, and memory chips become faster and more energy efficient, the equipment filling existing data centers could depreciate rapidly,



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making it harder for them to amortize their costs. And LLMs, which have become extraordinarily capable based on what is essentially next-word prediction, could plateau until some new technique emerges.

For now, AI labs are investing vast sums to train newer, larger models on the assumption that the first model to reach some magic point where it becomes self-improving will rule the AI world, and reap enormous profits. But this scenario seems implausible. Even if there is such a point, competitors could still match the first mover's model, including by hiring away key employees to obtain technical trade secrets.

So far, no AI model seems to have gained a sustained advantage. Unless Gemini (Google), Claude (Anthropic), and ChatGPT (OpenAI) can eventually differentiate themselves by appealing to specific user segments, or by merging or colluding, it is hard to see where the profits justifying their enormous training investments will come from.

Moreover, although politicians have been largely standing on the sidelines so far, policy interventions to address AI risks and concerns are inevitable. Since data centers consume tremendous amounts of power — driving up the price for everyone — state and local governments

will be under increased political pressure to limit their construction. In the US state of Indiana, for example, multiple counties recently proclaimed a moratorium on data center construction.

Projections into next year already suggest that hardware makers and data centers will be unable to supply enough US compute. And as shortages of compute mount, end users will have more reasons to delay implementation. You cannot reorganize all your operations around AI if you have good reason to worry about the reliability of access or reasonable pricing in the future.



Malevolent use by hackers and deepfakers is growing rapidly

Worse, whereas broader use may take longer than many expect, malevolent use by hackers and deepfakers, as well as unsupervised use by children, is growing rapidly. It is not difficult to imagine disaster scenarios, such as a deadly cyber incident, gross data misuse by AI agents, or poorly trained AI models advising children to commit acts of violence against themselves or others — something that has already happened. The chorus demanding regulation and more liability for AI models will only grow louder. The risks posed by rogue AI could even prompt a sorely needed dialogue among major powers, perhaps leading to some kind of AI Geneva Convention.

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Ben-Gvir is an embarrassment

It is not difficult to find hostile actors across international media, anti-Israel activists, and foreign governments eager to exacerbate the reputational damage Israel has suffered since October 7, 2023, and the subsequent wars that ensued, using it as a tool to further isolate Israel, regardless of its actions.

But too often, one minister in the Israeli government goes out of his way to make their job painfully easy.

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir's conduct surrounding the interception of the Gaza-bound flotilla this past week perfectly encapsulated the decision-making process that has plagued his tenure: He once again chose to neglect his responsibilities as a member of the cabinet by appeasing his far-right base with social media clips, handing Israel's critics exactly the images, rhetoric, and symbolism they wanted.

In videos shared by Ben-Gvir himself and by Israeli journalists, the minister is seen taunting detained flotilla activists while condoning and encouraging the harsh treatment displayed by some officers in the footage.

One video posted by the minister shows officers forcing an activist to the ground after she chants "free, free Palestine."

Another clip shows Ben-Gvir threatening the activists in Hebrew as they kneel on the floor with their hands zip-tied behind their backs. In another, he waves Israeli flags while declaring: "Look at them now. See how they look now, not heroes and not anything... Welcome to Israel! We own this place."

The flotilla itself was always designed as a provocation. Its organizers sought confrontation and publicity, hoping to produce images that would fuel accusations against Israel and reignite international outrage over the war in Gaza.

Then came Ben-Gvir, giving them precisely what they wanted.

The footage spread rapidly across international media and social networks, and the diplomatic backlash was immediate.

US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee said Ben-Gvir had "betrayed the dignity" of Israel. Israeli envoys were summoned for clarification in Italy, France, Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, among others.

Yesterday, France joined Italy in banning Ben-Gvir from entering the country, with Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot urging the rest of the European Union to follow suit.

The national security minister's actions proved a step too far even for Ben-Gvir's fellow cabinet members.

Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar issued a stark condemnation of Ben-Gvir's conduct, accusing him of knowingly harming Israel through a "disgraceful display – and not for the first time."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also rebuked Ben-Gvir in statements released in both Hebrew and English, itself a rarity, saying the minister's actions were "not in line with Israel's values and norms."

Yet, Netanyahu has thus far avoided calls to dismiss the national security minister, despite years of mounting controversies and repeated incidents that have damaged Israel diplomatically and internally.

With political considerations mounting, it is not difficult to understand why. Netanyahu is determined to prolong his coalition's survival for as long as possible, and Ben-Gvir remains politically useful.

Additionally, the prime minister will almost certainly need Otzma Yehudit's support if Likud hopes to form another coalition after the next election.

Ben-Gvir's outrageous behavior in the flotilla incident serves as a, hopefully final, reminder that during his tenure, he has behaved exactly as his critics warned he would when he first entered government.

Since October 7, Israel has been fighting not only a military war, but also a political and diplomatic one. A government minister who repeatedly sabotages that effort is both a political inconvenience and a liability.

If Netanyahu truly wants Israelis to believe that his decisions are guided solely by what is best for the State of Israel, then Ben-Gvir cannot remain in power for even one more day.

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MESSAGE TO MAMDANI:

Focus on NY's problems, not Israel

• By COOKIE SCHWAEBER-ISSAN

So vast is the multitude of problems that plague New York's five boroughs, over which Mayor Zohran Mamdani presides, that it is mind-blowing how he has the time or inclination to weigh in on a real estate expo which took place at a Brooklyn synagogue.

With long-standing issues of violent crime, including people being pushed onto subway tracks, along with rampant drug use on city streets, languishing homelessness, a lack of affordable housing, and an ever-growing budget deficit as the rich escape the extremely high taxes sought to be imposed upon them, the list goes on.

But Mamdani is not as perturbed by all of the above as he is by what is happening in Israel.

His latest response to an Israeli-sponsored real estate event, which took place last week at Brooklyn's Park East Synagogue, was to criticize the gathering, saying "he was deeply opposed to the real estate expo that included the promotion of the sale of land in settlements in the occupied West Bank." (<https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-895848>).

Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I fail to see how any of that falls under the purview of Mamdani's already challenging job!

What should be of grave concern to the Democrat Socialist mayor is the fact that the flag of the Hezbollah terror group was unfurled in front of a Jewish institution, while keffiyeh-clad protesters chanted, "There is only one solution: intifada, revolution," and brandished an "Abolish Israel" sign.

That kind of hateful incitement – by avowed Jew-haters hoping to send the message to anyone participating in this event that their lives are imperiled – should be troubling to a mayor whose many worthless campaign promises included protecting the Jewish community.

But like so many of the impossible commitments Mamdani has spouted, intended to win him the job, they were just empty pledges that he had no intention of keeping.

With every right to hold an event of interest to the local Jewish community, the fact that angry, hateful activists

got away with their intimidation tactics, meant to frighten and threaten attendees is further evidence that Mamdani has no problem allowing New York's Jews to experience the same kind of persecution that marked their history, but, in this case, under the guise of "peaceful protest."

There is nothing peaceful about a screaming mob that threatens the legitimate homeland of Jews, shouting at them as they attempt to enter a house of worship – which should never be the site of angry protesters spewing hateful choruses of destruction.

Had it not been for the large police presence separating the mob, would anyone have had the slightest doubt as to what would have happened? Verbal assault would have turned into physical battery, an all-too familiar byproduct of the ugly antisemitism that seethes in the hearts of Jew-hating activists.

Although police officials assured that the mob would be adequately distanced from those trying to enter the synagogue, that was not the case, as they continued to forcibly push through, trying to gain closer access to the people and the venue, resulting in the arrest of four.

PAL-Awda, an activist group promoting "The Palestine Right to Return Coalition," – which is proud to employ Hamas imagery – was on hand to promote the usual lying propaganda, claiming that the real estate on offer for purchase is located on stolen Palestinian land.

It's a pretty hard swallow, considering that there was never an official state of Palestine from which land was stolen, but why bother with historical details?

THEIR HATE rally was just part of a cog in the massive wheel of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment, not so different from what the world witnessed in the 1930s, well before the State of Israel ever existed.

Claiming that "the event was in direct violation of housing and anti-discrimination laws," one has to wonder why a real estate expo, intended for Jewish residents, would break any laws, considering that anyone would have been able to purchase such land, despite the attraction being directed toward one particular community.

