

# IIT-B to dinner table, the camera is on



PARTHA SINHA

OUTSIDE IIT-Delhi last month, after a young student's death, protesters noticed a man who filmed everything and photographed nothing. No press card, no lanyard, only a phone held with the studied carelessness of someone pretending not to hold one. Word moved through the crowd in the efficient, unreliable way rumours do: plainclothes police, collecting faces for a file somewhere.

The students did not convene a seminar on privacy. They raised their own phones and filmed him back — 40 small black mirrors turned upon the watcher. By the time they met the administration, every chair had acquired its own cameraman. What might once have been a conversation became a production with 40 directors, each certain that his recording would contain the truth.

A few hundred kilometres south, at IIT-Bombay, a quieter version of the same story arrived this week: A student caught by a lens mid-exam, allegedly borrowing an answer from a chatbot because his own supply had run short. By nightfall, the exam was the least of it. Within hours, he had taken his own life — the fourth such loss on that campus in a single year. By

morning, his phone was in an evidence bag and the hostel's cameras were being re-played, frame by patient frame, reconstructing where he had gone and what he had done. The invigilator's eye had been quick enough to catch a stolen glance at a screen. No comparable instrument existed for the distress underneath it.

We have built formidable surveillance for small dishonesties, and almost none for the larger unravelling beneath them. The lens is exquisite at proof. It has never once been any good at care.

Both will be filed, eventually, under procedure — a disciplinary hearing, a departmental enquiry, a line in somebody's record. Filed there, both will be filed slightly wrong. Delhi wasn't really about a plainclothes man, and Bombay wasn't really about a chatbot. In both places, the camera had become more than a witness. It had entered the event itself.

I thought of an old hostel mate from IIT-Kharagpur who spent years at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory working on imaging technology related to the sensors that would eventually transform the mobile phone. He still holds patents connected to that work. Such sensors were refined partly so cameras could travel aboard spacecraft and look at distant planets. Their greater consequence was here on Earth: they made human beings look constantly at one another.

The camera used to appear on occasions — weddings, holidays, a child beside a birthday cake, all of us standing stiffly before the Taj Mahal. You performed briefly for it and then returned to

The camera used to appear on occasions — weddings, holidays, a child beside a birthday cake, all of us standing stiffly before the Taj Mahal. You performed briefly for it and then returned to life.

The phone camera reversed the arrangement. Life now appears briefly between performances.

Meals cool while being photographed. Accidents acquire spectators before they acquire help. Children learn their good side before they learn long division. The police record protesters, protesters record police, and everyone records himself recording everyone else. Memory, once private and notoriously inaccurate, has become public evidence — still inaccurate, but available in high definition.

We Indians had understood the danger of concentrated attention long before Silicon Valley gave it a valuation. We called it *nazar*. The black dot on a baby's cheek and the lemon and chillies above a shop carried an old social intelligence. To be looked at too intensely, by people whose intentions you could not know, was a form of exposure. Attention could take something from you.

The aunty at the window also watched, of course. The neighbourhood gaze was nosy, disciplinary and occasionally cruel. But it was human in one important respect — it forgot. It returned to its tea, found a new scandal, forgave by Tuesday. The digital gaze has an employer and unlimited storage. It reports to the State when trained on a protest, to a platform when trained on a teenager, and to the crowd when trained on somebody's worst 10 seconds. Shame wanted to keep you within the community. Surveillance wants to keep your file.

Jeremy Bentham imagined a prison in which one unseen watchman might be looking at every prisoner. We have built the opposite architecture and reached much

the same destination. Everyone is visible, everyone is watching, and nobody knows who occupies the tower. We arrange the table because a photograph may be taken. We adjust the face because a video may survive. We begin experiencing ourselves from the viewpoint of an audience that has not yet arrived.

A second self now stands just outside us and asks how the moment will look. That self can protect us: without a camera, authority owns the only version of events. The students at IIT-Delhi were right to film the man filming them. A watched species eventually grows an eye of its own, if only for the dignity of saying, "I saw you seeing me".

But an eye grown for defence does not close when the danger passes. It follows us home, to dinner, into grief. We film the concert instead of hearing it, the funeral instead of mourning, the child instead of watching him become himself. The sensor was built to extend human sight towards worlds we may never visit. Its deepest effect has been here: it has made ordinary life behave as though it may later be called as a witness.

We once photographed what we wanted to remember. Now we photograph because we are afraid of what others may say happened. Somewhere between Mars and the IIT courtyard, the camera stopped being an instrument of memory and became a negotiation over reality. Forty phones rise. The watcher becomes watched. Everybody has proof. Nobody, quite, is present.

The writer is a senior advisory professional

## Democracy at work or disaster



FIFTH COLUMN  
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

IN TIMES of trouble, the worst thing a government can do is respond with arrogance and disdain. Narendra Modi is among the most skilled and sophisticated political leaders I have ever met, but this is one lesson he appears not to have learned. So, when this newspaper published its excellent investigation into the Election Commission last week, his response was to deploy his most articulate spokesmen onto TV chat shows and social media platforms to fight back hard. They did, but in the stupidest, most arrogant way.

With smug expressions and fake smiles pasted on their faces, they repeated, ad nauseum, that serious disagreements among the three election commissioners were a sign that India was a 'vibrant democracy'. A puzzling and farcical viewpoint. But afterwards, the ones who are always too clever by half changed tactics and as usual, blamed the Congress Party. They recounted how many times election commissioners had been controlled by the government in Congress times. Names such as Naveen Chawla and MS Gill were brought up to prove this. One was a family friend of the Gandhis, and the other had been rewarded with a seat in the Rajya Sabha and made a minister after he retired from the Election Commission. True.

It is also true that elections in Kashmir were openly rigged for decades. But does that justify what has been done now, in the name of the Special Intensive Revision, or SIR, to give it the acronym that has gained a notoriety that strikes dread in the hearts of those whose election credentials it seeks to 'revise'? Shashi Tharoor wrote a detailed and disturbing piece in this newspaper last week, so I am not going to go into the numbers of voters who have been deleted wrongly. What I learned from it was that half the Delhi voters had been deleted. And in West Bengal nearly all those who had appealed against being deleted had found their voting rights restored after appealing to tribunals, but by then the election was over.

There have been doubts about this SIR for months, as there have been about the integrity of the election process itself. Rahul Gandhi has led the charge and in Bihar tried to make 'vote chori' the fulcrum of his campaign. I have been among those who doubted the charges because I continue to believe that no matter how much tampering happens, and it does, it usually does not change the result of an election. Besides, if you have been in journalism for as long as I have, it is hard to forget how bad things used to be. Especially in rural India.

I remember ballot boxes being stolen by mafioso-types. I remember lower caste voters being forced to vote with a gun pointed at them by rural thugs. One reason so many criminals ended up in Parliament and our legislative assemblies is because these mafias discovered that if they could win elections for others, they might as well start winning for themselves. In the process, they discovered that there was more money to be made from 'serving the people' than from crime. Indian democracy has been deeply damaged because of this.

So, what happens now that Gyanesh Kumar has become the villain of a very ugly story? If I were him (thankfully I am not), I would gracefully exit the stage after declaring with a painted expression on my face that I have done no wrong but am happy to resign until a commission of inquiry establishes my innocence. Who knows, but he may have done this by the time you read this piece — which would be good for him. But the damage done to the Modi government still needs repair.

It needs to prove to the Indian people that it has not been trying to steal elections by disqualifying voters who do not vote BJP and by conducting an SIR that now has a huge cloud hanging over it. Instead of ordering its supporters and social media trolls to bang on about toolkits and foreign money, it should spend some time introspecting about why so many things are starting to go so wrong. Why is Modi these days appearing to be constantly misreading the political mood? When the Cockroach Janta Party descended on Jantar Mantar, there was such mishandling that shooting at students with pellet guns became more important than paper leaks. Then came the disastrous handling of Modi's birthday celebrations. The acres of 'diyas of blessing' that were lit brought shame to the birthday boy when small children were seen collecting oil from *diyas* to take home for their families.

The latest mishandling has been the way his government responded to *The Indian Express* story. BJP spokesmen were seen openly defending Gyanesh Kumar on TV and social media without anyone noticing that, in doing this, they were proving the opposition parties' charge that the Election Commission had become a tool of the government. With so many things going so wrong, the Prime Minister needs to conduct a special intensive revision of his team if he wants to regain a measure of lost credibility. And if he has not already asked Gyanesh Kumar to make a graceful exit, he would do well to do so because he has become a major liability for the government. Besides, it can be said with certainty that he has lost the trust of voters.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Indian Express

## Memories of Maharashtra's 1972 drought



HISTORY HEADLINE  
BY SHUBHANGI KHAPRE

WITH EL Niño causing rainfall deficits and crop losses in rural Maharashtra, the state could be heading for a drought. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis said last week, "We are bracing for a severe drought, which could be worse than 1972." NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar said the same: "This year's drought could be worse than 1972."

From 1960 to 2026, Maharashtra has gone through at least 15 droughts. Yet, 1972 remains unparalleled for many reasons. The state of Maharashtra, which came into existence on May 1, 1960, was beginning to settle down, focusing on agriculture to drive its rural economy, when devastation struck. Much of the state, especially Marathwada, Vidarbha and parts of Western Maharashtra, was dependent on rain-fed agriculture. However, the south-west monsoon's failure for three consecutive years, beginning 1970, would break the backbone of its rural economy and culminate in the worst famine the state has witnessed in 1972.

During that time, the calamity — devastated nearly 75 to 80 per cent of Maharashtra's population of 5.4 crore, with official records putting the number of affected between 1.8 crore and 2 crore. This havoc was unprecedented for a state actively evolving a cooperative-sector economic model.

In 1972, Maharashtra had 26 districts, and 21 had been drought-affected. Now, the state has 36 districts, and 21 have logged rainfall deficits. With the lack of rain turning vast swathes of agricultural land into barren fields in 1972, farmers became most vulnerable. The question before them was how to survive?

The water in wells, lakes, and rivers had dried. With no food grains to draw sustenance from, no water to drink, and no work to earn from, rural Maharashtra, for the first time in its history, saw mass migration to urban ghettos. In Mumbai (then Bombay), the population rose by 3.5 lakh in the drought year.

The Maharashtra government, then led by the Congress's longest-serving CM, Vasantrao Naik, took some drastic and innovative decisions, redefining the socio-economic policies of the state and the nation. Of them, the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) remains relevant to this day. The idea came from a visionary Gandhian leader, also the first state legislative council chairman — VS Page. Based on the concept that work is a fundamental right, a government resolution for EGS was issued in March 1972.

Through the EGS, villagers rendered jobless by the drought were given an alternative to agricultural work they no longer had. Major public works, such as water and soil conservation, digging wells, building tanks and ponds, and constructing canals and roads, were undertaken across the rural belt with heavy government backing. During the worst of the drought, the state poured over Rs 200 crore into the scheme. While nearly 15 lakh enrolled during the initial rollout, estimates suggest that over the course of the crisis, the program absorbed a record one crore workers.

Another critical decision taken to avert starvation deaths was providing villagers with *sukdi*, a calorie-dense, nutrition-rich supplement made from wheat flour, jaggery, and oil or ghee. Amid the domestic shortage of food grains, *sukdi* utilised substandard red wheat imported from the US under aid programmes. During this crisis, the Public Distribution System (PDS), which provided essential grains through fair-price ration shops, emerged as a foundational component of the state's drought relief measures.

In 1978, the government adopted the EGS Act, which mandated providing unemployed people in rural Maharashtra with jobs on daily wages within 15 days. Tailored for drought mitigation as an emergency measure, the Act soon became a model for the country through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act, 2005. The calamity also hit the cattle and farm animals hard. But, despite the severity of the crisis, human starvation deaths were avoided, even as malnutrition persisted.

Decades later, history threatens to repeat itself. Moreover, as All India Kisan Sabha national president Ashok Dhawale says, "The 1972 drought was catastrophic. But what we are heading for is going to be far more dangerous." The prolonged dry spell, says noted water expert Pradeep Purandare, has made winter rabi season uncertain. "We failed miserably in addressing challenges in water conservation. We are still stuck in a 19th-century irrigation system, which is not compatible with the demands of the 21st century."

The writer is Senior Editor, The Indian Express

## Filter coffee doesn't wake you up, it's what you wake up for



VIBHA KRISHNAMURTHY

I HATE it when someone says, "Let's meet for a coffee", and means it literally. Why not talk over ice-cream? Or a walk? At least then I won't be sitting in a cafe, confronted with a menu that has 12 different kinds of coffee and a choice of regular/skimmed/almond/oat milk. Apart from disliking the cognitive burden of making these choices, I find they taste uniformly awful. I love coffee, but unfortunately only one kind, the kind my father makes.

I learnt to drink South Indian filter coffee as a teen during my summer holidays in Tamil Nadu. Every May, my sister and I made the 48-hour journey by train, with my mother, from Delhi to Tamil Nadu. At some point during the lazy summer, my mother would swoop down on us and announce that we needed to meet our relatives, to 'get to know our culture'. My sister and I were sullen and truculent, having been plucked out from a *sapota* tree in my grandfather's backyard. As soon as we entered the relatives' home, the lady of the house would ask if we wanted coffee. If I said no, she would ask "Tea?" in a tone that conveyed how disappointed she was in me. When I declined, she would look relieved and disappear into the kitchen. She would emerge in a bit and triumphantly plonk a glass of lukewarm Horlicks, or worse, rose milk, in front of me. I quickly learnt to accept the initial offer of coffee.

Back home in Delhi, my father was a filter coffee aficionado before it was a thing in boudie restaurants. As children, we woke up to the annoying sound of the coffee grinder every morning. The aroma of fresh grounds is the background to my memories of getting ready for school on cold winter mornings. My father was bright-eyed and



The American Heart Association says 3-5 cups of coffee a day may be beneficial for metabolism.

GETTYIMAGES

bushy-tailed at 5 am, going to the kitchen with alacrity, so he could begin the process. Hot water would drip slowly through the fresh grounds in the stainless-steel filter, taking its time to travel through and soak in the flavour. When the decoction was finally ready, it was mixed with steaming hot milk and a bit of sugar. No spoon could sully the tumbler's insides. The mixing involved swishing the milk, decoction, and sugar between the *dabara* and tumbler. My father would be appalled if I shared the stereotype of a groggy person reaching for his first cup of coffee to wake himself up. For my father, coffee is not a thing that wakes you up; it is what you wake up for.

I asked my father a few months ago how he learnt to make coffee. His answer had me learn to travel back 82 years, to my father's home in Salem, Tamil Nadu. Krishnamurthy, 10, is in the kitchen at 6:30 am, before he leaves for school. The skinny boy in his school uniform lights the *karidupu* — the wood-fired stove in the kitchen. His mother is 'out of doors', the euphemism for having your periods, literally and figuratively. She is peering in through the kitchen window and giving him instructions. I imagine her saying, "Now, put three heaped spoons of coffee powder in the filter, and be careful with the hot water..." Three days she gets to rest, so she does not complain about being banished from the kitchen. But she misses her coffee, and her son loves to come in early, before the house

is awake, and make her coffee. He hands it to her between the bars on the window and watches her. His face lights up as she closes her eyes and sighs.

Cut to over eight decades later, we are in my father's kitchen. We are just back from our morning walk. I tell my father that it is now official: coffee is good for your health. Apparently, it heals livers that have been ravaged by modern diets. The American Heart Association just announced that three to five cups of coffee a day may be beneficial for metabolism. The tone is prescriptive, sort of like a recommendation for fish oil or vitamins. But in my father's home, the making of coffee is and remains a spiritual experience. He is a bit sad because drinking more than half a cup now gives him heartburn. He still loves making it, though, for those who enjoy it. I watch him and Karun, my 25-year-old son, as they make it together.

Karun listens intently as my dad explains to him how to pack the coffee powder: first, wet it with water ("50 ccs, no more!"). Then he instructs him to add more hot water to the filter. He knows that Karun carries his stainless-steel filter all over the world in his backpack. He eschews coffee shops and coffee machines. My Dad potters about the kitchen, measuring and heating, and finally hands me my tumbler. He scans my face as I take my first sip. "It's perfect" I say, and he beams.

The writer is a developmental paediatrician

## Women, lust, and no apologies

Stories all the more refreshing.

Be it Radhika Apte's Kalindi exploring intimacy in an open marriage (S1) to Tilotama Shome's Ishita finding her release in someone else's union (S2), or Kiara Advani's Megha (S1) finding her mojo in a vibrator (the series is said of have encouraged many women to invest in such devices) to Mrunal Thakur's Veda (S2) confiding in her *dadi* that she did not orgasm, *Lust Stories*' women are not brushing aside sex as something that they do for men. They want to feel wanted and are taking the lead in making it happen.

And they don't always have to look young and conventionally desirable while at it. I can still not forget the image of a very-much-in-her-middle-age Manisha Koirala emerging from the sea in a swimming costume, and without a hint of makeup, as her lover outside marriage, the friend of her husband no less, sighs on with desire.

These women pursue pleasure, because they want it. Because it is as much a bodily need for them as it is for men. It is not something they are doing out of "majboori" or as a favour, or as a means to an end. Sana



SHE SAID  
BY DEEPIKA SINGH

Thampi's Lisa (in the brilliantly directed Kiran Rao chapter in S3) may be a little bit guilty of the latter but pleasure, again, was a very big part of why she was doing what she did.

My favourite part? I still can't decide. While Apte's Kalindi reminds me a little of myself — a woman not wanting to be inside a conventional box but still feeling all the conflicts and pain that convention brings — I want to be Koirala's Reena as I grow older: a successful career woman who is comfortable in her skin, steals whatever frame she is in, and is not one to take all the blame for something in which she is just one of the participants.

I loved Apte's Padma in S3 as she says "Hum Kandivali mein rehte hain" to Konkona Sen Sharma's suggestion of a couple swap, and felt deeply for Radikha Madan's Sailee (again S3) whose hunger for her husband doesn't shield her from the painful realisation that love, and lust, may not always be enough.

But what surprised and delighted me the most is Aditi Rao Hydari's Saira in Season 3. In Siddharth's Badru, she has the ro-

mance-novel husband: They are very much in love and regularly make time for intimacy. But then, a Mills-and-Boons type book makes her realise what she didn't know she has been missing. And so, she goes on to write her own story, quite literally. Because in Hyderabad, people make love in Hyderabad Urdu. "English *nakko*", as she says in a fantasy.

And in weaving her fantasies, she helps the rest of us see the fantasies we didn't know we had. Who could have thought that what we needed to fix 2026 was the sight of a towel-clad Siddharth? Move over, Ranbir Kapoor.

There is a scene where Saira gazes at Badru dusting off his Yamaha, shakes off a thousand dirty thoughts forming in her head, and goes: "Reham, mere miyaan. Reham (have mercy, my love)". Us, Saira Jaan. Us.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Indian Express

Editor (Planning & Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column







THE WORD  
THIS WEEK

US National Book Awards 2026:  
Five titles to read from this year's longest

THE UNITED STATES' National Book Foundation has announced its 2026 longest for fiction, non-fiction, poetry, translated literature and young people's literature. Winners will be honoured in New York on November 18, at a ceremony where *The Satanic Verses* author Salman Rushdie will receive the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, one of American publishing's top lifetime honours. His memoir *Knife*, about the 2022 attack that blinded him in one eye, was also a finalist in 2024. It has since been adapted into a documentary. Here are our recommendations, one from each category.

WHAT I READ  
THIS WEEK

Stranger  
in a Strange  
Land

Mirza Waheed's *Maryam & Son* looks at the precarious relationship between an immigrant and the state through the story of a grieving mother

Sukhmani Malik

MONTHS INTO her 20-year-old son's disappearance on a random Tuesday morning, Maryam implores one of the officers in charge of her son Dilawar's case, to shift his gaze. She has been pleading for assistance but has been met only with suspicion and surveillance by the London authorities who started investigating her son — and in some ways, Maryam — for connections to the Islamic State. She asks the officer, "Do you know what it means to have a missing son? Do you know what a knock on the door does to me?"

This frames the central tension in Mirza Waheed's *Maryam & Son*. A mother who doesn't know how to grieve her son, Maryam is surrounded by people who offer her shrugged indifference at best and accusation at worst; the world seems to be closing in on her, and there is little she can do about it. With that premise, in the painful in-between that Maryam's life has become, Waheed makes readers confront the price of innocence denied, trust stolen, and grief poisoned to the point of racial profiling, state surveillance and imperial policy.

While placed firmly inside the home, the book has everything to do with the politics of today. It tells the story of an impact: When otherness, stereotypes and impunity for the powerful converge, the fallout for the othered can be catastrophic. Contemporary European politics is obsessed with the Muslim immigrant and her assumed crimes, fuelling a machinery that discriminates at home, and invades outside. At a time when domestic politics in the

West is consumed by rhetoric and headlines announce the arrival of Western forces and funding in foreign countries, Maryam's story comes as a plea, a window into the homes such politics and policies seek to overtake and destroy.

Waheed says these characters "have every right to be normal". But do they? Even before Dilly goes missing, the reader can see the compromises he and his family make as immigrants and the vilified religious minority: What they allow themselves to say, think, expect,

and how they negotiate their space even as they hold onto the belief that they belong. Maryam, who was brought to the UK as a baby, wonders at one point if her fate would have been different had she been born in the country.

Also, at the centre of the novel is memory. Readers often experience the world Waheed has built through memories; they provide the context for loss and the fodder for doubt. Maryam starts soaking in nostalgia almost as a compulsive habit; she is caught between her past and present, struggling to spot how she missed this about her son. The book is an exercise in holding your breath, yearning and praying. In execution, though, the story slows too much at several points. Sometimes, the repetition of the mundane fails to serve its function.

But in this tale that reads as a mother's nightmare coming to life, there are also flashes of levity, helmed by affection, familiarity and community. The characters carry themselves in all the complexity they deserve; you can see in them and their relationships, tea-time conversations with your own parents, aunts, children, sisters. Because the mundane is felt so viscerally, so is the grief of their extraordinary circumstances.

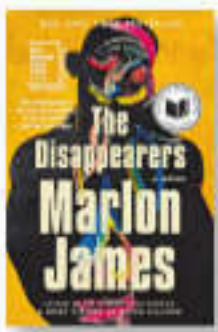
But Maryam does much more than grieve her son and her husband, whom she lost years ago. She finds herself. She rediscovers the pleasures of being more than the mother, and explores the freedom of being left behind by the men in her life.

Her relationship with Julian Chapman, the family liaison assigned to her son's case, has a constant tussle with trust even as it embodies comfort for both parties. In many ways, it reflects the relationship between a faithful immigrant and a suspicious state.

In the aftermath, dealing with tragedy and loss, facing endless possibilities, we leave Maryam in a place of hope: of a new life, of a new door, and of a new feeling when someone knocks on it. For readers condemned to live in and around the tragedies of the non-fiction world of today, that hope can be a saving grace.

The Disappears  
Marlon James (Fiction)

THE BOOKER-winning author takes us to 1988, where eight men are rehearsing Jamaica's first gay play. Seeing this as a provocation, a homophobic mob kills one of them. Years later, a survivor sets out to find what became of the rest of them in the aftermath of the attack. James has said the novel "is based on a violent incident that was rumoured to have happened but was never proven." The novel also made the 2026 Booker Prize shortlist.



The Midnight Special: The Secret Prison History of American Music

Colin Asher  
WHAT DO Lead Belly, Johnny Cash, Ike White and Tupac Shakur have in common? They are all musicians whose careers were shaped by the criminal justice system. In *The Midnight Special*, Colin Asher examines how incarceration affected their music, pointing out that while White artists were able to cash in on their notoriety, it wasn't the same for Black artists.



Tree of Knowledge  
Victoria Chang

WHEN MIN-HUI'S husband vanishes pursuing a business deal in China, she moves to Beijing. As she waits for answers, she writes a novel about a young Qing emperor trapped in the Forbidden City, spellbound by a pirate merchant's tales of Taiwanese seas. Through Min-Hui's tales, Ping Lu explores the universal hunger for freedom. Jeremy Tiang, longlisted for the International Booker Prize, has translated it.



To the East of East  
Ping Lu

WHEN MIN-HUI'S husband vanishes pursuing a business deal in China, she moves to Beijing. As she waits for answers, she writes a novel about a young Qing emperor trapped in the Forbidden City, spellbound by a pirate merchant's tales of Taiwanese seas. Through Min-Hui's tales, Ping Lu explores the universal hunger for freedom. Jeremy Tiang, longlisted for the International Booker Prize, has translated it.



Life on the Moon  
Matthew Swanson and Robbi Behr

Life on the Moon follows 12-year-old Leo, who gets the opportunity to join the first Moon colony. But after his family lands, his dad is sent on a mission and never returns. Authorities claim the mission never existed. Determined to find him, Leo explores the colony and discovers a landscape teeming with extraordinary creatures, baffling behaviours, and strange beliefs. AISHWARYA KHOSLA



TASTE  
EDITED BY LAKSHMI CHAUDHRY  
Juggernaut  
332 pages  
₹15,000

JASJOT SINGH HANS/ JUGGERNAUT

For Select Palates Only

Featuring essays by economists, artists, entrepreneurs and travel writers,  
Taste is a product of indulgence, even as it attempts to be a critic of it

Aishwarya Khosla

IN INDIA, Rs 15,000 can buy a decent phone, a weekend in Goa or a box-set of two volumes of cultural criticism that takes the reader down a rabbit hole, a literary Russian nesting doll. Inside *Taste*, edited by journalist Lakshmi Chaudhry, CEO of Splainer Media and co-founder of *Firstpost*, one finds essays on the politics of taste but also pages that unfold sideways or upwards into larger-than-life Bollywood posters, maps, postcards from a bygone world and a sleeve of coloured lenses.

Graphic designer Kriti Monga designed the first volume; designer Tania Singh Khosla and her studio, TSK Design, designed the second.

Dismissing *Taste* as a coffee-table book that happens to contain essays would be a mistake. It is a book about who gets to exercise cultural judgement and who is denied it.

The first volume opens with 'Immortal

Beloveds' by Srinath Perur — author of the travelogue, *If It's Monday It Must Be Madurai* — a joyful account of Boney M's Indian afterlife.

Nobel laureate economist Abhijit Banerjee hosts a roundtable on the homogenisation of Indian food and the loss of regional traditions with four chefs: Garima Arora of the Michelin-starred Gaa in Bangkok, Bengaluru restaurateur Manu Chandra, Prateek Sadhu of Masque and Naar and Thomas Zacharias, founder of The Locavore.

Novelist and essayist Aatish Taseer dissects the death of the Delhi drawing room and the rise of the "Antilia effect", a hotel-like luxury that severs the bond between a person and their home. Simran Lal, co-founder of the lifestyle brand Nicobar, writes an unexpectedly moving ode to the spittoon, an object "meant for bodily waste" that Indian artisans turned into a canvas for "creativity, innovation and aesthetic refinement."

Artist Subodh Gupta offers a visceral

**A PLATEFUL**  
Abhijit Banerjee and chefs Garima Arora, Manu Chandra, Prateek Sadhu and Thomas Zacharias, reimagined at one table for the book's 'Plating India' conversation

meditation on cow dung. His mother asked him to fetch it for daily rituals, and it was "sacred: used to cleanse our home, cook our food, anchor our prayers."

Novelist Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's "The Solo Traveller" is a wry account of a DDLJ-themed bus tour through Switzerland, where the Alps become a pilgrimage for Bollywood fans. Photographer Sujata Setia, whose project 'A Thousand Cuts' examines domestic abuse, asks why art made from the survivor's gaze is deemed unpalatable by the market.

MacArthur-winning artist Shahzia Sikander recounts the beheading of her sculpture 'Witness' at the University of Houston, calling it "tasteless moral theatre." Conceptual artist Mithu Sen takes her title from pao bhaji, and uses it to question highbrow taste itself.

Vivek Shanbhag, the Kannada writer behind *Ghachar Ghochar*, and *The New Yorker* critic Parul Sehgal discuss how translation works and how a new tongue alters who we are.

Where do we go  
from here?

Parini Shroff on her new novel *Some People*, ditching saintly heroines and embracing mess in relationships

Paromita Chakrabarti

THERE IS a particular kind of dread that comes with being trapped somewhere with a person you would rather avoid. It is this premise — seven days, two reluctant companions, nowhere to go — that powers Parini Shroff's new novel, *Some People*, in which a mother-in-law and son-in-law who share little beyond their love for the same woman are forced into each other's company.

Shroff's 2023 debut, *The Bandit Queens* — a blackly comic tale of village wives in rural India turning the tables on their husbands — was long-listed for the Women's Prize for Fiction, drawing comparisons to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* for the way it laid bare the darker undercurrents of contemporary Indian society beneath its comedy. *Some People* consolidates that promise and sets her up as a writer unafraid to let humour do serious work. "Nathan and Malti differ on so many fronts: age, gender, race, upbringing, language, culture. I

wanted to thrust two disparate people in a pressure cooker and make them actually talk to each other. I knew from the onset that they would hide behind their differences but also that these were misdirects to avoid the work of actually interfacing with someone who doesn't agree with you, and then realising that that disagreement does not automatically make them a villain," Shroff, 41, says.

Family, in the novel, is a slippery thing, a constant tussle between the ones we choose and the one we inherit. Can the two ever truly come together? Shroff's answer runs through Kavya, the daughter and wife who orbits between her mother Malti and her husband Nathan, smoothing over a friction neither of them will name. Shroff calls her the embodiment of the "eldest daughter maintaining the peace," and it is Kavya's removal from the equation that sets the



**FAMILY WOMAN**  
Parini Shroff

novel in motion. Without her to mediate, Shroff explains, "Nathan and Malti must reckon with each other. The only thing binding them are their ties to Kavya, and even those are fraying." What follows is less a reconciliation than a reckoning: two people realising "they never really knew each other — or bothered to." Kavya, Shroff says, is "a load-bearing corner I yanked out so the entire artifice above could wobble and fall" — leaving her mother and husband to have the "messy" conversations that never would have happened otherwise.

That interest in mess — in characters who are undignified, contradictory, still figuring themselves out — runs through Shroff's fiction more broadly, and she is candid about wanting to push back against tidier depictions of South Asian women in particular. "People are complicated, but for so long South Asians, women especially, are portrayed as long-suffering saints. I'm far more interested in flailing and failing humans and I hope readers are, too. We won't all see ourselves in saints, but we can certainly identify and empathise with a character who tries and just can't seem to get it

right," she says.