Is that not true of any land purchase? According to Asden Israel, a premier



NEW YORK City Mayor Zohran Mamdani is seen giving a speech, last month. (David 'Dee' Delgado/Reuters)

luxury real estate developer focusing on high-end residential projects in Israel, "Non-Jews, including foreigners and non-citizens, can legally buy private land, apartments, and commercial property in Israel" (<https://asden.co.il/our-guide-to-buying-a-home-in-israel/>).

So where does any illegality come into play?

It doesn't, but the incendiary and false claim is, nonetheless, a handy one to hurl in the war against the right of Jews to return to their biblical and ancestral homeland.

But wait, given that the presence of Zionist Jews is so objectionable to Palestinian activists, why wouldn't they applaud those who came to hear the real estate pitch, given the possibility of their forever leaving America the beautiful?

The real truth is not their opposition to the Jewish homeland, which they claim was established on stolen land, but rather their overall objection to the existence of the Jewish people – not wanted in New York and not wanted in Israel.

Their dishonesty and corrupt souls prevent them from voicing that truth, because to finally admit their antipathy for Jews would be to uncover their genocidal aspiration toward the creation of a Jew-free world, their real goal.

Of course, it would be too risky to

show all their cards, so instead, they attempt to cleverly disguise their hatred in the form of protesting against a lawful real estate event directed at the Jewish community, at a time when antisemitism has picked up steam.

Why wouldn't such an event be met with great curiosity and enthusiasm when considering the toxic atmosphere that has escalated in America's largest Jewish-populated city, now run by a Muslim mayor who feels the need to express his own personal repugnance over an issue in which he is clueless?

Mamdani has a lot on his plate, but since he claimed to be up for the task, shouldn't he be 100% focused on the many challenges that lie before him?

Does he really have time and indisputable knowledge to take on the super-charged subject of Middle East land disputes, while innocent women get sucker punched on the streets of New York?

If Mamdani doesn't take more care, he may be accused of using his public office to further his anti-Israel agenda, which he has denied having – but then what do we know?

The writer is a former Jerusalem elementary and middle school principal. She is also the author of Mistake-Proof Parenting, available on Amazon, based on the time-tested wisdom found in the Book of Proverbs.

Current events or Israel education?

The depth our students deserve



LIVING THE DREAM

• By URI PILICHOWSKI

Many dedicated Israel educators believe that keeping pace with the latest headlines from Jerusalem and Gaza delivers a meaningful connection to the Jewish state.

There is virtue to their position, as long as they don't get carried away. Chasing the news cycle may feel urgent and relevant, but it falls short of genuine Israel education.

True Israel education does more than report.

It transmits the constant principles that have defined Zionism since its earliest days.

It immerses students in the full sweep of Jewish and Zionist history, from the biblical kingdoms through two thousand years of exile and longing, from the stirrings of modern Zionism at the end of the 19th century to the desperate struggles of the Yishuv, the miracle of 1948, and the difficult decades that followed.

It offers a broad, elevated perspective that reveals patterns and purpose amid the chaos of events.

Teaching current events serves a more immediate function. It keeps students aware of what is happening right now. It functions as a briefing, helping young Jews stay connected to the world.

No one wants our children detached from the realities shaping people's lives.

Yet a briefing, no matter how detailed, cannot substitute for education. Without historical grounding and ideological depth, students see only fragments. They understand the symptoms but not the underlying condition.

The risk runs deeper than incomplete knowledge. When our classrooms obsess over the latest developments, we unintentionally suggest that Zionism has already completed its work. The state was founded, the army was built, and sovereignty was achieved.

Now the story reduces to crisis management, another attack, another debate, another wave of condemnation. The grand, ongoing drama of Jewish return and renewal slips away.

Students absorb the quiet sense that the Zionist project reached its climax decades ago, and everything since is simply a reaction.

The events of the October 7 massacre during Simchat Torah in 2023 illustrate the gap between these two approaches with painful clarity.

A current-events lesson often begins and ends with the horror itself. On that quiet Shabbat morning,

Hamas terrorists smashed through the border fence. They murdered more than 1,200 people and seized 251 hostages.

The images that emerged seared themselves into our collective memory. Students leave the class informed, shaken, and angry. They grasp what happened and feel the raw wound.

But they often lack the framework to answer the deeper questions of why this savagery? What does it reveal about the Jewish condition in our time? How should we respond not just as mourners but as Zionists?

ISRAEL EDUCATION approaches the same day differently. It situates October 7 within the long continuum of Jewish vulnerability and resilience. The massacre did not emerge from nowhere.

It echoed the pogroms that convinced Herzl and Jabotinsky of the necessity of Jewish power, the Arab riots of 1929 that tested the Yishuv's will, and the Holocaust that proved exile offered no permanent shelter.

It confirmed, in the most brutal way imaginable, the foundational Zionist insight that a people without sovereignty will always remain at the mercy of others. Yet the response reaffirmed Zionist principles in action.

Reserve soldiers left their civilian lives within hours. Communities pulled together across political divides. Debates raged, not over whether to fight, but how to fight while remaining true to Jewish ethics.

The biblical command "If someone comes to kill you, rise early and kill him first" found new meaning in the fields surrounding Gaza.

Students who receive this fuller education see both the tragedy and the affirmation. They understand that October 7 did not disprove Zionism; it reconfirmed its urgent necessity.

The Jewish people did not return to the land merely to escape history but rather to engage it as free actors.

They learn that Israel's successes, technological ingenuity under fire, democratic debate amid crisis, continued immigration even as sirens sounded, flow from the same values that built the state. They also confront the failures honestly. This honesty deepens the students' attachment.

The same principle applies across every flashpoint. Teaching judicial reform or settlement policy as breaking news produces heated but shallow discussion.

Placing those issues within the century-long Zionist argument over the character of the Jewish state gives students perspective. A briefing on diplomatic agree-

ments or boycott campaigns keeps students current.

Connecting them to the enduring tension between security and morality equips students to think as heirs to a tradition, not spectators to headlines.

Educators who mistake the news cycle for curriculum may produce engaged followers of events, but they miss the opportunity to form rooted Zionists. Young people flooded with daily updates often react with passion yet lack the intellectual steadiness needed when facing sophisticated criticism or their own doubts.

Those who have internalized the long view move differently. They carry the quiet confidence that comes from knowing Israel's full story, including its light and its burdens, its triumphs and its ongoing struggles.

This does not mean discarding current events. They have an essential place, but only as an illustration within a larger framework.

The thoughtful teacher weaves today's crisis back into the tapestry, teaching how it echoes 1948, how Zionist values shape our choices, and how Jewish history prepares us for what lies ahead.

Only then does the present enlighten rather than overwhelm the student. Jewish teaching has always favored depth over immediacy. The Torah embeds every incident in covenant and destiny.

The sages argued across generations, never allowing the crisis of the hour to erase eternal questions. Zionism emerged from precisely this kind of honest, unflinching engagement with reality. Our classrooms must honor that inheritance.

Israel educators must teach the unchanging principles. They must teach the history that gives every headline its weight and offer the broad view that transforms raw information into understanding.

When they do this, students will not merely follow events as they unfold. They will see their own place within the continuing Jewish story, a story that did not conclude with independence and will not be defined by any single massacre or victory.

They will emerge not as consumers of news but as conscious participants in a living Zionism, connected to Israel not only by emotion but by knowledge and conviction.

The Jewish people have never needed this more. In a world that often reduces Israel to soundbites and slogans, we owe our students the fullness of their heritage. That fullness remains the surest foundation for both understanding and love.

The writer is a Zionist educator at institutions around the world. He recently published the book Zionism Today.

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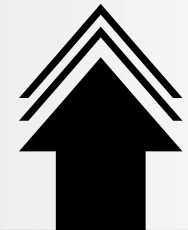
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The dangerous culture of violence and impunity

• By SEBASTIEN LEVI

On Thursday, May 14, as violence by far-right thugs was raging against Arabs around the now infamous Jerusalem Day, the head of Peace Now was assaulted by a far-right settler in the West Bank. These two separate incidents displayed the same violence and the same culture of impunity.

Jerusalem Day should be a proud and joyful day for Israelis and Jews around the world, celebrating the reunification of the city.

Unfortunately, it has become a day of racist rage for the far-right thugs who terrorize the city's Arab residents and one of shame for many Israelis or Jews, who see the Israeli flag, desecrated together with Jerusalem, become a synonym of Jewish supremacy.

Thanks to the demonstrations against the judicial overhaul, the Israeli flag has been reclaimed by the democratic Israel, right, center, or left-wing.

But it remains tainted on Jerusalem Day by the thugs who use it as a rallying cry for their extreme nationalism and outright racism.

Thugs exist in every democratic country.

The problem here is that they are not only tolerated but encouraged to act by the very government of this democracy, as illustrated by the infamous National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir's participation in this march, waving the Israeli flag on Temple Mount, yet again irresponsibly fanning the flames of confrontation.

The same impunity is at hand in the West Bank, where violent settlers have been terrorizing Palestinian civilians for months now, with minimal consequences.



CLASHES ARE seen breaking out near Damascus Gate in Jerusalem's Old City, during Jerusalem Day, earlier this month. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

When Defense Minister Israel Katz revoked administrative detention for the settlers upon taking over Yoav Gallant's position as his first order of business, he sent them the unmistakable message of impunity.

Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who said that the partic-

ipation of Arabs in an Israeli coalition would be 1,000 times worse than October 7, is also in charge of civilian matters in the Defense Ministry.

IN OTHER words, he is the minister of the settlers, who therefore benefit

from a de facto judicial impunity from Katz and active political support from Smotrich. What could possibly go wrong?

The assault on Lior Amihai, the head of Peace Now, in the West Bank on Jerusalem Day, is a direct consequence of such a culture of

impunity.

The violence by extremist settlers is indeed not only directed at Arabs but also at the Jews, whom they deem a "fifth column" or an "enemy from within." The logic at play is the same: a thuggish mentality that knows no bounds and

wants to implement a far-right, racist agenda at any cost, including violence.

As elections loom, there is a genuine danger of violence aimed both at Arabs and at such "traitorous" Jews in the next few months, as the fear of losing power may trigger them to take measures to create chaos, assault Arabs, and intimidate their opponents while they still can.

It is also difficult to imagine that such thugs will quietly accept the outcome of the elections and not do everything in their power to disrupt them, from intimidating Israel's Arab citizens to attacking Zionist opposition lawmakers in order to deter them from building a coalition with Arab parties after the election.

And it is dubious that the current government whose fate hangs in the balance, is deterring extremist settlers from carrying out any actions that could help them remain in power.

What happened in Jerusalem and the West Bank on May 14 is no longer a problem of law and order. It has become a political problem that only political solutions can solve, with a change of government and a return to democratic sanity.

These violent and racist thugs know it, and so does the government that has empowered them. That makes the stakes of the looming elections all the more decisive for the future of the State of Israel as both Jewish and democratic.

Born and raised in France, the writer is the correspondent of French Jewish radio, Radio J, and of the French paper librepresse.fr in the US, where he has been living for 16 years. He is also a contributor to the European Review. He also holds US and Israeli citizenship. His opinions are his only.

Jerusalem Day perspectives

• By YISRAEL MEDAD

Now that Jerusalem Day has passed, once again, we have been made aware that there is a significant media theme surrounding the day, celebrating its unification, and it is mostly negative.

For a week or two prior to it happening, we are already informed of the violence of years past, and the expectation of more violence becomes the messaging.

The media crowd at Damascus Gate gathers, video cameras set up, and with crews to follow the masses of youth into the very narrow alleyway just inside. This year, some 300 peace and human rights activists stood alongside Arab residents "to provide a protective presence."

This year, thankfully, even Nir Hasson's *Haaretz* story last Friday informed that this year's contretemps were noticeably less violent than previously. I think it was even less than at a few soccer matches this past year in Israel.

To be clear and firm: there is no need to be violent when marching through Jerusalem's Old City. It is criminal and immoral. Not only does it detract from the celebrations, but it also offers up to the detractors of a united Jerusalem a media victory. It stains our joy.

Still, there is context. The day recalls the years between 1948 and 1967, when Jerusalem, for the first time in some 3,000 years, was very briefly divided. In part, the celebration seeks to ensure that never happens again, as well as denying any "East" or, for that matter, "North" and "South" Jerusalem.

During those 19 years, Jews suffered Arab violence incessantly. For example, this newspaper, then called the *Palestine Post*, informed its readers on March 20, 1950, that Emil Taib, a 22-year-old immigrant, was shot and wounded while walking along the railway lines near Malha.

Another example was reported in *Haaretz* on Sunday, July 11, 1954. Readers were informed that all Shabbat long, sporadic shooting was heard in Jerusalem coming from the Jordanian side of the border. The neighborhoods affected were in the south of the city, near Mount Zion, and even in the center of town.

Throughout the 19 years of a divided city, following the Jordanian Arab Legion conquest on May 27, 1948, not only did the city's residents need to fear for their lives, but even the agreements Jordan, the illegal occupier of the section of the pre-1948 city lost in the War of Independence, were ignored and violated.

I lived in Jerusalem for some six months during 1966-67 while attending the Machon LeMadrachim program for youth movement leaders, and I well remember the huge white wall at the beginning of Jaffa Road near the municipality that sought to protect vehicular traffic from snipings from the Old City walls.

On Friday night, October 8, 1966, an apartment block suffered an explosion in the neighbourhood of Romema. Five civilians were injured, and the building suffered damage. In reaction, prime minister Levy Eshkol, confronted by a journalist at the site and asked for a response, declared that he had a notebook and was recording

all the incidents. Many dozens of murders, infiltrations, robberies, and sabotage occurred during 1948-1967.

The 1949 Jordan-Israel Armistice Agreement guaranteed, at least on paper, several important items that could have led, if not to peace, then to an atmosphere of coexistence. These included resumption of the normal functioning of the institutions on Mount Scopus, the Hebrew University, and the Hadassah Hospital; free access to the Western Wall and use of the cemetery on the Mount of Olives.

NONE OF that was fulfilled.

Thirty-four of the 35 synagogues inside the Old City were destroyed. Those not completely broken down were used as chicken houses and stables and were found in 1967 filled with dung-heaps, carcasses, and garbage. Scores of Torah scrolls were burned or ripped along with holy books.

A large section of the 2,000-year old Jewish cemetery below the road to Jericho was destroyed. Tens of thousands of tombstones were broken, and grave stones were used by the Jordanian Army stationed nearby as paving for walkways, as well as latrine covers. Part of the upper cemetery was levelled for a shortcut to a new hotel.

Thousands of Jewish residents, those who had remained after successive Arab terror attacks during the Mandate period, especially during 1936-1939, when even the Friday night walk to the Western Wall became a death trip, were ethnically cleansed from the city. The neighborhoods of Nahalat Shimon, Kfar Shiloah, the moshavim of Neveh Yaakov and Atarot, and other pockets of Jewish residency were forcibly emptied of their Jews.

The Jewish Quarter was torched in parts, and synagogues throughout the walled Old City were desecrated. All that was left was a corridor to Mount Scopus for a small security unit that was changed every two weeks.

Jews would seek to view the Old City from Mount Zion. They would not yield up their holy city, their national capital. They would not surrender their national identity and its physical proof. They would not permit an erasing of the historical record along with Jerusalem's illegal occupation.

We Jews refused and continue to refuse the idea that Jerusalem, a city of Temples, of pilgrimage festivities and gatherings, that for 3,000 years knew no division, no East and no West, should now forever seemingly consecrate a very short 19-year-long rupture and partition forced upon it by violent aggression.

Jerusalem has a heart, and Jews will not contribute to its submission to the fallacies of historical fiction. We raise Jerusalem above our greatest joy.

Again, Jews attacking Arabs is a stain on Jerusalem Day. It minimizes the history of a divided Jerusalem with its Arab murderous terror, its violations of international legal agreements, the destruction of Jewish property, desecration of Jewish graves and institutions, as if it never happened.

Arabs do not deserve for their crimes to be forgotten.

The writer is a researcher, analyst, and commentator on political, cultural, and media issues.



UNIVERSITY OF Michigan Prof. Derek Peterson praises campus pro-Palestinian protesters during his commencement speech in Ann Arbor, Michigan, earlier this month. (Screenshot via YouTube)

The wrong side of history

Cheering bullies and fueling hatred during graduation at UMich

• By STEVEN BURG

Graduation day is supposed to be one of the most joyful moments of a young person's life. Years of hard work, late nights, and sacrifice, all culminating in a single morning with family in the stands and a future wide open. That is what it is supposed to be.

At the University of Michigan on May 2, Jewish students experienced something very different.

Prof. Derek Peterson, the outgoing chair of the Faculty Senate, used his commencement address to praise the student activists who have spent the past two years making Jewish life on that campus difficult. He sang out to the protesters, celebrated their cause, and urged the graduates to go out and "make good trouble." The crowd cheered. The university's president sat there in his regalia and watched it happen.