It's a seriousness she consistently smuggles in through comedy. Shroff resists the idea that humour undercuts weight. "I was re-reading *The Crucible* (by Arthur Miller) this month and I didn't recall it having funny lines but it does! Humour can act as a counterweight to heavier topics and admit some breathing room, but it's also an effective way to educate and entertain simultaneously, which is what I want my fiction to accomplish," she says.

That instinct for argument and nuance, it turns out, is not confined to the page. Shroff is also a practising attorney, and says her two working lives feed off one another rather than compete. "I have been writing fiction in some form or another since I was seven, and it was my interest in writing and character nuance that made law feasible," she says, "They have both informed how my brain operates, for better or worse."

Unlike her debut novel, *Some People* came together unusually quickly. "I have never written as fast as I wrote *Some People*, and I will likely never write that fast again. But I learned there is, for me, no one way to write a novel. Even the novel I'm working on now has been a different experience than its predecessors. The only thing the manuscripts all have in common is that I must commit my butt to my seat and show up. I always have to show up," Shroff says.

And once a book is finished, does she ever have to tell her characters that they are done, or do they keep talking to her regardless? "I have learned my characters are in the driver's seat and I'm just along for the ride. They are pushy, loud and demanding and, more often than not, I defer to them. Resisting only delays the project and process; they generally tend to get their way," says Shroff.



SCIENCE

Chemists report ‘milder’ way to swap carbon for nitrogen atoms

Vasudevan Mukunth

When working with drug candidates, chemists sometimes like to replace a carbon atom in a ring of atoms with a nitrogen atom. This is because the switch can significantly alter the molecule's properties, including how well it dissolves or how it interacts with biological targets in the body. But achieving it has been quite difficult, requiring chemical reactions with powerful

oxidants, say, that can damage other parts of the molecule.

A new study in *Science* offers a breakthrough: researchers from the University of Chicago have reported a reaction to replace carbon with nitrogen in types of molecules often encountered in medical research and industry, in “mild conditions”.

Chemists had previously banked on a highly reactive intermediate compound called a nitrene to

help push a nitrogen atom into a ring. The problem is nitrenes can have different electronic states, one of which – called the triplet state – doesn’t perform the desired reaction. But in the new work, the team set up a series of reactions that used the triplet nitrene state to temporarily open the ring, rearrange the atoms’ positions, and close it such that a nitrogen occurred where a carbon had been. When they tested their technique on a type

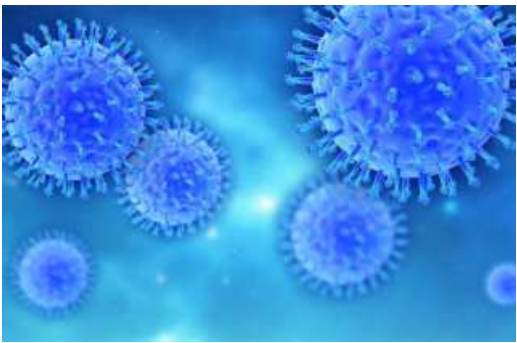
of indole that had resisted existing methods, the researchers found the nitrogen-containing version in 73% of the reaction’s yield. After also trying it on other molecules, the team turned to biologically active molecules, which can be quite complex. The team modified one of the cancer-fighting compounds called the Vinca alkaloids to produce a version with nitrogen, which they found had better metabolic properties and less

inhibition of the hERG potassium channel.

Finally, the team was also able to produce nitrogen-containing versions of two natural compounds: yohimbine, a veterinary drug, and catharanthine, one of the precursors of the chemotherapy drug vinblastine. This is valuable because synthesising them with nitrogen at the outset can change the molecules’ reactivity, putting paid to established synthetic routes. That said, the

method is not universal, as the authors have acknowledged, and includes toxic compounds called aryl azides among the starting materials. Even so, as they wrote in their paper, “The mild reaction conditions and broad skeletal diversity... lend an unexpected degree of generality to this method”, and they “anticipate that this addition to the toolkit for C-to-N transmutation will find promising applications in medicinal chemistry.”

SNAPSHOTS



PFOS disrupts immune system's antiviral action

PFOS, a widespread industrial ‘forever chemical’, weakens the body’s ability to fight viral infections, a study has found. Researchers found that it binds to an immune protein called IRF3, which keeps it from triggering the release of interferons, our immune system’s top antiviral defence. As a result, viruses can multiply faster. Tests in human cells and mice showed that everyday levels of PFOS exposure led to more severe infections from viruses like influenza and hepatitis B.



IIT-Madras tool bridges quake science and dam safety

An IIT-Madras team evaluated 6,545 dams under India’s National Dam Safety Authority and found standard seismic zone maps misjudge earthquake risks. For Himalayan ‘megadams’ like Tehri and Bhakra, site-specific modelling revealed projected ground accelerations were too conservative. The team achieved this using a combination of a tool it built to perform “probabilistic seismic hazard analysis”, a catalogue of 68,000+ earthquakes from 2,600 BC to 2019, and maps of India’s major faultlines.



Eukaryote sets record for warmest reproduction

Scientists have found a new species of amoeba, *Incandiamoeba cascadenis*, in hot springs in California that has set a record for the upper temperature limit of eukaryotic life. Scientists previously thought these lifeforms couldn’t reproduce above 60° C. However, *I. cascadenis* replicates at 63° C. It activates genes to repair DNA and cell membranes. Its proteins’ chemical properties are such that they don’t clump together, a trick heat-loving bacteria use as well.

Shortening the road to cardiac care in rural Haryana

A tele-ECG project implemented by the govt. in partnership with a startup has made ECGs available at primary, community health centres; patients can get an ECG done, take emergency medication, then be referred to tertiary care centres

Swagata Yadav

In July 15, Raj Rani (52), an ASHA worker in Yamunagar, Haryana, had just completed her tasks for the day when the throbbing pain in her left arm and chin returned.

She headed to the Community Health Centre (CHC) at Vyaspur, 15 km away, for an electrocardiogram (ECG). The additional senior medical officer at the centre, Dr. Gunjeet Singh, checked the ECG results, gave her blood thinners and clotbusters – called a loading dose – and asked her to rush to the district hospital at Ambala Cantonment.

She did, and the cardiologists there performed another ECG and some other tests, and told her she was fortunate to have come to them at the right time.

Ms. Rani had single-vessel disease: a major coronary artery had been blocked. She underwent an angioplasty the next day to release the block.

Two months prior, Mr. Rani would not have received such a quick diagnosis or treatment. Even though the Vyaspur CHC had an ECG machine, there was no technician to conduct it, and while the medical officers could interpret the results, they were not confident.

On May 29, the Haryana government tied up with health technology startup Sunfox Technologies in a

### Care closer home

‘We are already witnessing a 20% reduction in deaths in district hospital emergency departments’

- In a public-private partnership, Haryana has worked with Sunfox Technologies to install tele-ECG devices in its rural clinics
- These portable machines allow rural health workers to receive reviewed ECG results in under three minutes

Dr. Varun Singh, medical officer, Ranjitpur PHC, Yamunagar, holds up a tablet showing an ECG report. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

- Rapid diagnoses help doctors stabilise heart attack patients with essential medications before referring them to hospitals
- The initiative has already detected many critical cases and significantly reduced emergency room mortality rates
- Although the diagnostic programme is highly effective, experts also emphasise the need for better medical transport infrastructure
- Because India faces immense cardiovascular mortality, officials believe other States should urgently implement this lifesaving technology

public-private partnership to set up a tele-ECG network called ‘Spandan One’. As part of the initiative, each medical centre in Haryana received a tele-ECG device connected to smartphones, which could be operated by frontline workers. Thus, clinician-reviewed results became available in under three minutes.

Almost 600 government facilities, including primary health centres (PHCs), CHCs, sub-divisional hospitals, and district hospitals, have been equipped with these setups. Per the Spandan dashboard, as of September 17, 33,854 ECG tests had been conducted and 1,342 critical cases detected. In the remote Ranjitpur PHC in Yamunagar, there has been a steady increase in the number of patients seeking to avail the tele-ECG service.

“Before this initiative, I

would not be able to interpret ECGs with this level of sophistication. The patient would need to visit a cardiologist available two hours away and wait a long time in the OPD for the diagnosis,” medical officer Dr. Varun Singh said.

While PHCs are the first point of contact for medical care for rural patients, the centres lack the requisite equipment and human resources to diagnose and treat heart ailments. And the time lost to travelling between centres can prove fatal for many patients.

“We are already witnessing a 20% reduction in deaths in the emergency departments of district hospitals because patients are being stabilised before rushing here,” Dr. Kuldeep Singh, former Director-General of Health Services (DGHS), Haryana, and the person who conceived the partnership, said.

There are now ECG machines and early treatment in rural centres that had earlier not registered a single heart attack due to lack of diagnosis, he said. Once patients are stabilised by the loading dose, they are sent to higher centres like district hospitals with catheterisation labs, where angiographies and angioplasties can be performed.

“With Haryana, we are trying to build that complete pathway – from diagnosis to prescription to referral – while giving the State real-time visibility into its cardiac burden,” Rajat Jain, Sunfox CEO Rajat Jain said.

The Dehradun-based company designs and manufactures portable, affordable diagnostic tools to solve healthcare challenges. Under its agreement with the Haryana government, it also provides equipment, training, and

ongoing support for the tele-ECG system and maintains a live dashboard.

Dr. Chetanya Malik, who practices in Surguja in Chhattisgarh for the non-profit Sangwari, said that while making ECG facilities available at PHCs is a great start, more needs to be done.

“Along with a tele-ECG facility, there needs to be tele-support in finding transport and referral in higher centres to solve the problem of treating a cardiac emergency,” he said. The question of what happens when the partnership between the government and Sunfox ends also remains open.

India records 31 lakh deaths every year due to cardiovascular causes. Some 60% of them occur in people aged 40-69 years, with Indians on average reporting the effects of heart disease a decade earlier than in the west. Timely treatment during the ‘golden hour’ after an emergency can significantly improve survival and recovery. “We have the funds and have the technology to prevent the deaths; there is no reason why other States should not implement this programme and tackle heart emergencies,” Dr. Singh, the former DGHS, said.

*(This article is the third of a three-part series on the health system's response to heart attacks. This series is a project of Nivarana, a digital public health platform and has been supported by Sunfox Technologies)*

How wealth shapes our view of artificial intelligence



John Xavier

There’s a common assumption that anxiety about artificial intelligence is universal – that everyone, everywhere, is bracing for the same disruption. But, a new Pew Research Centre Survey of over 42,000 adults across 37 countries suggests otherwise.

The survey’s data points out that worry about AI tracks closely with wealth. The richer the country, the more its people fear AI will take their jobs, widen inequality, and disrupt daily life. The poorer the country, the less its citizens fear AI as they simply haven’t formed an opinion on it yet.

Per capita income, it turns out, may be the single best predictor of how a population feels about AI.

The researchers split 36 core countries into 18 “high-income” and 18 “middle-income” nations, using World Bank’s classifications built on gross national income per capita. The gap between the two groups shows up in nearly every question that was part of the survey.

A median of 55% of adults in high-income countries said AI will lead to fewer jobs in their country over the next decades. In middle-income countries, that figure drops nearly 20 points lower to 36%. People in poorer countries aren’t necessarily more hopeful; they’re more uncertain.

Roughly a third of the adults in middle-income nations said they simply don’t know how AI will affect jobs, compared with about a fifth in wealthy ones.

The same pattern holds for inequality. A median of 35% of adults in high-income countries believe AI



Divergence in attitudes of people seems to be a function of the level of awareness of new technologies. GETTY IMAGES

will widen the gap between rich and poor, versus 22% in middle-income countries.

In general, 40% of the respondents in the wealthy nations said they were more concerned than excited about AI’s growing presence in their daily lives, compared with 31% in middle-income nations.

When the researchers plotted individual countries against their GDP per capita, the correlation between GDP per capita and the belief that AI cost jobs was strong. On AI aware-

ness – the share of people who said they’ve heard or read ‘a lot’ about AI – the connection was even stronger.

Respondents in two Asian nations capture this divide. In Singapore, for instance, where GDP per capita is close to \$100,000, 53% of its adults said they’ve heard or read ‘a lot’ about AI. In Bangladesh, where GDP per capita is about \$2,600, just 4% of its adults reported the same level of awareness.

Loss of job loss follows the same pattern as rough-

ly seven in ten or more adults in Australia, South Korea and the U.S. expect AI to shrink the job market over the next two decades. But in Kenya, Nigeria and the Philippines, that expectation is far less common as they are yet to form a strong view on the technology.

Nearly half of Americans said the technology will widen the gap between rich and poor. In India, however, which is classified as a middle-income country, only 13% said the same.

This divergence in attitudes of people in high-income and middle-income economies seems to be a function of the level of awareness of new technologies.

People in advanced economies are far more likely to have encountered AI tools directly that have visibly threatened their job prospects.

In middle-income nations, however, where in-

formal labour and manual work still make up a large share of employment, AI’s impact can feel more abstract.

Pew Research Centre found that in many middle-income countries, it’s the wealthier and more educated people within that country who are most likely to say AI will cost jobs or deepen inequality.

Much of the gap traces back to the same driver: people with less income and less formal education are simply more likely to say they’re unsure of this technology. Uncertainty fills the space where worry would otherwise occupy.

The implication of this survey is double-edged for citizens and governments. Concern is often what drives demand for regulation and worker protections. That means the countries best positioned to frame laws around AI’s disruptions may be exactly the ones already feeling the most anxious about it.



Question Corner

Feel the music

**Why is some music able to make us cry?**  
– Radhika S., Mumbai

A good song can make us cry because listening to it simultaneously invokes parts of the brain involved in emotion, memories, expectations, and arousal. As we listen, the brain constantly predicts what will come next, from a melody resolving itself to a voice reaching a particular high note. When the song suddenly fulfils or violates these expectations, the resulting build-up and release of tension can trigger strong physiological reactions. We also associate music with autobiographical memories. When we

repeatedly hear a specific sequence of rhythm, timing, lyrics, etc., the brain stores it alongside whatever else it is encoding then. When you hear the opening notes later, it can trigger the brain to recognise the old sensory pattern and ‘activate’ the larger network of information stored with it. Sadness can also produce changes grounded in shared physiology. When people observe these cues alongside sadness, their brains learn the association. So, people can be brought to cry to unfamiliar music, too.

Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in



FAQ

Why are students protesting at IIT-Bombay?

What are the students demanding? How has IIT-Bombay responded? What questions have faculty members raised?

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

**The story so far:** On September 18, 20-year-old Dalit student Sahil Wakode died by suicide in his hostel room at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay. He was a second-year B.Tech student. Sahil’s parents have claimed their son was facing caste discrimination. They registered an FIR against the faculty of IIT-Bombay, invoking provisions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Mumbai Crime Branch is continuing its probe. Meanwhile, IIT-Bombay has constituted a 10-member inquiry committee and accepted the 18 demands made by the students. The institute had initially stated that Sahil was apprehended for cheating during an examination. It later apologised and said: “It was inappropriate to have set out or characterised details relating to the events preceding his demise before they had been duly established through the appropriate investigative process.”