When the backlash came, the university's first instinct was to scrub the video from its YouTube channel. Then, under pressure from alumni, faculty, and activists, they put it back up. Two thousand students, staff, and alumni signed letters demanding that the president retract his mild criticism of Peterson and pledge to protect what they framed as free expression. The American Association of University Professors issued a statement calling Peterson's remarks "measured and principled."

Jewish students, who have faced years of harassment, intimidation, and targeted hostility on that campus, sat in their graduation gowns while a senior faculty member effectively told the crowd that the people making their lives hell were heroes. A university official stood at a

podium and validated two years of discrimination against one specific group of students.

Imagine for a moment that the targeted group were Black students. Or Latino students. Or Asian students. If a faculty leader used a commencement address to celebrate the activists who had spent years harassing those students, screaming at them, surrounding them, making them afraid to wear any symbol of their identity on campus, no one would be drafting letters in his defense. There would be no petitions. There would be no statements from professors' unions about "protected speech." The outrage would be swift, total, and entirely justified.

The Jewish community has become the one exception to every rule that otherwise governs how we talk about discrimination in this country. The double standard is not subtle anymore. It is on full display, in cap and gown.

What happened in Ann Arbor also happened in other places: Cornell, Columbia, UCLA. Campus after campus has watched administrators either look away or actively legitimize the targeting of Jewish students. And when those same administrators face any scrutiny, they retreat behind the language of free speech and institutional neutrality, as if neutrality is even a coherent position when one group of students is being singled out for abuse.

There is nothing neutral about using a graduation stage to cheer the people doing the harassing.

The University of Michigan made a choice. When the president apologized for Peterson's remarks, it was a fleeting moment of institutional accountabili-

ty that the faculty almost immediately moved to reverse. When the video was quietly hidden and then restored under activist pressure, the university signaled where its sympathies lay. When more than 2,000 members of the university community rallied around the professor rather than the Jewish students, the picture became complete.

The federal government provides substantial funding to institutions like the University of Michigan. That funding comes with an expectation, embedded in law, that campuses will not tolerate discriminatory environments. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act exists for exactly this kind of situation. If the university cannot protect its Jewish students from a hostile environment, and if it celebrates the people creating that environment, the question of federal funding is entirely legitimate to raise.

Jews are being attacked around the country. Synagogues are being attacked around the country. The violence does not exist in a vacuum. It is fed by this same culture, which condones the harassment of Jewish students on campus and condones a culture in which Jewish students are told, from the graduation stage at a major American university, that the people targeting them are on the right side of history.

The University of Michigan has made its decision. But it is on the wrong side of history. Until there are real consequences, I fear it won't recognize that.

The writer is the International CEO of Aish, a global Jewish educational movement. He formerly served as Eastern Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, where he oversaw the Museum of Tolerance in New York City.

Why does the West ignore the hanging of a child marriage victim in Iran?

Why does Greta Thunberg not organize a flotilla to help save oppressed South Azerbaijani women facing execution in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

• By RACHEL AVRAHAM

Recently, *The Jerusalem Post* reported that the Iranian regime hanged Hanifeh Avandi, a 24-year-old Iranian South Azerbaijani victim of child marriage, who had documented psychological problems. However, no one else reported on this atrocious case, except for a few Iranian human rights organizations. The question I find myself asking is, why did the Western media ignore her plight?

The case of Hanifeh Avandi should interest Western audiences. In fact, it should interest not just Western audiences but anyone who proclaims to care about minority rights, women's rights, and human rights. For anyone who is crying with the Iranian people as they face increased repression during this cease-fire, this case should resonate. However, it is unfortunate that people are not paying close enough attention to what is happening inside Iran domestically.

Human rights activist Turkan Bozkurt stated in an interview, "Hanifeh Avandi was hanged at Tabriz Central Prison at dawn on April 19, 2026. She was 24 years old, Iranian Azerbaijani, and had been married by her family at the age of 17 to a severely disabled

man. She killed him eleven months into the marriage.

"Her prison physician, Dr. Davari, documented in repeated medical reports that Avandi suffered from acute psychological problems, was under continuous medical supervision, and had been placed in 'unjust circumstances' that, in his recorded assessment, should have precluded a death sentence."

For a child to be forced into marriage is a form of rape. If the child had preexisting psychological problems before experiencing such sexual abuse, then she definitely did not deserve the death penalty, even if she killed her husband.

If this had happened anywhere else in the world, Avandi would have been placed in a psychiatric institution to get treatment, first for the sexual abuse she endured and then for her underlying psychological problems, which pre-existed the marriage. The death penalty would have been unimaginable.

The world should have been outraged by her execution, yet they were deathly silent, preferring to focus on other issues, as if the execution of an Iranian South Azerbaijani child bride in the Islamic Republic did not matter.

According to Bozkurt, "The execution was carried out in secret. Iranian state and judiciary-affiliated media made no announcement, consistent with the broader pattern in which roughly 88% of executions in Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Baluch provinces proceed without official acknowledgment. The structural conditions that produced Avandi's case are neither unusual nor contested among researchers."

"Hanifeh Avandi has a name, and that alone places her in a minority," he continued. "The conditions that produced her death, forced marriage as a child, a husband she could not leave, a legal system that gave his family the right to kill her, and a prison physician whose objections carried no binding force, are not exceptional features of her case. "They are the operating conditions of a system that processes thousands of women in the same way, most of whom die without documentation, without a physician's report entering the public record, and without a rights organization learning their name in time to act."

SOCIOLOGIST SEVIL SULEYMANI proclaimed that Hanafi's case is not at all unusual in Iran: "We have seen this before in the

case of Rahele Zamani, who was also executed, demonstrating that Hanifa is one among many women whose lives are shaped by a system that enforces child marriage and later creates structural barriers to divorce.

"Many of these women experience what can be described as structural intersectionality: the overlapping effects of gender inequality, ethnic marginalization, and class disadvantage. They often grow up with limited access to education, legal resources, and social support. Language barriers, particularly for those less fluent in Farsi, further restrict their ability to navigate legal systems or advocate for themselves."

"At the same time, domestic violence and coercion are frequently normalized within both family and community structures, leaving women with few avenues for escape. When the state intervenes, it often does so not as a source of protection, but as an instrument of punishment," she added.

Bozkurt concurred: "Avandi's case sits within a documented pattern of Iranian women who were married as children, killed a forced or abusive spouse, and were subsequently executed under qisas retribution law. For instance, Rana Faraj-Oghli, 24 years old, was forced into marriage at 16 and was hanged

at Tabriz Central Prison in December 2025, four months before Avandi died in the same facility.

"Of the women whose executions IHRN-GO documented in 2025, approximately 44% had killed a husband or fiancé. Across these cases, the shared structure is forced or child marriage, domestic violence or rape, absence of legal recourse, and capital punishment administered through a system that places the final execution decision in the hands of the deceased abuser's family."

One must ponder, where is the Me Too Movement? Where is the United Nations? Where are Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International? Where are the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*? Where are the campus feminist protesters when we need them most?

Why is Greta Thunberg not organizing a flotilla to save oppressed South Azerbaijani women in Iran, who are at imminent risk of facing the death penalty?

The writer is the CEO of the *Dona Gracia Center for Diplomacy and an Israel-based journalist. She is the author of Women and Jihad: Debating Palestinian Female Suicide Bombings in the American, Israeli and Arab Media.*

US indecisiveness on Iran fuels war risks in the Far East

• By ZAKI SHALOM

In recent years, Japan has gradually changed the language it uses when discussing China and Taiwan.

Whereas Tokyo once sought to avoid almost any statement that could be interpreted as preparation for military confrontation, senior Japanese officials now speak openly about the possibility that a war over Taiwan could become a direct security crisis for Japan itself.

A major turning point came on November 7, 2025, when Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi stated during a parliamentary debate that a Taiwan emergency involving the use of force and naval vessels could constitute a situation threatening Japan's national survival.

The implication was unmistakable: Tokyo no longer views Taiwan as a distant issue, but rather as a focal point with direct consequences for Japan's national security.

Japan's concerns stem primarily from China's position.

On December 31, 2023,

Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in his New Year address that China would "surely be reunified" with Taiwan. Xi has repeatedly emphasized that Taiwan's reunification with China is a strategic and historical objective that is not open to negotiation.

During his summit with US President Donald Trump in Beijing in May 2026, Xi further sharpened his rhetoric, warning that the Taiwan issue constituted the most sensitive and important matter in Sino-American relations and that mishandling it could lead to confrontation between the two powers.

From the perspective of both Japan and Taiwan, however, the most troubling development is not China alone, but rather the shift in the American approach.

During the same summit, Trump avoided making an explicit commitment to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack. Asked whether the United States would protect Taiwan, he replied that he did not wish to discuss the matter.



US PRESIDENT Donald Trump shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping as they hold a bilateral meeting at Gimhae International Airport, in Busan, last year. (Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters)

He also appeared to defend the Chinese president, asserting that Xi did not seek war.

At the same time, Trump emphasized that the United

States should avoid being drawn into a distant war in Asia. He also reiterated his longstanding argument that semiconductor manufacturing

should be returned to American territory.

Washington has not abandoned Taiwan, yet in both Taipei and Tokyo, there is a

growing perception that the American commitment is no longer as unequivocal as it once appeared.

Increasingly, regional actors believe that in the event of a direct confrontation with China, the US would act with extreme caution and seek to avoid a large-scale war whenever possible.

This perception has been reinforced by the United States' conduct toward Iran. Despite the clear military superiority of the US and Israel, and despite Iran's severe strategic difficulties after years of sanctions and economic erosion, Trump has thus far failed to bring Tehran to a clear breaking point.

In the eyes of many countries, the very fact that the Iranian regime remains standing and has not capitulated to American pressure is interpreted as evidence of American indecisiveness – or at least of an unwillingness to go all the way.

Under such circumstances, any future agreement between Washington and Tehran that leaves the Iranian regime intact without a decisive outcome

could be perceived internationally as proof that the US and Israel failed to secure a complete victory.

Such a message could also shape the way China and North Korea assess American resolve and Washington's willingness to defend its allies in Asia, including Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan.

This also carries a broader lesson for Israel. Even a state enjoying a deep strategic alliance with the United States, such as Taiwan, is discovering that no guarantees are absolute or permanent.

American support may be extremely strong, but it is always contingent upon changing political and strategic circumstances.

From Israel's perspective, therefore, the conclusion must be clear: Israel needs its alliance with the United States, but it must always ensure that it retains the ability to defend itself even without direct American military intervention.

The writer is a senior fellow at the *Misgav Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy.*

Tehran's terror campaign in the West makes regime removal imperative

• By YOSSI MANSAROF

The recent announcement by the US Department of Justice regarding the arrest of Mohammed Baqer Saad Daoud al-Saadi, a senior figure in Iran's proxy network, provides a stark illustration of the depth of Tehran's operational penetration into both North America and Europe. Saadi is not a peripheral operative.

He serves as a senior commander in Kataib Hezbollah, the spearhead of Iran's proxy infrastructure in Iraq. He previously operated in close coordination with Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, and with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, his principal counterpart in Iraq, both eliminated by the United States in 2020.

The Saadi indictment:

Tracking a transnational terror network
This case, however, extends beyond the familiar pattern of regionally confined counterterrorism operations. It exposes a transnational network operating across Canada, the United States, and Europe – underscoring the global scope of Iran's proxy strategy.

The indictment filed against Saadi in a federal court in New York includes six serious terrorism-related charges and attributes to him direct involvement in nearly 20 attacks and attempted operations in the West.

Saadi, who was arrested in Turkey and extradited to the United States, is assessed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to have directed a sequence of 18 terrorist attacks across Europe within a span of just three months during 2026.

The evidence further reveals that on April 3, he was recorded instructing an undercover US agent to carry out a coordinated attack targeting a synagogue in New York, along with two additional Jewish institutions in Los Angeles, California, and Scottsdale, Arizona.

A new Iranian proxy in Western states

The exposure of this network directly links

Saadi to the activation of a new and covert Iranian proxy operating under the name "Harakat Ashab al-Yamin."

The organization appears to have been established and supported by the Iranian regime as a subversive response to the military campaign launched by the United States and Israel against Tehran.

The group's operational record, some of which has been documented and publicized by the organization itself for purposes of psychological warfare, demonstrates a high degree of audacity.

Reported attacks include an assault on an American bank in Amsterdam (March 15), the arson of a synagogue in Skopje, North Macedonia (April 12), and a stabbing attack in London targeting two Jewish civilians, including a dual US-British national (April 29).

These incidents occurred alongside a series of explosions and arson attacks targeting Jewish sites in Golders Green in London, as well as in Belgium, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam throughout the month of March.

This reality once again underscores the direct threat posed by the Iranian regime to national security in Europe. The European Union took a significant step in mid-February by designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization. However, the picture in the British arena remains more complex.

In late March, Hamish Falconer, the United Kingdom's Minister for the Middle East at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, formally rebuked Iran's ambassador to London, Ali Mousavi, following the prosecution of two Iranian nationals accused of spying on Jewish centers across the country.

Despite this, official London continues to hesitate, refraining from applying a comprehensive terrorist designation to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Against this backdrop, a bipartisan group of US lawmakers recently urged the British government to end its hesitation. In their

letter, the legislators cited the involvement of the IRGC in antisemitic attacks, intimidation campaigns, cyber operations, and assassination plots targeting regime opponents on British soil.

The pressure appears to be yielding only partial results. During a late-April visit to a London synagogue that had been targeted in an attack, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer pledged to introduce legislation in July to outlaw the organization in order to "ensure that the Jewish community feels safe." In an interview with *The Jewish Chronicle*, he also expressed deep concern over Tehran's growing reliance on proxy actors.

Missiles over Europe

and the fragility of Western alignment

The arrest of Saadi, together with the exposure of the "Ashab al-Yamin" networks, leaves little room for doubt: the Iranian regime constitutes a clear and present threat to global stability and to the sovereignty of Western states.

This threat is further compounded by Iran's advancing ballistic missile program, whose operational range already covers significant portions of the European continent – placing major cities such as London, Paris, Amsterdam, Vienna, and Rome within direct reach.

This assessment is reinforced by the Iranian launch toward the joint UK-US base at Diego Garcia on March 21, which demonstrated a strike capability of approximately 3,800 kilometers. Although one missile was intercepted en route and another disintegrated roughly 600 kilometers short of its target, the test nonetheless underscores the growing range and ambition of Iran's missile capabilities.

Yet, in the face of this escalating threat, the West appears fragmented and increasingly hesitant. While the United States is actively working to constrain Iranian aggression and, in practice, engaged in a military effort to contain it, key European states have adopted



A VAN arrives at Westminster Magistrates Court on the day Essa Suleiman appears in the court, after he was charged with the attempted murder of two Jewish men during an antisemitic attack in Golders Green, earlier this month. (Jack Taylor/Reuters)

a posture of panicked appeasement, retreating from their original commitments. This trend reached a notable peak in the refusal by France, Spain, and Italy to authorize docking, refueling, or overflight access for US forces and transport aircraft en route to deliver critical military supplies to Israel.

Paradigm shift: Eradicating the head of the snake

These measures, driven by a European desire to avoid friction with Tehran and by internal political concerns, constitute a direct reward for the Islamic Republic's state-sponsored terrorism.

Those who refuse to provide basing access and logistical support to their allies during a campaign against Iranian aggression reveal a broader reality: Iranian terrorism does not

stop at the borders of the Middle East; it is already knocking at the gates of Europe, Canada, and the United States.

The West must awaken, recognize the total nature of the threat, and understand that the only way to ensure public security is not through the containment of proxies, but through eradicating the head of the snake in Tehran.

For Israel and the United States, the growing Iranian threat makes clear that the removal of the regime must serve as the central objective in any confrontation with Tehran, regardless of the outcome of the current war.

The writer is a lecturer in the "Politics of the Middle East" MA program within the School of Political Science at the University of Haifa, and a senior researcher at the *Misgav Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy.*

'Launch failures come with the territory'

Why latest success of Bezos's Blue Origin left its biggest rocket grounded

By LAUREN ROSENBLATT

Jeff Bezos's rocket company put a satellite in the wrong spot.

But, for a company struggling to keep up with rival SpaceX, that was still a win.

The April mission marked an early success for Blue Origin's New Glenn heavy-lift rocket, which the Kent, Washington-based company has launched just three times. Blue Origin successfully recovered New Glenn's booster stage, the part of the rocket that propels the whole system off the launchpad before separating, sending the upper stage to space and the booster back to Earth.

Blue Origin is one of the few companies that has designed a rocket with a reusable booster stage. The recent mission last month was the first time Blue Origin used the recycled booster.