**What are the students demanding?** After the suicide case, protests were held at IIT-Bombay. The students gave a charter of 18 demands, which included taking action against the stakeholders, issuing an apology for Sahil’s defamation, holding an open house with all the stakeholders, an independent investigation,

A report said 13,600 students from disadvantaged communities had dropped out of premier institutions between 2018 and 2023. The report also said 13,600 students from disadvantaged communities had dropped out of premier institutions between 2018 and 2023. committees, and a task force for students’ well-being. The students also sought better handling of cases of malpractice, in-person counselling, round-the-clock psychiatrist on call and mental health sensitisation, dedicated time from the Dean for one-to-one interaction with students to address their concerns, open students’ concerns portal. They have also sought at least one counsellor for every 250 students to reduce the waiting period. Students have also sought independent audits of the Student Wellness Centre and at least one counsellor in every hostel.

**How has the institute responded?** IIT-Bombay Director Shireesh Kedare signed the memorandum submitted by the students. A 10-member committee has been appointed by the institute to probe the circumstances around Sahil’s death. The institute issued an apology for its previous statement. It also suspended Prof. Satyanarayan Doolla from the position of Dean of Administrative Affairs.

But some students have continued to protest, calling IIT-Bombay’s apology “a joke”. “Not only did the institution not take any responsibility for the tarnishing of the reputation of the deceased, but the narratives casting doubt on his image have only compounded since then,” said a letter issued by Ambedkar Periyar Phule Study Circle IIT Bombay. It has sought the resignation of IIT-Bombay Director, alleging that four suicides have taken place during his tenure. The group also sought the resignation of Prof. Doolla.

**Why is the faculty divided?** The faculty stands divided on the issue. Some faculty members have questioned whether the institute had followed the due process laid down for handling examination malpractice. They have also asked if Sahil was given a fresh answer sheet after being caught for alleged malpractice, as per the rules. IIT-Bombay Faculty Forum issued a statement in support of Prof. Doolla. “We are distressed by the vilification of our colleague’s reputation by misleading reports,” it stated. A group of faculty members distanced themselves from the forum, adding that it was not an official representative of the faculty members. It questioned how the forum could issue a statement in support of a faculty member when the case was still under investigation.

**What do the numbers show about caste discrimination?** The numbers on caste discrimination in India’s premier institutions are stark. In September, the National Task Force on ‘mental health of students and prevention of suicides in higher educational institutions’ released its interim report. It said 13,600 students from disadvantaged communities had dropped out of premier institutions between 2018 and 2023. During this period, 4,596 OBC, 2,424 Scheduled Caste and 2,622 Scheduled Tribes students left central universities. At the IITs, the numbers were 2,066 OBC, 1,068 SC and 408 ST students. At the IIMs, 163 OBC, 188 SC and 91 ST students dropped out. The report noted that these dropouts occurred despite measures such as fee waivers, stipends, and other government support. It said the figures pointed to academic or other forms of stress affecting students. (For those in distress, counselling is available at Tele MANAS 14416)

What is Karnataka’s objection to the ESA?

What did the Karnataka Legislature decide on September 22? Why has the State repeatedly rejected the ESA draft? What did the Kasturirangan Committee recommend? How much of the Western Ghats was proposed as ESA? What has Karnataka proposed as the way forward?

Sharath S. Srivatsa

**The story so far:** On September 22, the Karnataka Legislature unanimously passed a resolution rejecting the K. Kasturirangan Committee report on the Western Ghats in its current form. The resolution was in response to the seventh draft, published on July 27 by the Ministry of Environment, Ecology and Climate Change to declare parts of the Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA). The draft gave the State government a 60-day window to file its objections. This was the seventh instance of the Karnataka government rejecting the draft, which was first published in 2014. Successive governments have acknowledged the Western Ghats as an ecologically sensitive region, but have highlighted the ESA’s impact on lives and livelihoods. There have been widespread protests over fears of loss of livelihood, as well as public consultations in the Malnad region. Of the six Western Ghats States, Karnataka has the largest area to be notified as an ESA, spread across 10 districts.

**What is the report?** Eminent space scientist K. Kasturirangan chaired the High Level Working Group (HLWG), which was tasked with reviewing the earlier Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), headed by Prof. Madhav Gadgil, and recommending measures to protect the fragile Western Ghats, recognised by UNESCO as one of the world’s ecological hotspots. The WGEEP submitted its report in 2011. Set up in 2012, the HLWG submitted its recommendations in 2013. Of the 1.64 lakh square kilometres of the

Both Houses of Karnataka Legislature passed a unanimous resolution seeking one year to conduct a physical survey of the area

Western Ghats, it recommended declaring 59,940 sq. km, covering 4,156 villages across Keralam, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat, as ESA. Karnataka has the largest area recommended under the ESA and the highest number of villages among the six States. About 41% of the total Western Ghats area has been identified as natural landscape, of which 37%, or about 59,940 sq. km, is biologically rich, has low fragmentation and low population density, and contains protected areas, World Heritage Sites, and tiger and elephant corridors. The report identified 20,668 sq. km across 1,576 villages in Karnataka, 17,340 sq. km across 2,159 villages in Maharashtra, 13,108 sq. km across 123 villages in Keralam, 6,914 sq. km across 135 villages in Tamil Nadu, 449 sq. km in 64 villages in Gujarat and 1,461 sq. km in 99 villages in Goa. Currently, the area sought to be notified is 56,825 sq. km, mainly after Keralam undertook a ground survey and brought down its area to 9,993 sq. km. Subsequently, the number of villages in Maharashtra and Goa has increased, while the number has come down in Karnataka. As per the latest draft, a total of 4,402 villages will be part of the ESA. The actual area is sought to be finalised based on the recommendations of the State governments, the views of stakeholders, and the ESA Expert Committee.

**What are the key recommendations?** The report recommends a total ban on certain activities and regulation of others. Banned activities include mining, quarrying, sand extraction, setting up red-category industries, thermal power plants, and construction of buildings beyond 20,000 square metres. It has prohibited township and area development projects. It has subjected infrastructure and development projects to environmental clearances and allowed hydroelectricity projects with certain conditions. All development projects located within 10 km of the Western Ghats ESA and requiring environmental clearance would be regulated under the provisions of the EIA Notification, 2006. It has also recommended financial arrangements and incentives for Green Growth in the Western Ghats, and suggested a decision-support and monitoring centre.

**How does it differ from the Gadgil report?** There has been intense debate among experts, environmentalists and policymakers over the recommendations of the two reports. The two committees differed on the extent of the area to be declared ecologically sensitive and brought under protection. The Gadgil Committee

designated the entire Western Ghats as an ESA and estimated it to cover about 1.29 lakh sq. km, whereas the Kasturirangan Committee identified 1.64 lakh sq. km as the Western Ghats, of which about 60,000 sq. km were sought to be declared ESA. To initiate the conservation exercise, the Gadgil Committee recommended three categories of Ecologically Sensitive Zones – 1, 2 and 3 – with corresponding restrictions and bans on activities. The Kasturirangan Committee divided the Western Ghats into natural and cultural landscapes, with the latter being areas that have helped sustain lives but have lost their original character over centuries. The prohibition or restriction of activities is sought to be implemented in the ESA.

**What is Karnataka’s contention?** The State has argued that the ESA should cover only notified forest areas and other forest areas, and should not include plantation areas, agriculture and horticulture fields, or residential and public areas. It has pointed out that the areas were demarcated using satellite data and not through a joint survey. It has said there is no accurate bifurcation of revenue and forest land, and that there is no reference to provide alternatives for livelihood. It has argued that Bagair Hukum, forest rights, deemed forest, land grants, appeals, and legal cases should be considered. These issues, it has said, should be examined by an expert committee through a physical survey. It has also opposed the logic of including entire villages under the ESA because one-fifth of a village’s area may be forest. On the ground, genuine concerns have been expressed about possible restrictions on agriculture, housing and day-to-day activities by zealous forest officials. However, misinformation is also being spread in the name of the report. For example, though no restriction has been proposed on house building or renovation activities, ill-informed leaders at the local level are fuelling fears and anxiety that the measures would bring all such activities to a complete halt. There is also concern over a possible loss in the value of agricultural and plantation land due to restrictions, which could result in reduced investment in agriculture.

**What has Karnataka done now?** Rejecting the report in its current form, both Houses of the Karnataka Legislature passed a unanimous resolution seeking one year to conduct a physical survey of the area and demanded that Karnataka’s part should not be finalised till then. It has announced the setting up of a high-level committee headed by a retired judge and comprising all stakeholders to review the shortcomings of the Kasturirangan report and recommend modifications. Cutting across party lines, legislators urged the government to follow the ‘Keralam model’, under which such physical verification was conducted and submitted to the Centre.

What does the law say about CEC’s removal?

How are the CEC and ECs appointed? Why did the Supreme Court intervene in appointments? What did the Anoop Baranwal judgment prescribe? Who was on the appointment panel prescribed by the Supreme Court? What protection does a CEC have against removal?

Rizmi Lia M.

**The story so far:** The Chief Election Commissioner of India has come under scrutiny following a recent expose by *The Indian Express*. On September 23, Opposition parties sought the removal of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar after the expose claimed that two of the three Election Commissioners, Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi, had formally recorded objections at least 14 times over the last 10 months.

**How are the CEC and ECs appointed?** Article 324 of the Constitution vests the “superintendence, direction and control” of elections in the Election Commission of India (ECI). Article 324(2) provides that the President appoints the CEC and other Election Commissioners, subject to any law made by Parliament. For several decades, Parliament had not enacted a law laying down the procedure for these appointments. This led to a challenge before the Supreme Court on the question of how the independence of the ECI could be protected when its members were appointed by the executive. In March 2023, a five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court

Article 324(5) states that the CEC can be removed from office ‘in like manner and on the like grounds as a Judge of the Supreme Court’

delivered its judgment in *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India*.

**What was the Anoop Baranwal case?** In January 2015, Anoop Baranwal filed a public interest litigation (PIL) on the ground that the system for appointing members of the ECI was unconstitutional. At the time, the executive enjoyed the power to make appointments. The PIL contended that the ECI’s independence has degraded over time. It pleaded for the court to issue directions to set up an independent, collegium-like system for ECI appointments. The Constitution Bench held that until Parliament made a law under Article 324(2), appointments to the Election Commission would be made on the recommendation of a three-member committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India. The court said the arrangement would operate only until Parliament enacted a law on the subject.

**What happened after the judgment?** Parliament enacted the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, which came into force in January 2024. The appointment mechanism differed from the one prescribed by the Supreme Court in *Anoop Baranwal*. Under the 2023 Act, the Selection Committee consists of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, and a Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the Prime Minister. The President appoints the CEC and ECs on the recommendation of this committee. The Act also provides for a Search Committee headed by the Union Law Minister, which prepares a panel of five persons for consideration by the Selection Committee. The 2023 law has been challenged before the Supreme Court. One of the questions before the court is whether replacing the CJI with a Union Cabinet Minister is constitutionally valid. On September 23, a Division Bench of Justices Dipankar Datta and S.C. Sharma delivered a ‘split’ verdict on the Union government’s plea

seeking a larger bench reference of the challenges against the 2023 Act. While Justice Datta did not find a reference to a Constitution Bench necessary, Justice Sharma held in favour of sending the case to a Constitution Bench, stating that several questions of substantial importance were at stake.

**How can a CEC be removed?** The Constitution gives the CEC a high degree of protection against removal. Article 324(5) states that the CEC can be removed from office “in like manner and on the like grounds as a Judge of the Supreme Court.” This means that the CEC can be removed only on the grounds of proved misbehaviour or incapacity and through the parliamentary procedure prescribed for the removal of a Supreme Court judge. A removal motion has to be passed by the required special majority in both Houses of Parliament. Only after Parliament passes the motion can the President issue an order removing the CEC. The procedure is set out in the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968. The protection available to the other Election Commissioners is different. Under Article 324(5), an Election Commissioner or Regional Commissioner cannot be removed from office except on the recommendation of the CEC.

**Can a CEC be arrested?** This question has come into focus because of calls for the arrest of the incumbent CEC. The relevant provision is Section 16 of the 2023 Act. It provides protection to a person who is or was a CEC or Election Commissioner from civil or criminal proceedings in court for an act, thing or word done or spoken while, or in the course of, acting or purporting to act in the discharge of official duty or function. The provision is significant because it extends protection even to a person who “is or was” a CEC or Election Commissioner. However, Section 16 does not expressly state that a CEC cannot be arrested. It says that no court shall entertain or continue civil or criminal proceedings in relation to conduct covered by the provision. The section does not use the words “arrest”, “investigation” or “police custody”. It therefore cannot simply be described as a blanket immunity from arrest. The protection is also linked to acts done while, or in the course of, acting or purporting to act in the discharge of official duty or function.



PROFILES

Dissent in the Commission

Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi

The two Election Commissioners, both appointed by the government under the new 2023 law, have raised questions about changes to electoral rolls, centralised control and the Election Commission's decision-making process

Sreeparna Chakrabarty

When notices began to be issued after the publication of the draft list during the Delhi SIR [special intensive revision], one of the names was that of Election Commissioner (EC) Sukhbir Singh Sandhu. What was considered ironical on that day and time soon became a moment of reckoning for the poll body as reports emerged that Dr. Sandhu, along with his fellow Election Commissioner Vivek Joshi, had flagged many anomalies in the ongoing SIR process across the country over the last 10 months.

Though rumours of a rift within the Election Commission had been doing the rounds for some months, what came as a surprise were the formal dissent notes written by the two ECs, including one to the Cabinet Secretary, as both had been virtually handpicked by the government under the new 2023 Law for Appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners.

The Opposition Congress party had given written objections during the appointment of both in the selection committee meetings. When Dr. Sandhu was appointed along with CEC Gyanesh Kumar on March 14, 2024, following the retirement of EC Anup Chandra Pandey and the abrupt resignation of EC Arun Goel, Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury had given a formal dissent note in the selection committee. Later, when Mr. Joshi was appointed on February 17, 2025 after Gyanesh Kumar was elevated to CEC, Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi raised objection in the committee meeting.