But the upper stage didn't do its job, dropping the satellite off lower than planned and causing its customer, AST SpaceMobile, to leave it to burn up in space. The Federal Aviation Administration grounded the New Glenn rocket as Blue Origin determines what caused the missed delivery.

That marks another delay for Blue Origin.

SpaceX and Blue Origin have taken vastly different approaches to the space race—SpaceX moves fast, fails, and then launches again, while Blue Origin tests and tests before taking to the launchpad. The recent mission was Blue Origin's chance to prove its strategy would work, said Chad Anderson, founder and managing partner of venture firm Space Capital. That didn't happen.

The challenge of their approach, where they do everything slowly... there's not a lot of opportunity for failure," Anderson said. "We don't know how long they're going to be grounded or how long it's going to take to get to the bottom of this."

But the delay likely won't lead to any lost customers, thanks to a massive supply and demand imbalance in the industry, space consultants and analysts told *The Seattle Times*. There are only a handful of rocket companies able to deliver payloads to space and nearly all of them have experienced



A BLUE ORIGIN New Glenn rocket lifts off from the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in April. It is the third launch of New Glenn, carrying the AST SpaceMobile's BlueBird 7 satellite into low Earth orbit. Right: the first-stage booster used on the Blue Origin New Glenn NG-3 mission, named 'Never Tell Me The Odds,' returns on the recovery vessel Jacklyn to Port Canaveral, in April. The booster was also flown and recovered after the NG-2 mission in November 2025. (Joe Skipper/Reuters; Blue Origin/TNS)

recent setbacks.

One of Blue Origin's largest launch customers, Amazon's satellite venture Leo, told the *Times* it will be ready to incorporate New Glenn back into its launch cadence as soon as it's flying again.

AST SpaceMobile, the company that lost its satellite, isn't worried either.

On a call last week with analysts, president Scott Wisniewski even celebrated Blue Origin's booster recovery as "a great milestone." When it's flying again, Blue Origin will have two booster stages ready to increase launches, Wisniewski said.

Shortly after the incident, Blue Origin CEO Dave Limp posted on X/Twitter that the company was "pleased" with its booster recovery but "we clearly didn't deliver the mission our customer wanted, and our team expects."

A satellite in the wrong orbit

Though it sounds shocking, delivering a satellite to the wrong place isn't that big of a deal, according to space industry watchers who spoke with the *Times*.

SpaceX changed expectations with a high cadence of successful launches, but rock-

ets used to mess up deliveries all the time. That's why companies insure the million-dollar satellites they shoot off.

"It used to be every time your rocket would go up, you'd put your satellite on it and you'd be nervously chewing your fingernails off," Anderson said. "SpaceX changed the paradigm."

Blue Origin's third New Glenn mission launched from Cape Canaveral, Florida, on April 19 with plans to bring a satellite to low earth orbit for AST SpaceMobile, a Texas-based company building a space-based cellular broadband network. But New Glenn delivered the satellite "too low to sustain operations," according to AST SpaceMobile.

Limp said on X that "early data" suggested the second burn of one of New Glenn's BE-3U engines didn't produce enough thrust.

According to Kayhan Space, a technology company that tracks objects in space, New Glenn delivered the satellite about 93 miles from Earth, far short of the more than 300 miles it was aiming for.

Most satellites in low earth orbit are somewhere between 250 and 620 miles from Earth, said Siamak Hesar, Kayhan's

CEO and co-founder.

The satellite also ended up in an elliptical orbit, meaning it spent very little time where it was meant to be.

The satellite separated from the upper stage then didn't have enough energy to push itself to the appropriate orbit. By now, both pieces have probably burned up in the atmosphere.

"This is a step back, but I don't think we can categorize it as a failure," Hesar said. "At the end of the day, space is hard."

The severity of the mishap hinges on how long it takes Blue Origin to figure out why the engine produced too little thrust and identify a fix, industry analysts said.

That process is hindered by the fact that the company can't examine the upper stage. But it's helped by a large amount of data Blue Origin has on similar engines on the New Shepard rocket, the company's space tourism shuttle.

"If it's something relatively simple—a faulty sensor, a software change, squeaky valve—no big deal probably," said Stan Shull, founder of space technology consulting firm Alliance Velocity. "If it's some kind of design flaw, and they've already produced a

lot of engines... they'll have to go back and fix that."

"My net takeaway is that Blue Origin is deliberate, dedicated, determined," Shull said. "They'll get this fixed. It's just a question of how long that takes."

Catering to NASA and Amazon

A New Glenn grounding also threatens to disrupt Blue Origin and NASA's plans to return to the moon.

NASA's Artemis II mission just successfully sent four astronauts to circle the moon, marking one step in its journey to use the lunar surface as a stopping point on the way to Mars.

For future Artemis missions, NASA selected both SpaceX and Blue Origin to build lunar landers, the vehicle that gets astronauts to the lunar surface and back off again. Blue Origin intends to use New Glenn to launch its lunar lander.

Last year, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy said the space agency was reopening one of the earliest slots for a lunar lander, previously awarded to SpaceX, citing delays with its heavy-lift rocket, Starship.

In February, NASA announced its third Artemis

mission, planned for 2027, would rendezvous with "one or both commercial landers from SpaceX and Blue Origin."

Even with New Glenn's grounding, space industry analysts don't expect the mishap will impact Blue Origin's standing in the Artemis program.

NASA will want two options for lunar landers, and there are plenty of other obstacles the space agency still has to overcome to meet its timeline. A New Glenn delay wouldn't be the "long pole in the tent for staying on schedule," said Shull, from Alliance Velocity.

In fact, NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman said in April, shortly after the incident, he was confident Blue Origin's "sustained achievements... will keep us on track for success with the Artemis program."

In May, NASA posted a photo of a prototype of Blue Origin's moon lander, sparking excitement for future mis-

sions.

On the commercial front, AST SpaceMobile and Amazon are among Blue Origin's largest New Glenn customers.

Amazon, which started its satellite venture Leo in 2019 under the name Project Kuiper, plans to launch more than 3,200 satellites to expand broadband access, but it is running behind schedule.

Amazon had to ask the Federal Communications Commission in January for an extension to its Leo license, which required the company to deploy half of its 3,200 satellites by the end of July. Amazon has so far sent about 300 satellites to low earth orbit.

Amazon pinned the blame for its delay on "an unprecedented logjam" from launch providers, including Blue Origin, telling the FCC Leo was "producing satellites considerably faster than others can launch them."

Amazon is working with several launch providers, but Blue Origin accounted for the majority of its recent spending. According to a regulatory filing, of the \$2.2 billion Amazon spent on its launches, \$1.8b. went to Blue Origin.

Companies like Amazon that have already paid for launches on New Glenn won't relinquish their spot, said Chris Quilty, president of space consulting firm Quilty Space. But the longer New Glenn is grounded, customers may have to shift future plans.

The incident could also make it harder for Blue Origin to make money, Quilty said. Because of earlier delays, the cost of insuring a satellite hitching a ride on New Glenn is already higher than other launch providers. After the April incident, it will only go up and customers are more likely to ask for a discount.

But, Quilty continued, Blue Origin will make that back. More successful launches will boost its reputation and revenue.

"Launch failures," he said, "come with the territory." (The Seattle Times/TNS)

Sustainable sushi: California farm grows rare wasabi plants

By KATE BRADSHAW

SAN JOSE, California - Becoming a wasabi farmer wasn't initially part of the career plan for former electrical contractor Jeff Roller.

But for those who know him, his pivot wasn't all that surprising, he says.

He and co-founder Tim Hall got the idea to start a wasabi farm about 15 years ago when Hall learned that most of the wasabi Americans eat is fake: Expert estimates cited in *The Washington Post* over a decade ago put the proportion of fake stuff at between 95% and 99% of the wasabi consumed in the US. The green paste that usually comes with your takeout sushi is made up of horseradish, mustard, cornstarch, food coloring, and some other ingredients.

Hall and Roller had construction backgrounds and wanted to see if they could figure out how to grow the notoriously finicky plants.

Wasabi plants generally grow best in cool climates with water flowing over the soil, and they take around two years to reach maturity.

After months of research and trial and error, they decided to start their farm, repurposing an old Coastside nursery with greenhouses dating back to the 1960s for the job. For years, they struggled to achieve consistency with the plants they grew. Every time they tried to scale up their production, a new challenge popped up, Roller says.

"We've changed the way we've grown it a bunch of times," he says.