Both the Election Commissioners had reportedly flagged several key issues, including the centralisation of the Electoral Rolls. In May this year, Mr. Joshi proposed an audit to certify that “no one except the concerned statutory authorities has any credentials to make any change in the (voter) database”. In August, Dr. Sandhu recorded that State-level election officials were reporting that

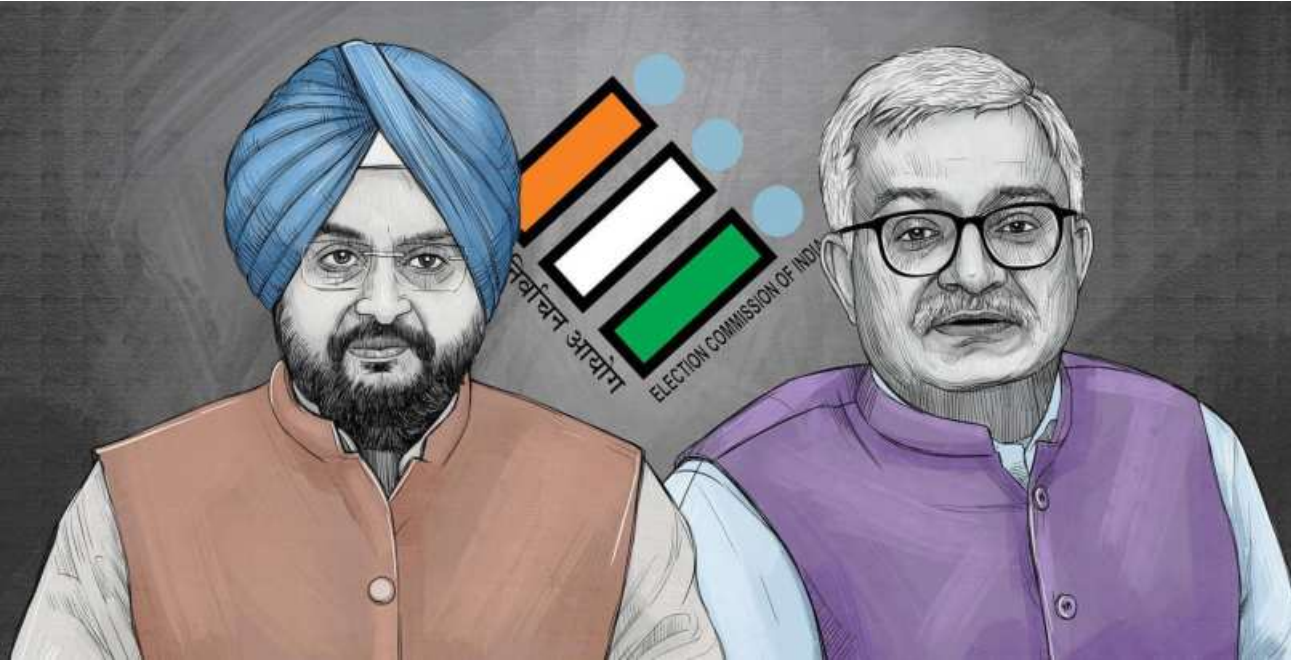


ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

they do not have “proper and complete access” to the ERONet portal – the digital system through which the electoral rolls are maintained. He further flagged that Election Commission Director General of IT “does not have any legal authority to restrict proper and complete access and freedom to operate as given by law to the statutory authorities”.

‘Unauthorised and illegal’

The two ECs also said that Form 6 – which new voters must fill to register– was altered to ask if the applicant or their parents/grandparents “exist” in the electoral roll of the last SIR. They warned as early as May that such a statutory form cannot be changed without amending the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, and Dr. Sandhu called the change “unauthorised and illegal” in August, demanding its immediate removal. He also questioned who had authorised the Commission in West Bengal to file appeals against voters whom judicial tribunals had already included in the rolls – with 38 lakh appeals pending.

They also flagged the Goa case in which 97 voters, found eligible by local Electoral Registration Officers (EROs)

after a Supreme Court-mandated hearing, were left off the final roll because the centrally controlled software had no mechanism to record the EROs’ decisions. The Chief Electoral Officer’s (CEO) office had written eight times seeking a rollback option.

However, some experts, including former Election Commissioners, have questioned why the two did not seek a meeting of the full Commission and attempt to resolve these issues through a majority vote.

As per provisions of the Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991, which has been carried forward to the 2023 Act, all decisions by the Election Commission have to be unanimous, where possible. But if the CEC and the other Election Commissioners genuinely differ in opinion on a matter, it is to be decided according to the opinion of the majority with each Commissioner (including the CEC) carrying equal weight in the vote. The vote of the CEC does not have any special veto. Dr. Sandhu is a retired 1988-batch IAS officer of the Uttarakhand cadre. Born in 1963, he

holds an MBBS from Government Medical College, Amritsar, a master’s degree in history from Guru Nanak Dev University, and a law degree. He was Chief Secretary, Government of Uttarakhand, from July 2021 to January 2024, where he is credited with having overseen the ideation for implementing the Uniform Civil Code.

He was also Chairman of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), Additional Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development and Commissioner, Ludhiana Municipal Corporation – for which he was awarded the President’s Medal. He is also an expert on urban reforms and has authored many papers on municipal management. Dr. Sandhu also briefly served as Secretary, Lokpal of India, from February 5 to March 14, 2024, just before he was appointed as an Election Commissioner.

Vivek Joshi was born on May 21, 1966, in Uttar Pradesh. A 1989-batch IAS officer of the Haryana cadre, he’s a mechanical engineer from IIT-Roorkee. He holds a master’s degree in International Business from IIFT, New Delhi, and an MA and PhD in

International Economics from the Graduate Institute, Geneva. He has served as a Financial Services Secretary and Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India. Earlier, he was member secretary of the Fifth State Finance Commission of Haryana.

Unexpected appointment

When he was appointed EC at 58, he was among the younger members appointed to the poll panel and had taken voluntary retirement before joining the Election Commission, which was considered somewhat unusual.

He himself had called the appointment “unexpected” and noted it was meaningful to him personally as it brought him back to his home cadre (Haryana) briefly before moving to the central body. Mr. Joshi also has family members in the bureaucracy. His brother, Vineet Joshi, a 1992-batch IAS officer, serves as Secretary, Higher Education.

His term runs until February 2031.

Given the seniority order among current commissioners, if Mr. Kumar demits office in January 2029 after retiring, then Mr. Joshi would be the senior-most EC and could succeed him as Dr. Sandhu retires in July 2028. However, if Mr. Kumar has to go before July 2028, Dr. Sandhu becomes the senior-most as he was appointed before Mr. Joshi.

Most importantly, the 2023 Act for appointment of ECs and CEC doesn’t guarantee automatic succession by seniority. Instead, the Act provides a statutory framework for the appointment, tenure, and service conditions of the CEC and ECs, replacing the earlier system governed largely by convention.

There is no clause in the Act that says the senior-most EC automatically becomes CEC when a vacancy arises. Every appointment – including to the post of CEC – goes through this same fresh appointment process unlike the earlier tradition of the next senior-most Election Commissioner being the successor to the incumbent CEC.

THE GIST

In May this year, Joshi proposed an audit to certify that “no one except the concerned statutory authorities has any credentials to make any change in the (voter) database”

In August, Dr. Sandhu recorded that State-level election officials were reporting that they do not have “proper and complete access” to the ERONet portal – the digital system through which the electoral rolls are maintained

However, some experts, including former Election Commissioners, have questioned why the two did not seek a meeting of the full Commission and attempt to resolve these issues through a majority vote

The Arctic race

U.S.-Greenland deal

Washington will establish two new military bases in the world’s largest island as it seeks to expand its presence in the Arctic region and check Russian and Chinese influence

Stanly Johny

Essentially, it’s a large real estate deal. A lot of things can be done,” U.S. President Donald Trump said in August 2019, during his first term, when asked whether the U.S. would be interested in acquiring Greenland. After he returned to office in January 2025, Mr. Trump repeated his threat. “We need Greenland for national security purposes,” he said in January 2025. You look outside. You have Chinese ships all over the place. You have Russian ships all over the place. We’re not letting that happen.”

Greenland, a Danish territory located between the Arctic Ocean and the North Atlantic Ocean, was home for at least 30 American military bases and installations during the Second World War. The island’s strategic profile grew in recent years after Russia and China stepped up their activities in the Arctic region, partly because of ice melting which opened up previously unpassable regions. Mr. Trump’s threats to take over the island incensed Denmark, a founding member of NATO, and America’s other European allies. The crisis further strained the transatlantic ties. But on September 22, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, the leaders of the U.S., Denmark and Greenland



AP

signed a new security agreement, which, according to Mr. Trump, would allow the U.S. “to do what is necessary in Greenland”.

The 1951 U.S.-Denmark security agreement provides Washington broad rights to build military bases in the ice-covered island. Most American bases on the island were shut down over the years, particularly after the Cold War. Now the U.S. stations some 150 troops at its Pituffik Space Base in Greenland. U.S. officials wanted to increase this military presence which they argued was important to monitor and defend the northern approaches of North America and North Atlantic at a time when the race to control the Arctic is heating up. Russia has extensive Arctic territory and military infrastructure. Greenland also possesses significant mineral resources, including rare earths, a segment which is currently dominated by China. U.S. officials have raised concerns about potential Chinese invest-

ments in Greenland. So Denmark, which has already blocked Chinese investments in Greenland, had said it would allow Washington to expand its military presence on the island, but insisted that Danish sovereignty and Greenland’s self-governing rights be respected. The latest security agreement with the U.S. sought to address both America’s demands and Danish concerns.

Terms of the deal

Denmark, which has already blocked Chinese investments in Greenland, had said it would allow Washington to expand its military presence on the island, but insisted that Danish sovereignty and Greenland’s self-governing rights be respected. The latest security agreement with the U.S. sought to address both America’s demands and Danish concerns.

According to the agreement, even if Greenland, which has a population of around 50,000, becomes independent, it would respect the deal with the U.S. and stay within NATO. In other words, this deal pro-

vides the U.S. indefinite access to the island’s military facilities. The deal, which reaffirms “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Denmark” and recognises the “self determination of the people of Greenland”, also stipulates that no hostile power (non-NATO countries) can establish military facilities on the island or invest in its sensitive areas (mainly rare earths). The U.S. will be allowed to establish additional defence facilities in Narsarsuaq in the south, where it had an airfield during the Second World War, and in Mestersvig in the east. The Mestersvig facility would allow the U.S. to monitor the waters between the island and the Scandinavian region. Greenland would also be part of the U.S. Golden Dome anti-missile shield, and Danish authorities have pledged to work together with Washington to counter espionage in Greenland, a reference to alleged Chinese activities in the region.

On paper, Greenland would remain a self-governing territory of Denmark. But in practice, the U.S. would have indefinite rights to build military facilities on the island and a say in its economic policies and resource extraction. Mr. Trump may not have secured ownership of the world’s largest island, but he appears to have secured almost everything else.

The ‘party of power’

United Russia

The political party affiliated to President Vladimir Putin is the big bear that continues to win almost all elections in the country

G.R. Rajeev

Often during his international engagements, the one question that infuriates Russian President Vladimir Putin the most is if Russia is a “managed democracy”. He has been vehement in saying it’s not. “The road to democracy must be adapted to the realities of Russian life, traditions, and history,” Mr. Putin said in February 2005 at a press conference.

But, despite his protestations, democracy in Russia is under intense scrutiny. Mr. Putin’s party, United Russia, is the big bear that wins almost all elections in Russia. In the just-concluded parliamentary elections, United Russia got 349 out of the 450 seats in the Duma, polling 58% of the vote for the 225 seats apportioned by parties and winning 209 single-seat races that fill the other half of the lower chamber of Parliament. The vote, western observers said, was flawed. In August, Russia’s Supreme Court barred Yabloko, the only party running on an anti-war platform, from appearing on the ballot, as polls showed it gaining in popularity and possibly poised to win enough votes to enter Parliament.

The 2024 Presidential election was no different. The result of Russia’s March 15-17 election was



AP

known to everyone even before the first ballot was cast, *The Hindu* noted in its editorial, as Mr. Putin won nearly 88% of the vote. The country saw a record turnout of 77.44% and the results showed that Russia “is united” under the long-time leader, Ella Pamfilova, Election Commission chief, said. Only Kremlin-tolerated candidates, meaning those who could not challenge Mr. Putin and United Russia, were allowed to contest.

Kremlin party

United Russia, called variously as the “party of power” or for its nebulous ideology, the “big-tent” party, is the Kremlin party, and it’s debatable if the party wants to keep Mr. Putin in power or if it’s the other way. In December 2001, Mr. Putin’s Unity party and Fatherland-All Russia, a leading Opposition group, merged to form an entity which became United Russia in 2003.

As Acting President after Boris Yeltsin resigned six months before the end

of his term on January 1, 2000 and handed over power to him, Mr. Putin, who was Prime Minister before being elevated, went on to consolidate his grip on the state. “Russian democracy now speaks with but one voice. Just 18 months ago, leaders of five ideological factions were waging a pitched public battle to succeed Mr. Yeltsin. Now there is only Mr. Putin, a man of no classifiable ideology beyond building a strong Russia, his rule endorsed by three of every four Russians, according to polls,” the *New York Times* reported on January 21, 2001, after Mr. Putin won the presidency in an election. A few days later, Parliament introduced a Bill that would drastically reduce the number of registered parties from 57 to just six.

The news agency Tass, owned by the Russian government, says United Russia “promotes centrist and conservative ideas, stands for strengthening the country’s sovereignty, increasing its defence capa-

bilities, advancing the patriotic education of young people, enhancing investment, introducing innovative technologies, developing democracy and civil society institutions”. In the 2017 article, Tass reported that the party had two million members.

Under Mr. Putin and United Russia, statism, rooted in Orthodox Christian conservative values, replaced the state-sanctioned communism of the Soviet years, *The Hindu* editorial noted. They mastered a complex model of a tightly held state with regular elections and little dissent. Party leaders variously call it centrist and conservative. Researchers term it Russian integralism. Opposition leaders call United Russia a “party of crooks and thieves”, a phrase popularised by Alexei Navalny, an anti-corruption activist who died in prison.

Gleb Pavlovsky, Putin adviser-turned-critic, is considered the chief architect of the “managed democracy” system in Russia. Vladislav Surkov, former Putin aide called the “grey cardinal” of Kremlin, rebranded it as “sovereign democracy”. The Economist described him as the architect of “a system of make-believe”, involving imitation political parties, stage-managed media, and orchestrated social movements. Mr. Putin, however, is in denial in public.



## Umpire on trial

An Election Commission does not derive its authority merely from the power to conduct elections. Its legitimacy rests on a more delicate foundation: the public's confidence that the institution conducting the contest is independent of the contestants. Recent developments have put that principle under unusual strain. The Election Commission is already facing questions over its handling of electoral rolls and the nationwide Special Intensive Revision. Reports of disagreements within the Commission over voter data, enrolment procedures and decisions allegedly taken without the full knowledge of all three commissioners have added a new institutional dimension to an argument that had largely been fought outside the Commission.

Now the Supreme Court has brought the question of institutional independence into sharper constitutional focus. A two-judge bench has directed that challenges to the 2023 law governing the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners be placed before the Chief Justice for consideration of a Constitution Bench.

The law replaced the Chief Justice of India on the selection panel with a Union Cabinet minister nominated by the Prime Minister, leaving a three-member committee comprising the Prime Minister, his nominee and the Leader of the Opposition. Justice Dipankar Datta observed that the minister, bound by collective responsibility and nominated by the Prime Minister, could not realistically be expected to defy the person who nominated him.

He consequently questioned whether the Leader of the Opposition's presence on the panel becomes largely ornamental. His cricket analogy captured the institutional problem: even if an umpire subsequently makes correct decisions, confidence can be weakened if the side involved in the contest appears to have disproportionate influence over the umpire's selection.

That observation should not automatically be converted into a finding that the Election Commission is biased. Nor do allegations of electoral manipulation become facts merely because political parties repeat them. But constitutional institutions are not judged solely by what can be proved after the event. The manner in which independence is secured - and perceived - is itself part of institutional legitimacy.

This is why the present controversy matters beyond the fate of any individual CEC. If appointments are perceived as dominated by the executive, and if questions subsequently arise about internal decision-making on electoral rolls, the two controversies reinforce each other in the public mind even when no direct connection between them has been established. The answer cannot be political retaliation, nor can every disagreement within the Commission be portrayed as evidence of institutional collapse. It must be transparent.

The Commission should go beyond terse communiques to explain disputed procedures, the safeguards governing voter-data changes and the manner in which dissenting views are considered within it. Parliament and the courts, meanwhile, must settle the constitutional question of how electoral independence is best protected. India's elections cannot depend indefinitely on citizens being asked to trust the umpire. In a democracy, the appointment, functioning and accountability of the umpire must themselves inspire confidence. That is the test now confronting the Election Commission - and, ultimately, the constitutional system that created it.