Two years in, Roller gave up, leaving the farm to Hall, but then came back



HALF MOON Bay Wasabi co-owner Jim Murphy holds wasabi roots. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group/TNS)

six months later. For many years, their wasabi farm was a passion project, funded by their electrical work. Now, Hall has stepped back from farming focus on parenting, but is still involved.

"There's no playbook of how to do it," Roller says.

But as they struggled, one thing kept them going: They always could sell whatever they grew, mostly to local high-end sushi restaurants and steakhouses.

Between reading a handful of academic papers and conducting lots of experiments with irrigation, lighting

and more, they finally landed on a consistent system. They've been growing their wasabi the same way for seven or eight years now, Roller says.

The farm draws on sustainable farming practices like using predatory bugs to keep pests at bay and recirculating water for the fairly water-hungry plants, according to Roller. Today, they're among just a small handful of US-based wasabi farmers.

The whole plants are edible, and the farm also sells the leaves and stems, which can be made into salads or chopped and marinated with soy

sauce to become kizami, a condiment. The flowers, meanwhile, can be used as an edible garnish.

Then, in 2020, the pandemic threw a wrench into their business. "COVID was really difficult for us," Roller says. "We lost 90% of our business overnight."

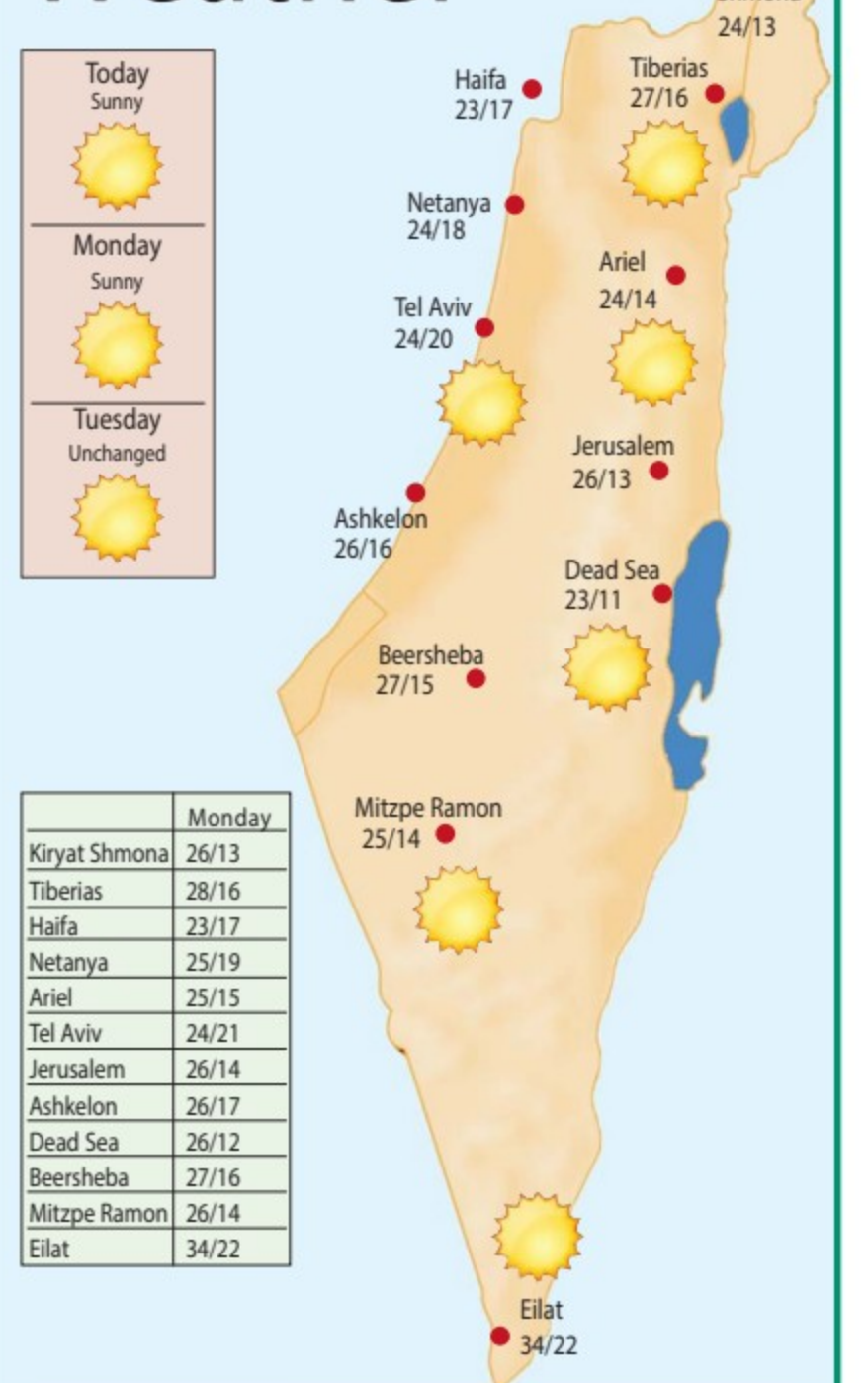
They had to adapt quickly, pivoting to online sales and learning how to ship across the US—particularly to areas where restaurants reopened ahead of the Bay Area, like Texas and Florida. They also began selling to local Japanese supermarkets.

So how do you eat it? What you'll want to eat—and what traditional wasabi is—is the wasabi plant's rhizome, or stalk at the base of the plant, grated very finely into a paste. Shredded over a special grater, the resulting flavor and color of the wasabi pastes can differ just based on which end of the rhizome you're grating, as co-owner Jim Murphy demonstrated on a recent visit to the farm. Murphy joined last year after a career in human rights work and web development.

Real wasabi oxidizes quickly. It's ideally consumed about five minutes after shredding, to let it oxidize a little bit. But it starts to lose heat within 25 minutes of grating it, he says. Those timing parameters make it difficult for many restaurants to work with, especially those serving takeout.

But after trying even just a tiny taste of the real stuff, it's obvious why it is so sought-after. The fresh, sharp, complex heat that spreads through the palate and nasal passages provides a unique sensation that's as fleeting as it is subtle. (The Mercury News/TNS)

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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Dignity the focus in new law on advance medical directives

The government plans to implement a law allowing terminally ill patients to refuse life-sustaining treatment from July 31, more than 20 months after the Legislative Council finally passed it. This has, wisely, allowed the healthcare sector time to prepare for important changes and for public education and awareness.

The Advance Decision on Life-sustaining Treatment Ordinance provides legal status to patients' advance-care planning while offering protection to healthcare and rescue personnel. Advance medical directives and do-not-attempt-cardiopulmonary-resuscitation (DNACPR) orders have been in place at public hospitals based on common law since 2010. As the new law takes effect, these two instruments will acquire formal statutory status.

A lack of public awareness was cited as reason for the delay for almost 20 years. The law is therefore welcome and long overdue. It is needed to provide clarity and reassurance for patients, their families and medical and health professionals.

Awareness of advance directives has grown over the years. The Hospital Authority issued guidelines on their use in 2010, but more needed to be done.

Although directives are covered by common law, the legal position needed to be clearer. Medical professionals could be unwilling to refrain from administering life-saving treatment and disputes could arise with family members.

A survey ahead of the passing of the legislation in November 2024 revealed that more than 75 per cent of respondents had not previously heard of advance medical directives. Once people understand the concept, however, evidence shows a majority tends to support it. The survey, organised by the Jockey Club End-of-Life Community Care Project, found 74.4 per cent in favour of setting up such directives for themselves.

There remains room to promote greater awareness of the new law along with careful monitoring of its implementation. The legislation aims to empower patients to make decisions about the treatment they receive in the final stage of their life. Their wishes are expressed while they still have mental capacity.

Hopefully the new law, which applies not only to hospital staff but also to those providing emergency treatment elsewhere, will provide adequate safeguards in practice for patients, medical professionals and healthcare workers.

Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that a patient's final days are lived with comfort, compassion and dignity. The new law is a step forward. Greater clarity and awareness will serve the best interests of all concerned.

Indie hit shows the power of storytelling

The films that become big box-office hits often enjoy huge budgets and feature all-star casts. Some Hollywood blockbusters cost hundreds of millions of US dollars.

The film that has taken mainland China by storm this year is different. *Dear You*, a heartwarming story featuring the culture of Chaoshan, in eastern Guangdong province, has been a surprise success.

The film was made on a shoestring budget of just 14 million yuan (HK\$16.13 million). The cast was mostly unknown before the film was released. It was filmed entirely in Teochew, a southern Chinese dialect.

Dear You has already grossed more than 700 million yuan and is projected to take 1.6 billion yuan, a record for a dialect film on the mainland. The film has enjoyed rave reviews, its popularity growing as plaudits spread by word of mouth.

The movie tells the story of a grandson searching for his grandfather from Chaoshan who emigrated to Thailand many years ago. It features the tradition of migrants from China regularly sending brief letters with small remittances to their family back home.

It is a story that has resonated strongly with film-goers at a time when interest is growing in China's regional culture. The film also powerfully conveys the importance of maintaining family and community bonds. This has struck a chord.

The movie's influence has extended beyond cinemas. Parts of Chaoshan in which the film was shot have become tourist destinations. It has also sparked much debate on social media among overseas Chinese communities.

Big budgets and famous actors are not necessarily needed for a movie to find success. Strong storytelling, authenticity, and – above all – the ability to connect with the audience can be the keys to bumper box office takings.

Hong Kong has a strong Chaoshan community, and film buffs will hope *Dear You* is released in the city soon. Local film *The Last Dance*, made with a modest budget, was a huge success last year.

Dear You is an inspiration and should give much encouragement to other aspiring directors and actors.

HARRY'S VIEW ON THE OBSERVATORY'S STORM WARNINGS



Havens for savings

Anthony Rowley says with too much money chasing too few investment options, unified bond markets in Europe and Asia may offer alternatives

An often-overlooked reason stock markets are prone to bouts of irrational exuberance, as is the case now, is that there is too much money chasing too few investment opportunities around the world. Could we be on the cusp of breaking out of this vicious cycle of boom and bust?

There are grounds for optimism on this score. They originate from an unexpected quarter – staid bond markets beyond the United States, specifically in Europe and Asia. European monetary authorities are pushing for the creation of "Eurobonds", a pan-European Union bond market where different countries raise joint funds in their common currency. These would be distinct from the existing Eurobond market, where countries and entities separately raise funds.

This in itself would be a big step towards expanding the global investment universe and could provide a model for Asia, where the existing market for Asian bonds allows countries and entities to issue debt securities in multiple different currencies. These moves together could hugely expand global capital markets.

To understand why this is necessary, we need to look at the relative size of bond markets. The supply of savings in these markets is becoming increasingly disproportionate to the size of investment opportunities. First, we should note that the size of global financial assets under management in 2025 reached close to US\$150 trillion, according to Boston Consulting Group. For comparison, global gross domestic product was just less than US\$111 trillion in 2024.

Where can this huge amount of savings be most safely and gainfully invested in a way that serves the public interest? Much of it is directed into equity markets, and a good deal of that money goes into US-listed stocks, which are in the middle of what is widely seen

as an artificial intelligence-driven tech bubble pushing stock valuations towards stratospheric highs.

Most of the remainder goes into bond markets, which are safer but all less exciting than equity markets. This is where the scope for reform lies if the world is going to meet its increasingly large demand for investment in defence, energy, technology, infrastructure and so on without breaking the bank.

The biggest single bond market by far to soak up the world's savings is the US government bond market, which weighs in at over US\$30 trillion. It continues to grow in size as successive US administrations vacuum up foreign savings, which is bad for the US and for the world.

The Eurobond market comes in at US\$15 trillion or so. The Asian bond market excluding Japan and China is even smaller. Clearly, these markets are not able to absorb meaningful amounts of global savings, which means a flood of portfolio investment makes its way into the US government bond and equity markets.

A Eurobond is defined as a bond issued offshore by governments or companies denominated in a currency other than that of the issuer's country. Eurobonds are usually long-term debt instruments and can be denominated in US dollars, euros, pounds, Japanese yen, Swiss francs or other currencies. There is great scope for further development and growth of both the Eurobond and Asian bond markets in a united form and in a common currency, for the good of both regions and of the international community.

As Olivier Blanchard and Angel Ubide argued in a recent blog published by the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, "European fragmentation severely hampers its economic and geopolitical potential". European leaders, they noted, have agreed to defragment the single market to boost

its size, productivity and investment potential, and now is the time to also defragment Europe's sovereign bond market.

The authors noted that they have long argued it is time to create a deep, large and liquid market for Eurobonds. There has been growing support for this initiative, they wrote, and not just from think tanks and academics but also from the European Central Bank, the German Bundesbank and some European governments. They suggested that Europe must accelerate the development of strategic autonomy to manage the rupture of the international rules-based global order. The row with the Trump administration over Greenland and the growing doubts about the future of Nato "make clear that Europe cannot wait", they said.

"Strategic autonomy requires three pillars – military, economic and financial strength – and a safe asset is a necessary condition for financial strength," Blanchard and Ubide argued. "Europe cannot rely on US Treasuries, an asset denominated in a foreign currency, as the safe-asset pillar of its economy."

Similar arguments also apply to Asia. As far back as the 1990s, farsighted policymakers such as Japan's former vice-minister of finance for international affairs Eisuke Sakakibara and Haruhiko Kuroda, his then deputy and later governor of the Bank of Japan, pushed for the creation of a bona fide Asia bond market and for an Asian monetary fund.

Development of bond markets is becoming an important policy agenda in Asia. Recognising this, finance ministries and central banks in China, Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asia have undertaken an attempt to develop their own bond markets under the Asian Bond Markets Initiative. However, the size of local currency markets is insufficient compared to the needs of the region. Efforts need to be accelerated before the stock market bubble bursts and savings are left without a safe home.

Anthony Rowley is a veteran journalist specialising in Asian economic and financial affairs

LETTERS

Study abroad returnees affirm China's growth and global ties

Recent figures released by the Chinese Service Centre for Scholarly Exchange – a public organisation under China's Ministry of Education – offer a revealing snapshot of China's evolving global educational landscape, painting a picture of balanced cross-border academic mobility and a rising appeal of returning home for overseas talent. In 2025, more than 570,000 Chinese students pursued education abroad, while 535,600 returnees came back to China after completing their overseas studies, a narrow gap that reflects shifting global talent dynamics.

These figures challenge outdated stories that describe Chinese study abroad as a one-way brain drain. Instead, it reflects a mature, two-way flow of knowledge and talent. The steady volume of outbound students highlights China's continued embrace of global education. Young Chinese citizens remain eager to gain international perspectives, access cutting-edge academic resources and broaden their cross-cultural competencies. Equally notable is the surge in returning students. This growth is driven by a mix of factors: vibrant career opportunities in China's booming tech, innovation and green economy sectors, favourable policies

for overseas returnees and deepening confidence in domestic development prospects. For many returnees, overseas study is not necessarily a path to permanent settlement abroad, but a strategic investment to acquire skills that serve personal growth and national development.

These statistics signal that China still believes in global exchange and that it has become strong enough to attract back its top global talent, along with their vision, expertise and skills. This injects vitality into China's development and fosters closer people-to-people ties with the rest of the world. This balanced flow is a positive sign. It shows that educational exchange remains a bridge for mutual understanding, and that a developing nation can send its youth out into the world while also welcoming them back. This is not only beneficial for China's long-term development. It also enriches the global talent ecosystem, promoting more inclusive and interconnected cooperation in education.

Xiyue Li, Yuhan Cao and Dr Yuehai Xiao, Hunan Normal University, Changsha, Hunan

Dogs and dining don't mix, whatever the regulations

I am writing in response to the article, "No hotspot: Hong Kong dog-friendly restaurants face menu and layout limits" (May 11). While the limitations imposed on menus and venue layouts aim to ensure food safety, I doubt whether these new regulations can truly address the practical problems caused by having pets in dining establishments.

A major issue that remains unaddressed is the general disturbance to other diners.

Imagine trying to catch up with friends, only to have your conversation drowned out by a dog barking at the next table. Beyond noise, pets may emit odours that others may find offensive. Most worryingly, dogs



A dog with its owner at a restaurant in a shopping centre in Kowloon. Photo: Dickson Lee

can pose a genuine health risk to customers with severe pet allergies.

Hygiene is also a concern. Even though the new regulations mandate a 1.5-metre buffer zone between dogs and food preparation areas, local eateries are generally compact and tables are typically packed tightly together. Dogs naturally touch, sniff and shed on everything they pass by; they may still access and contaminate the food of customers nearby.

Most alarming of all is the inevitable risk of accidents; if a dog decides to poop or pee inside the restaurant, it would ruin the appetite of other diners.

The new rules only look good on paper. In reality, they may not solve the hygiene risks and discomfort that regular diners will face.

Osanna Chan Ho Sheung, Kwai Chung

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