## Beyond Protest

The significance of the Cockroach Janta Party may ultimately lie less in the government concessions it has extracted than in the expectations it has created among those who watched these developments. For decades, Indian politics has trained citizens to think of the state as something to be petitioned, endured or periodically replaced. A defective examination system, an unresponsive public office or a failing school could provoke anger, but rarely a sustained expectation that institutions themselves must explain their performance. CJP is beginning to challenge that habit. This is larger than the fortunes of one movement.

Across countries as different as Bangladesh, Kenya, Bulgaria and Peru, youth protests have demonstrated a similar pattern: a specific grievance can become a vehicle for a much broader rejection of institutional complacency. The issue that brings young people onto the streets is often not the entire issue. It becomes the point at which accumulated frustration finally finds expression.

India's version is distinctive because the initial grievance was so intimately connected to the life chances of young people. Competitive examinations determine access to jobs, professional education and, for millions of families, years of sacrifice. When examination integrity is questioned, the state is not failing in some distant administrative sphere. It is interfering with the perceived fairness of the social contract. But the more consequential development may be what follows the protest.

A generation that has discovered its collective ability to force a response may become less willing to accept institutional failure elsewhere. That explains why questions about schools, policing, judicial conduct, public spending, the Election Commission's conduct and political accountability can now be connected to the same emerging civic consciousness.

There is, however, a danger in romanticising this transformation. Anger is an effective mobiliser but a poor substitute for institutional design. Movements can expose failures much faster than they can construct credible alternatives. They can also fragment, become personality-driven or acquire partisan agendas. The experience of other Gen Z movements shows that political mobilisation does not automatically produce democratic renewal.

For CJP, therefore, the challenge is demanding. It must preserve the energy of a movement while developing the discipline of a civic institution. It must distinguish evidence from allegation, scrutiny from spectacle and independence from partisan opposition. Most importantly, its standards of accountability must apply equally to governments, political opponents, allies and itself.

That is also where the movement's significance extends beyond CJP. If India's younger citizens begin to regard questioning authority as a normal civic responsibility rather than an act of political defiance, the consequences could be profound. Governments may discover that concessions after a crisis are no longer enough. Institutions may face continuous scrutiny rather than occasional outrage. The real change, then, would not be another government falling or another minister resigning. It would be a generation deciding that citizenship means asking why - and refusing to stop asking when the answer is unsatisfactory.

# Reorienting Education ~ I

*The problem begins when employment becomes the sole lens through which the value of education is judged. When that happens, education risks becoming a transaction in which a student acquires a credential, an institution delivers a qualification and society expects the qualification to produce a job. Somewhere in this transaction, the larger purpose of education often disappears*

Education is among the most powerful institutions through which a civilisation transmits its knowledge, values, aspirations and understanding of life from one generation to another. Yet, in our contemporary understanding, education has gradually become narrower and more utilitarian. We increasingly view education through the prism of examinations, degrees, qualifications, placements and employment. The question most frequently asked of a young person after completing school or university is not what he or she has learnt about life, society or the world, but what job the qualification will secure.

The choice of a course is often guided primarily by its perceived employment prospects, the success of an institution is frequently measured by its placement statistics, and the success of an individual is increasingly associated with salary, designation and professional status. Employment, which should be an important outcome and instrument of education, has gradually become its principal purpose, rather than preparing and grooming an individual as a complete person ready to go through life in any situation and circumstances.

There is nothing inherently wrong with seeking employment through education. Economic independence, dignity of labour and the ability to sustain oneself and one's family are essential dimensions of a meaningful life. A modern education system must certainly equip young people with knowledge and competencies that enable them to participate productively in the economy.

It must respond to technological change, emerging professions and the changing requirements of the world of work. The problem begins when employment becomes the sole lens through which the value of education is judged. When that happens, education risks becoming a transaction in which a student acquires a credential, an institution delivers a qualification and society expects the qualification to produce a job. Somewhere in this transaction, the larger purpose of education often disappears.

The consequence is a paradox that deserves serious reflection. We have more institutions of learning, more graduates, greater access to information and unprecedented technological capabilities, yet formal education does not necessarily translate into greater wisdom, stronger character, social responsibility or the capacity to deal with the complexities of human life.

We are producing people who may possess degrees without possessing adequate employability, and even those who are professionally successful may not necessarily have acquired the life skills, ethical judgement, emotional maturity or social values necessary



to live responsibly.

A degree can demonstrate that a person has completed a prescribed course of study. It cannot, by itself, demonstrate that the person has learnt how to deal with failure, exercise restraint, respect another person's dignity, resolve disagreements, distinguish between what is legal and what is ethical, or accept responsibility for the consequences of his or her actions. This distinction between being qualified and being educated is fundamental. A qualification is an acknowledgement of academic attainment. Education, in its fuller sense, is the development of the whole human being. It should enlarge the mind, deepen understanding, develop judgement, cultivate curiosity and enable a person to live with oneself, with others and with the larger world.

A truly educated person should not merely know how to perform a task; he or she should also understand why the task matters and what consequences follow from performing it. Education should enable a person to ask not only, "How can I do this?" but also, "Should I do this?", "For whose benefit?", and "What responsibility follows from my action?" This is particularly important in an age in which information is abundant but wisdom is not.

A smartphone can place enormous quantities of information in the hands of a child. Artificial intelligence can increasingly provide answers to questions, generate text, solve problems and assist in professional tasks. But access to information does not automatically create knowledge, and knowledge does not automatically produce wisdom.

Information tells us what. Knowledge enables us to understand how and why. Wisdom helps us decide what ought to be done. The more powerful our technological capabilities become, the more important this distinction will be. A person who knows how to manipulate information, but does not possess ethical judgement can potentially cause greater harm than an ignorant person. Education must therefore prepare individuals not merely to acquire knowledge but to use knowledge responsibly.

This requires us to recover the idea of education as a lifelong process. The classroom is only one of the places where learning takes place. The family is a school. Society is a school. Work is a school. Relationships are a school. Failure is a school. Adversity is a school. Nature is a school. Books, art, music, history and human experience are all teachers. A person who has completed formal education but has stopped learning has not necessarily become educated in the fullest sense. Conversely, a person who continues to learn from experience, from other people and from the changing world remains engaged in education throughout life.

The purpose of formal education should, therefore, be to prepare a person for this larger school of life. Instead of treating the

completion of a degree as the end of education, we should regard it as the beginning of a more independent and lifelong quest for learning. The student should leave school or university not with the impression that learning is over (reflected through acts like tearing away books on the last day of examination), but with the curiosity and intellectual discipline to continue learning throughout life.

This requires a fundamental reorientation of our education system. Such reorientation does not mean abandoning professional education, vocational training or employability. Rather, it means placing these within a larger educational framework. We must move from an education system that primarily asks, "What occupation will this student enter?" to one that simultaneously asks, "What kind of human being is this education helping the student become?"

The two questions are not contradictory. In fact, they complement each other. We need doctors who are competent and compassionate, engineers who are technically capable and socially conscious, administrators who are efficient and ethical, entrepreneurs who are innovative and responsible, lawyers who understand both law and justice, teachers who possess subject knowledge as well as empathy, and citizens who can pursue their own aspirations without forgetting their obligations to society. The reorientation must begin with the curriculum, but it cannot end there.

Our curricula need greater integration of life skills, ethics, civic responsibility, financial literacy, digital literacy, environmental awareness, communication, critical thinking and emotional maturity. These should not be treated as peripheral subjects to be completed merely for an examination. They should become part of the lived educational experience.

A young person should learn how to communicate clearly, listen carefully, manage money responsibly, understand basic legal and civic obligations, respond to emergencies, recognise misinformation and manipulation, protect digital privacy, resolve conflicts, deal with failure and seek help when necessary. These abilities are not less important than academic knowledge simply because they are difficult to measure through conventional examinations.

We should also rethink our obsession with marks as the principal measure of educational achievement. Marks have their place; academic standards matter, and knowledge must be assessed. But examination performance cannot capture curiosity, integrity, creativity,



DR. SAUMITRA MOHAN

*The writer is an IAS officer, presently working as the Principal Secretary, Information and Cultural Affairs Department, Government of West Bengal. The views expressed here are personal and don't reflect those of the Government*

Jakarta Post

## The American shield is cracking

Mocha was once known to the world for coffee. Today, the Yemeni port has acquired a harsher significance. Its seizure by the Houthis gives the movement control of the approaches to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which ships must pass between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

Taken alone, the fall of Mocha might look like one more reversal in Yemen's grinding civil war. It is not. It came alongside a drone attack launched from

Iraq that forced Saudi Arabia to close its East-West oil pipeline and in the largest

context of United States President Donald Trump's reckless and failing war on Iran. Together, the events expose an uncomfortable truth: The American security order in the Middle East is failing to provide security. Saudi Arabia built the East-West pipeline to escape precisely this kind of danger. The line carries crude from the kingdom's

eastern oil fields across 1,200 kilometers of desert to Yanbu on the Red Sea.

It allows Saudi oil to avoid the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran has long possessed the ability to disrupt maritime traffic.

Yet the escape route now has its own vulnerabilities, exposed by Trump's disastrous assault on Iran. Saudi Arabia says Iran-backed militias operating from Iraq attacked its pumping stations. At the pipeline's western end, the Houthi

advance threatens shipping around the Bab el-Mandeb. Iran and its allies have, in effect, applied pressure to both exits from the Arabian Peninsula.

This is not the outcome Washington promised. For decades, Arab governments bought American weapons, hosted American troops and accommodated US strategic priorities.

In return, the US presented itself as the guarantor of oil infrastructure, shipping lanes and the political survival of friendly governments.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

### Fairness

Sir, Recent media reports of differences and objections within the Election Commission of India have raised legitimate questions about the functioning of one of the country's most important constitutional institutions.

These reports should neither be exaggerated into allegations of wrongdoing nor dismissed without proper examination. The Election Commission occupies a unique position in India's democratic framework.

Its credibility depends not only on conducting elections but also in ensuring that people have confidence in the transparency and fairness of the electoral process. Questions relating to electoral rolls, voter additions and deletions, and administrative procedures therefore deserve clear explanations and, where necessary, independent scrutiny is required.

Internal discussion or disagreement

within a constitutional body is not necessarily a weakness. Indeed, reasoned dissent can be a healthy feature of institutional decision-making.

A truly independent constitutional authority should welcome legitimate questions and provide convincing answers. In a democracy, elections must not merely be held. Transparency, accountability and institutional independence are to be ensured to safeguard the democratic values and fairness governance.

Yours, etc., Ravi Chandra Sekhar Rao, Kharagpur, 25 September.

### ECI has failed

Sir, The latest revelations of internal matters related to the Election Commission of India have further deepened suspicions about the functioning of that body. The investigation conducted by a national daily has exposed many dangerous subversions

in the process of preparing electoral rolls. The worse among them is the capability of centralised data system to override the ruling of the electoral registration officer at the ground level. If the dissent of two out of three election commissioners couldn't effect the final outcome, it is a serious issue. The Election Commission of India has failed in delivering its constitutional duty.

Yours, etc., Dr DVG Sankara Rao, ex MP, Vizianagaram, 24 September.

### Troubling

Sir, The ongoing controversy surrounding the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and the mass deletion of voters during the Special Intensive Revision raises deep concerns about institutional independence.

To many critics and opposition groups like the Cockroach Janata Party, the commission's actions appear less like neutral

cooperation, leadership, empathy, resilience or the ability to apply knowledge in real-life situations.

If everything in education is designed around what can be tested in a written examination, students will naturally optimise themselves for the examination. We should, therefore, create more opportunities for experiential learning, projects, community engagement, problem-solving and collaborative work. Students should encounter real situations in which they have to use what they have learnt to address a problem or help another person. This is where knowledge begins to acquire meaning.

Service, in particular, has enormous educational value. When students participate in community work, environmental initiatives, care for the elderly, teaching children from disadvantaged backgrounds, heritage conservation, disaster preparedness or other forms of constructive social engagement, they begin to understand society beyond textbooks. They discover that the world contains people whose circumstances may be very different from their own. They learn empathy not as an abstract concept but as an experience. They learn that knowledge becomes meaningful when it is used for something larger than personal advancement. Such experiences can also cultivate humility, because they remind the student that no individual succeeds entirely alone and that society continuously sustains the opportunities available to each of us.

The role of teachers must also be reimagined. A teacher cannot merely be a person who completes a syllabus. A teacher is potentially a mentor, an intellectual guide and an example of conduct. Students often remember a teacher not for every fact taught in a classroom, but for the confidence that teacher inspired, the curiosity that was awakened or the standard of integrity that was demonstrated. As technology transforms access to information, the role of teachers as mentors may become even more important. When information is available everywhere, the teacher's distinctive contribution lies increasingly in helping students interpret, question, contextualise and use that information wisely.

The same principle applies to parents and to society as a whole. Values cannot simply be delivered through textbooks. Children observe what adults do far more closely than what adults say. A society that lectures children about honesty while rewarding dishonesty sends a contradictory educational message. A family that speaks of respect while resolving disagreements through humiliation teaches something very different from the lesson written in a moral-science textbook. An institution that speaks about integrity but celebrates success achieved through manipulation undermines its own educational purpose. The most powerful curriculum is often the culture surrounding the child. This is why the crisis of values cannot be addressed by placing the entire responsibility on schools and colleges. Families, educational institutions, workplaces, media, public institutions and society at large collectively educate the next generation.

If we want young people to become responsible citizens, adults must demonstrate responsibility. If we want them to respect differences, they must see disagreement handled with civility. If we want them to value public spaces, they must see adults treating public property as a shared resource. If we want them to understand service, they must see service respected as an important social virtue.

(To Be Concluded)



bureaucracy and more like the conduct of an obedient servant catering to the interests of the ruling BJP government.

When internal dissent among commissioners is dismissed as mere administrative friction rather than a red flag for democratic erosion, public trust is severely compromised.

For an institution tasked with safeguarding the bedrock of our democracy, the appearance of alignment with the ruling party's political agenda signals a troubling shift from public accountability to political subservience.

Yours, etc., Rajakumar Arulanandham, Tirunelveli, 25 September.



We need attention literacy

RUDRASHIS DATTA

A person sits down to read an article on a smartphone. Before the first paragraph is finished, a notification appears. A message is checked. One social-media application is opened. A short video plays automatically. A news headline catches the eye. Then an advertisement appears. An hour later, the original article remains unfinished.

This seemingly ordinary experience captures one of the defining economic realities of the digital age: our attention has become a commodity. We often say that information is the new currency. But information is abundant and increasingly inexpensive. What is scarce is the human capacity to notice, process and remember it. In a world overflowing with content, the most valuable resource may therefore be the limited number of hours during which human beings can pay attention.

The term "attention economy" describes an environment in which human attention is treated as a scarce resource that businesses compete to capture and monetise. Traditional businesses generally sold products or services. Digital platforms often operate differently. Many provide services to users at little or no direct monetary cost while generating revenue through advertising, subscriptions, data-driven targeting or commercial transactions.

In such a system, attracting and retaining attention becomes enormously important. The longer a user remains on a platform, the more opportunities exist to display advertisements, recommend content or encourage further engagement. A user's attention therefore has economic value even when the user is not directly paying for the service. This helps explain why digital platforms are filled with notifications, recommendations, autoplay videos, personalised feeds and endless scrolling. These features are not accidental. They are designed to reduce friction between one piece of content and the next.

The competition for attention is not new. Newspapers have long used headlines to attract readers. Radio and television developed formats designed to retain audiences between advertisements. Magazines used photographs, cover stories and sensational headlines to encourage purchases. What has changed in the digital age is the scale, speed and personalisation of the competition.

A newspaper has a limited front page. A television channel has a fixed schedule. A digital platform can offer every user a constantly changing stream tailored to individual behaviour. Algorithms can observe what people click, watch, ignore, share or revisit. They can then use those signals to predict what might attract attention next. The result is an extraordinarily personalised media environment. Two people sitting next to each other may inhabit entirely different information worlds because their digital feeds are responding to different histories of behaviour. Interestingly, attention is not captured merely through information. It is often captured through emotion. Anger, fear, curiosity, amusement, outrage and surprise can all encourage people to stop scrolling and engage with content. This creates a difficult problem: the information most capable of attracting attention is not necessarily the information most useful to society.

A careful explanation of a complicated policy may require several minutes of reading. A provocative headline may capture attention in seconds. A thoughtful argument may receive modest engagement, while an outrageous claim spreads rapidly. This creates a structural tension between what is important and what is attention-grabbing.

When clicks, views, shares and comments become measures of success, content producers may have incentives to optimise for engagement rather than accuracy, depth or public value.

The attention economy does not merely compete for the hours we spend online. It can also affect how

we use our minds. Constant notifications and rapid switching between applications encourage fragmented attention. A person may simultaneously read a message, listen to music, monitor social media and work on a document. Multitasking can create the feeling of productivity, but frequent switching carries cognitive costs. Deep work requires sustained concentration, working memory and the ability to resist distraction.

This is particularly important for students. A student preparing for an examination may have access to thousands of educational videos and digital resources. Yet the same device that provides those resources also provides entertainment, social media and endless distractions. The challenge is no longer simply access to information. It is the ability to determine which information deserves attention. The commercialisation of attention raises particularly important questions about children. Young people are growing up with devices that combine communication, entertainment, education, gaming and advertising. The competition for their attention begins early. Children naturally seek novelty and stimulation. Digital platforms can provide both in extraordinary quantities.

This does not mean that all screen use is harmful. Digital technology can support learning, creativity, communication and social connection. The problem emerges when digital stimulation becomes so dominant that slower activities - reading, conversation, physical play, reflection and uninterrupted study - appear boring. Parents therefore face a new responsibility: not simply deciding how much technology children should use, but teaching them how to control their attention.

One of the most troubling consequences of the attention economy is the amplification of polarising content. Social-media systems often measure engagement rather than truth. If provocative material generates strong reactions, it can receive greater visibility. This



can create a cycle: attention produces engagement; engagement produces visibility; visibility produces more attention. The cycle can reward sensationalism.

Political misinformation, conspiracy theories and inflammatory posts can spread rapidly because they provoke emotional reactions. The problem is not only that false information exists; it always has. The problem is that digital systems can distribute it at extraordinary speed and scale. The citizen becomes not merely a consumer of information but a participant in its circulation. Every click, share and comment can contribute to the visibility of content.

The attention economy is also closely connected to personal data. Digital platforms can learn a great deal from patterns of behaviour: what we watch, where we linger, what we search for, what we buy and what we ignore. This creates a paradox. Users may believe they are receiving personalised services for free, while the platform gains valuable information about their preferences and behaviour.

Personalisation can make technology more convenient. But it also raises difficult questions about privacy, consent and surveillance. These are no longer purely technological questions. They are questions of public policy and ethics. The remedy lies in a sustained effort to reclaim attention. The first step is recognising that distraction is not always a personal failure. Digital environments are deliberately engineered to make continued engagement easy. Individuals can nevertheless create boundaries. Turning off non-essential notifications, keeping phones away while studying, setting periods without social media,

avoiding screens immediately before sleep and deliberately engaging in long-form reading can help rebuild concentration.

Schools and colleges can also teach digital literacy. Students need to understand not only how to use technology but also how digital platforms influence behaviour. The ability to ask "Why am I seeing this?" may become as important as knowing "What does this say?"

There is perhaps a larger philosophical question beneath the economics of clicks and views: Who owns our attention? Our attention is deeply connected with our autonomy. What we repeatedly attend to influences what we remember, what we believe, what we desire and ultimately what kind of person we become. If commercial systems continuously compete to determine what we notice, then protecting attention becomes a question of individual freedom. The twentieth century required citizens to become literate enough to read newspapers, books and official documents. The twenty-first century requires another form of literacy: attention literacy. We need to understand how algorithms work, why certain content attracts us, how advertising influences behaviour and how constant digital interruption affects concentration. Most importantly, we need to learn that not everything demanding our attention deserves it. The ability to ignore something may be as important as the ability to discover something. In the digital age, attention is being bought, sold, measured and manipulated on an unprecedented scale. Yet it remains ultimately a human capacity.

The writer is Assistant Professor in English, Pritilata Waddedar Mahavidyalaya, Nadia.

India's leadership test begins now

DR SIMRAN KESHWANI

The most demanding test of India's leadership of the Global South begins after the visiting delegations leave. Following the BRICS summit in New Delhi on September 12 and 13, the question is how its ambitions will change the choices available to developing countries. Can they borrow on better terms, build industries and retain more of the value their economies generate? India's influence will deepen if its diplomacy helps answer these questions.

The changing world order is often described through the rise and decline of great powers. Yet power also resides in less visible places: the lender deciding whether a project can proceed, the company controlling a critical component, or the institution defining an export standard. More countries may gain a place in diplomatic negotiations while these practical sources of dependence remain concentrated. India's opportunity is to turn demands for a greater say into the capacity to finance, produce and negotiate on better terms. This requires a precise understanding of the Global South. It brings together countries with different political systems, resources and vulnerabilities. A small island state seeking protection against climate damage has different priorities from an oil exporter or a manufacturing economy. Their common

ground is a desire for greater influence over decisions affecting their development. Cooperation becomes possible when it addresses a specific shared constraint, without demanding agreement on every geopolitical dispute.

The New Delhi Declaration offers an opening. It welcomed the establishment of the India Centre for BRICS Industrial Competencies and supported developing a solar photovoltaic cooperation roadmap. These commitments matter because the ability to manufacture, maintain and improve technology shapes a country's bargaining position. They also require careful interpretation. An institution's establishment is a starting point; a proposed roadmap still needs financing, participating firms and a route to implementation.

Clean energy reveals what is at stake. A country can install solar panels rapidly while depending on imported components and foreign technical expertise. Deployment can lower energy costs and emissions, but industrial learning requires additional arrangements. Using 2024 data, the International Energy Agency's Energy Technology Perspectives 2026 estimates that China held around 85 per cent of solar supply-chain production capacity. Cheap equipment has helped expand access to clean power. Such concentration also gives developing countries a reason to cultivate additional suppliers and capabilities. India should therefore use its partnerships to build selected

parts of clean-energy industries across participating economies. The objective would be practical specialisation: locally serviceable equipment, trained technicians and firms capable of meeting reliable quality standards. It would be wasteful to promise every partner a complete solar manufacturing chain. Countries should identify activities suited to their markets and workforce, then negotiate the investment and knowledge needed to enter them.

Finance determines whether this approach is credible. The IEA's 2025 survey found that the cost of capital for renewable power and battery projects in emerging and developing economies was at least twice that in advanced economies, with considerable variation between countries. A technically sound project can therefore struggle before construction begins. Cooperation that supplies machinery without addressing financing and payment risks may leave a partner with equipment it cannot afford to deploy widely. A useful next step would be a small group of willing countries jointly developing projects around a shared need, such as reliable electricity for food processing. Development banks could help finance preparation and assess carefully limited guarantees. Participating governments could coordinate technical specifications and purchasing schedules, giving suppliers a clearer market. Contracts should include maintenance training and realistic

opportunities for local firms. Public guarantees must disclose their fiscal exposure, and projects must remain viable under plausible currency and demand shocks.

There is already evidence that relatively modest cooperation can produce observable results. An April 2026 update from the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation reported that an India-UN Development Partnership Fund initiative in Zambia had helped more than 34,000 users adopt digital payments for essential services. Women accounted for 72 per cent of those users. The example concerns financial access, but its wider lesson is relevant: a defined local problem and a delivery partnership give cooperation a purpose that can be evaluated. Applying this discipline to industrial partnerships would require India to accept a reciprocal bargain. Partner countries will want their own suppliers to learn and compete. Indian firms would gain markets and durable commercial relationships, while sharing some technical knowledge and supporting local participation. An arrangement that leaves the partner permanently dependent on a single vendor would weaken India's claim to offer greater autonomy. Contracts should allow competitive servicing and protect the partner's ability to change suppliers.

These partnerships should also remain open to useful finance and technology from outside the Global South. India and the European Union concluded free-trade negotiations in January 2026. That development illustrates the scope

for pursuing relationships across institutional divides. European investment, Japanese technology or multilateral finance could contribute to projects chosen by developing-country partners. The governing question should be whether the terms expand productive capacity and preserve local decision-making. This approach would benefit India beyond export earnings. Firms operating in several markets could learn to produce for different climatic conditions, incomes and regulatory settings. Shared technical work could help participating governments argue more effectively over international standards. Countries receiving useful support would have concrete reasons to sustain cooperation with India. These gains would emerge from relationships built through delivery, and would remain contingent on the quality of that delivery.

The immediate task is to choose a manageable number of projects and publish what they achieve. Evaluation should follow financing costs, reliable service and the capabilities retained by local organisations. Partners should help define those measures and have access to the contracts and results. Disappointing projects should be corrected or discontinued. India's ambition to shape the world order will gain substance when cooperation gives other countries a stronger hand in shaping their own development.

The writer researches international political economy, industrial development and India's clean energy transition.

NOW AND AGAIN

A FAN'S TRIBUTE

SOURISH MISHRA

Like so many Bengalis, I am a die-hard fan of the legendary Uttam Kumar. I vividly remember the first time I saw him on screen: it was a Sunday evening in the 1980s, and I was just twelve or thirteen years old.

My parents and I had gathered around our black-and-white 'Upron' TV to watch 'Saptapadi' on Kolkata Doordarshan.

My admiration for the 'Mahanayak' is a family trait shared deeply by my late father, who was even fortunate enough to see him in person.

It was either the late 1960s or early '70s, and my father was pursuing his M.Com. One day, my father heard that his favourite hero would be attending a cultural program at the Star Theatre near Hati Bagan.

Not wanting to miss the chance of a lifetime, he rushed to the venue the very day tickets went on sale. To his surprise, the popular actor Anup Kumar was personally manning the counter that morning and handed my father his ticket.

The effort paid off handsomely; on the night of the show, my father's dream came true as he watched Uttam Kumar, elegantly clad in a traditional dhuti-punjabi, from just a few feet away.

Because I was born in the same year that the 'Mahanayak' passed away, I never had the chance to see him. However, I consider myself incredibly lucky to have touched the edges of his cinematic world.

Once met the legendary Supriya Devi, chatted with her for a few minutes, and even got her autograph. I also watched a live theatre performance featuring Uttam Kumar's brother, Tarun Kumar, and had the good fortune of meeting Lily Chakraborty, his brilliant co-star from the classic film 'Deya Neya'.

100 Years Ago

News Items

GANPATI PROCESSION

HINDUS PROTEST AGAINST MAGISTRATE'S ORDER

Yeotmal, Sept.

As a protest against a magisterial order prohibiting music and bhajan parties in the Ganpati procession in the vicinity of a mosque at Darwha, Hindus have resolved not to immerse the images unless and until they are allowed to take them, in procession with music. At a public meeting hold last night a resolution was passed protesting against the order, and a committee was elected to take measures to assert what the Hindus consider their right. The meeting also resolved to observe complete hartal to-day. A message from Mehkar in the Buldana District reports similar trouble. There also a committee has been formed to carry the matter to "its logical consequences," and to mark the local indignation hartal has been declared for November 21.

BOXING IN CALCUTTA

KID LEWIS TO MEET MILTON KUBE

Efforts to arrange a return contest between Battling Kid Lewis and Gunboat Jack have so far been unsuccessful as the latter finds it impossible to leave his business for sufficient time to enable him to train. It will be recalled that Battling Kid Lewis only lost by the narrowest margins at the end of a brilliant fifteen round contest when the men first met in Calcutta in August, and Lewis has now issued an open challenge, which has been accepted by Milton Kubes. The men are expected to meet at the Globe Theatre on October 8 over fifteen rounds at the middle-weight limit.

DEATH OF SHIKARI

HEART FAILURE AFTER GAME SHOOTING

(From Our Correspondent.)

Secunderabad, Sept.,

The death took place suddenly from heart failure of Mr. Bhowhani, Superintending Engineer, Hyderabad City Improvement Board, while big game shooting in the Pataveharuvu jungles. The remains were brought to Hyderabad yesterday for interment. Mr. Bhowhani was a popular figure in Hyderabad and the news of his sudden death came as a shock to his numerous friends.

Crossword | No. 293593

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

Last Sunday's Solution

D O L L O P S A M A I N T H A

E Y M R R R R U

T A R G E T S C O R P I O N

E I L L H A V A

R O C K E T S C I E N T I S T

A A T P P E T A U

T A L K I T U R K E Y B L U R

E A R E E L S E

S A R I P A R A N O R M A L

T E E D G E A

P U T O N E S F O O T I N I T

I S D H B S U

L E I S U R E D F A B I A N

O N R E L L O I

T R A V E S T Y G L E N Y S

ACROSS

9 Fit pair to be worn by Latvian hunchback (9)

10 Worker traps extremely gullible negotiator (5)

11 Soppo mouth attracting kiss from drunken lips? (7)

12 Obscure English knight against European from the East (7)

13 Worn-out fossil one to throw away (5)

14 One to march or stroll about in old

16 Regularly he's in suspect Yemen gallery CIA target (5,2,3,5)

19 Reptile displays pride in Tarsus recklessly (9)

21 Workers organised to run in short jacket (5)

22 King needs a wash, mum reflected in capital (7)

23 Dull reporter saying something cutting? (7)

24 Refuse to be carried in this cruise ship? (5)

25 Sound shortened in shout to encourage Maurice? (9)

DOWN

1 Up there: some endlessly stormy god (10)

2 Get weight reduced somehow — cook using this (5,5)

3 Swimmer takes position restricting current (6)

4 Urge charming female to go topless (4)

5 Meet old man entertaining men say (10)

6 Location likely to see better girl embracing star (3,5)

7 Days initially lost in broadcast confused situation (6)

8 One in flight has tantrums when climbing (4)

14 Not prepared for away match (3,7)

15 Writer's Christmas card impressing bird no end (4,6)

17 Freeholders from the Old Country Railway (8)

18 Sceptical sort acting so atrociously (8)

20 Fur coat owner's hesitant admission? (6)

21 Jerk outside court with adult signalling of course (5,3)

22 Flesh and blood covering fifty pots fired here (4)

23 On radio man would listen (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

Color calibration bars and registration marks.



# Lifetime Free Newspapers Access

## Editorials PDF

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

## Magazine Channel

National & International  
[General & Exam related]

## International Newspapers

Newspapers around world.  
Asian, European & American

## Hindi Newspapers

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

## Indian Newspapers Channel

1. The Indian Express

2. The Hindu

3. Business Line

4. Financial Express

5. Times of India

6. Hindustan Times

7. Economic Times

8. Live Mint

9. Business Standard





# Shop till you don't! The desi twist to a dopamine chase

From cart-ghosting to mock checkout, the Korean fad offers the thrill of fake-ordering food, gadgets & holidays with Indian coders behind several of these sites

Sneha.Bhura@timesofindia.com

The cart is full, the order is placed and the delivery is on its way. Except you paid nothing, and nothing is coming. By late May, a South Korean trend of 'dopamine websites' — fake e-commerce and lifestyle sites that mimicked the ritual of online shopping — had started circulating, without ever delivering the burger, sneakers or holiday package you booked. A country famous for viral internet trends, from Mukbang and Dalgona coffee to glass skin, had found a new one: a satirical cure for online shopping addiction. Soon, the question was whether Indian users had caught the bug too.

They had, but not in the way anyone expected. Scratch the surface and several sites — some racking up millions of impressions — had a distinctly Indian backend. From 20-something friends in Udaipur to an engineer in Mumbai selling pharmaceutical machinery by day, and a UPSC aspirant in Old Rajinder Nagar, all had read about the Korean trend and decided to build their own versions of phantom storefronts online. Curiously, though, Indian audiences aren't quite ready to confront their own midnight cravings and cart ghosting yet, and several Indian-built sites are now catering to an audience abroad.

## MADE IN INDIA

One such site is FoodNeverComes, built by Udaipur software developers Purvansh Parmar and Anshul, both in their twenties and frequently mistaken for South Korean. Here, you order a dish and watch a fake delivery tracker crawl towards your door for three or five agonising minutes. Your delivery agent might be a singing cat or Gary the snail. Eventually, they call to say they can't deliver your Katsu curry because they can't find your door, your street or even your city, and that there never really was any food to begin with because you didn't even pay.

Their English-and-Chinese website, with "22 kitchens, 327 dishes and 319 recipes", has received international coverage. "After it went live on June 24, we experimented with adding our own personal handles. But as soon as we did that, our traffic dropped by 96%," says Parmar. "Ninety-six". He says it twice. "Maybe they don't like Indians much." Their names came off and, he says, the traffic returned.

The site has had around 92,000 active users and "more than a million recorded events". The food isn't real, but the recipes are. "Why would we give fake recipes? A recipe blog of ours has even climbed Google's second page," he says with pride. Ask him whether the site solves an addiction or simply points at one, and he gets almost professorial. "Honestly, the site works more like a poem than an app. Everyone reads it differently," says Parmar. The duo has since extended the idea to travel with TripNeverLeaves, which plays on ticketing platforms, but rooted in the notion of 'all the escape, none of the stress'. "In real-life too, one person is doing all the planning, but others are in it just for the hit. They will share thoughts but then say things like 'My father said no' or make up some excuse. People actually get dopamine out of such things," says Parmar.

But the impulse these sites parody isn't entirely new. Shoppers have long browsed, filled carts and walked away without buying. The difference is that dopamine sites have made the abandoned cart the product itself.

Globally, about seven in ten online carts are abandoned before a purchase, according to Baymard Institute, which averages data from 50 e-commerce studies. Not every abandoned cart represents a frustrated purchase. Shoppers also use them to compare prices or park things they fancy.

Delhi-based entrepreneur Sonali Sokhal loves loading her cart with clothes and footwear on sites like Ajio, Nykaa and Myntra whenever she's bored or overwhelmed. "Twenty dresses sitting in my cart and sud-



**ORDER, ORDER:** They look like e-shopping sites, complete with checkout and delivery tracker, but no money changes hands and nothing arrives; the delivered parcel exists only in the imagination

denly, life feels good," she says. Months later, if she still wants something, she can "ruthlessly" trim the pile.

When FoodNeverComes began trending, Sokhal tried it and found make-believe ordering oddly comforting. "Instead of playing solitaire, I can just fake-buy. With the food sites, I can order anything with zero consequences," she says. Her only complaint? "Someone needs to build one of these for clothes too."

There may be something to the pleasure of shopping without owning anything. Cognitive neuroscientist and consumer-behaviour expert Shikher Chaudhary says much of shopping's reward lies in anticipation — browsing, choosing and imagining ourselves with a purchase — while the eventual arrival can be less exciting. "The actual pain point in the journey isn't the price being too high, it's the literal moment of payment: watching money leave your account. That's the one part of the process people instinctively want to avoid," says Chaudhary.

Whether or not they curb an actual purchase, India's developers have begun finding other ways to keep that make-believe reward going. Take Bhukkad, an app started by Mumbai engineer Akshay Joshi, 31, who sells pharmaceutical machinery otherwise. His version comes with food gifting, a cravings log and Guddu, a mascot who must be kept fed. "Guddu has hunger cycles similar to humans. Whenever you order mock food, it feeds the mascot. Sometimes, Guddu rejects the food at random if he doesn't like it or if the quality isn't as expected," says Joshi. Users can turn those cravings into Instagram Stories. "It looks good, it's relatable and attracts DMs, which is the whole point. We swap the dopamine of ordering with the dopamine of sharing. You can also 'gift' food to a friend. Fake food, but the gesture is real," says Joshi, who believes his app offers a solution to the very modern problem of wanting to be seen wanting food, and perhaps wanting someone else to send it to you. "We as a society are still not addressing the huge online ordering frenzy as a behavioural pattern. Throughout evolution, food has always been scarce," says Joshi, who believes our "monkey brains" have a

rough time resisting the targeted advertising on delivery apps.

## CART BLANCHE

Where FoodNeverComes sticks to food, and Bhukkad builds around cravings, DopeEat pushes the premise towards aspirational consumerism. "I added a 'Dope Shop' feature where you can shop for things people dream of. You can see a PS5, an Airwrap, an iPhone or even a car," says founder Prakhar Shukla, 25, a civil services aspirant in Delhi who built the site using an AI tool between study sessions. He dropped a couple of Instagram comments about it, went to sleep and woke up to traffic from the US and Asia. The biggest hits, he says, remain junk food like burgers from MacDope, fried chicken from DFC, pizza from Dopeminos, nachos from Taco Hell, and chaat from Jaldiram's.

Then there is the money. Shukla added a tip button, and people actually paid him. "I received a \$100 tip from someone in the US. Then I think someone from Malaysia or Indonesia also tipped me; someone had sent \$20, and someone else \$30," says Shukla, who informs that the tipping jar is still ringing.

A stranger overseas tipping in dollars for a fake McD's order built by a civil services aspirant between study sessions may best capture how far the trend has travelled, where even fake delivery can generate real money.

Some Indian fake-shopping sites don't even preach about consumerism-gone-mad. DopeMint has built a catalogue of very Indian everyday defeats, priced at zero rupees and marked down 80% from nothing. Anti-Aunty Earbuds that promise to 'Block' 'beta, shaadi kab?' at 40,000 Hz, or an Instant Six-Pack Sticker that 'Peels off' with your dignity after one samosa'. Each item comes with a fabricated discount, fake star rating, and a counter of people "pretending to buy". A site-wide tally claims 412,908 people are doing just that, while Rs 2.93 crore has been "saved by buying nothing".

There's also a 30-day "spend nothing" challenge, a confessions page, fake customer testimonials, and bestsellers such as 'athleisure for the sofa'. Whoever built it didn't want to talk when contacted by this reporter. Perhaps because the website talks plenty.

**"I added a 'Dope Shop' where you can shop for things people dream of — a PS5, an Airwrap, an iPhone or even a car. But the biggest hits remain burgers from MacDope, DFC fried chicken, Dopeminos pizza, and Jaldiram's chaat"**

**Prakhar Shukla, 25, FOUNDER OF A DOPAMINE FOOD DELIVERY APP**



# Why the law is yet to crack the digital privacy code

Experts say sweeping search and seizure powers enjoyed by investigative agencies puts personal information and privacy at risk

Himanshi.Dhawan@timesofindia.com

You may believe that a road rage investigation involving a collision and verbal altercation can hardly spiral into an inquisition. Journalist Abhishek Upadhyay discovered it the hard way that the long arm of the law can stretch backwards in time into a person's digital world — a gated and private enclave of an individual — to mine information far beyond what's required.

When Upadhyay was faced with an FIR in Aug and what he considered to be intrusive prying into his personal life and work, he rushed to the Supreme Court. The Ghaziabad police had sought access to his phone records from June 1 onwards to investigate a road rage incident that allegedly took place on Aug 18 this year.

He told the court that the police had also sought data from social media intermediaries, including YouTube and X, covering a period well before the date of the alleged offence. This included Upadhyay's international mobile equipment identity (IMEI) number, which uniquely identifies a mobile device. Interestingly, it was Upadhyay who had flagged the misappropriation of donations at the Ayodhya temple and alleged that he was being framed for that. SC then questioned the police, asking it to explain why the information was

needed, putting a pause to what appeared to be a search for unearthing his sources as Upadhyay alleged. It stayed his arrest, too.

The tussle between evidence gathering by investigative agencies and an individual's right to privacy and against self-incrimination is, however, only intensifying. The implementation of Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (BSA) and Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) in July 2024 set the stage for the conflict.

## WIDE-RANGING POWERS

Legal experts say the law doesn't have enough safeguards to protect individuals. Anuj Berry, lawyer and partner at law firm Trilegal, says the laws were designed for physical "filing cabinets", not devices holding a lifetime of data. Under the Indian Evidence Act, enacted in 1872, a search-and-seizure operation by the police meant a physical search of the suspect's house by checking cupboards and safes, and looking under the bed. The boundaries were clear; visible and tangible. "When BNSS expanded these powers to include electronic communication, it added no corresponding safeguards. The law conflates seizure (taking the device) with search (examining its contents). Once seized, no separate authorisation is needed to image (mirror) the device," Berry says. And unlike a safe that may

have a limited number of contents, our phones are now a portal to our lives. Cyber law expert Prashant Mali explains the scale of the problem. "A phone is no longer merely an object, it is almost a digital autobiography of its owner, with chats, photographs, financial and health information, location history, professional communication and, sometimes, confidential journalistic or legal sources. Therefore, seizing a handset and examining everything inside it cannot automatically mean the same thing," he says.

Berry points out another serious anomaly. "There is a regulatory asymmetry where real-time interception requires strict judicial oversight but accessing stored data on a seized phone requires none. The constitutional limit on compelling the revealing of passwords or providing biometrics also remains unsettled due to conflicting court decisions." Lawyers describe this as a "fishing and roving expedition" where an individual is arrested and his or her digital device seized and cloned even before the judicial process kicks in.

Experts point out that in the

## MISSING SHIELD

**Jurisdictions in US, UK & EU ensure Judicial authorisation before a digital device's content can be accessed**

**Necessity and proportionality must be proved by the agency**

**Oversight and audit of this work by courts or independent bodies**

Upadhyay case, access to phone records was demanded without any independent authorisation or showing a requirement for information related to the June-to-August window. "The court happened to intervene here because it was politically sensitive and was brought to its attention. In many cases, such matters may not come to the court's attention at all," says an academic.

Without that scrutiny, the same absence of oversight can play out far more brazenly. In Oct 2021, the Hyderabad police stopped commuters on a busy street to check their phones for chats about drugs. It was only after a severe backlash that the police said it was part of a crackdown but hastily withdrew the anti-drug drive.

As seen in Upadhyay's case, legal experts say agencies are often hoping to recover evidence which is a clear violation of the right against self-incrimination. Several court orders have allowed police to access biometric details from the accused to unlock a phone while ruling that an accused cannot be forced to reveal his or her password. Cyber law expert Mrudul Bhatt, writing in Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research, says, "However, this distinction collapses in practice because unlocking a phone by any method gives the police access to deeply testimonial content, making the act of unlocking functionally equivalent to compelled self-incrimination."

In Feb, two Jamia students had approached Delhi High Court, asking for their biometric data (collected by Delhi Police when they were questioned for merely participating in a campus protest in April

2025) to be deleted. They also demanded that Criminal Procedure (Identification) Act, 2022 — used to collect biometric details — be declared unconstitutional and void for "disproportionately infringing on the right to privacy, right against self-incrimination, as well as the guarantee against arbitrary state action" which remains pending before the court.

## WHAT THE LAW LACKS

Experts agree that any state action to access personal digital data must meet the 2017 privacy judgment's three-part test — legality, necessity and proportionality. It broadly means that there must be a law in place; the invasion of privacy must be for a legitimate state aim, like solving a crime; and there must be a rational link between the aim and invasion. The state should not use a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The warrant or authorisation should effectively say what are you looking for, why do you believe it is there, what period of data is relevant, and what offence does it relate to. "It should not be like 'Give me your phone and I will first read your entire life and then decide what may be relevant,'" says Mali.

A petition by the Foundation for Media Professionals seeking a digital doctrine has been pending since 2022, following which a committee was set up by the Union govt in 2023 but the issue has remained pending. Former SC judge Justice Madan Lokur says, "Experience of the past few years is an indication that a law must be enacted with necessary constitutional safeguards."

Zealous investigative agencies, often pressed for time and resources



when trying to catch criminals, may be tempted to bypass laws. They could, in fact, do worse. Earlier this month, grainy CCTV footage revealed what appeared to be two police personnel allegedly placing a phone in the house of Noida-based labour activist Srishri Gupta. The activist had been arrested and her phone seized in April. Yet, the visuals appeared to show the police placing Srishri's phone in her house to be "seized" later. Releasing the footage, Gupta's lawyer accused the police of "planting evidence". The police have denied the allegation but the jury is out on what may have happened.

Former Pune police commissioner Meeran Chadha Borwankar says that time is of the essence in investigations but officers do need to be trained in legal processes. "Clear rules help but a transparent and

well-documented/video-recorded recovery of any instrument used for a crime shall withstand judicial scrutiny. Our IOs need to be trained in legal processes involved in recovery extensively and regularly," she says. Berry explains how the legal process can help in this regard. "A reasoned court order must be obtained to examine a device's contents, distinct from the order to seize it. In urgent cases, access must be regularised by a warrant within a fixed period (e.g., 48 hours), failing which the material becomes inadmissible. The orders must specify the offence, categories of data, date ranges and search terms. The examination must be confined to these defined terms."

# MEET THE NEW EGGALITARIANS

Vegetarians are warming up to eggs as a cheap and easy protein fix brought by changing lifestyle and living away from home

Srirupa.Ray@timesofindia.com

*'Sunday ho ya Monday, roz khao ande'*

Here's another 80s trend worth going back to: an iconic tagline that egged on an entire generation to, well, eat more eggs. The ad campaign by the National Egg Co-ordination Committee (NECC) came at a time when poultry farmers were running dry, and India was grappling with severe malnutrition. It played a huge role in securing an 'eggnostic' consumer base in the country.

Cut to the present. Eggs are no longer just a boring breakfast item — they form a part of gym goals, enjoy fancy names in street-cart preparations, and have a growing fan base among vegetarians.

Akhilesh Chamoli started eating eggs in June, after a health scare prompted him to reconsider his diet. "I was feeling heavy-headed and restless," recalls the 28-year-old Ghaziabad techie. "I found I had high cholesterol, thyroid issues, and vitamin deficiencies. I was advised to eat more protein." But Chamoli comes from a family of staunch vegetarians. While mauling over whether to start on eggs, he saw several Instagram influencers recommending protein powders and bars. "When I compared the prices, I realised eggs were a cheaper and more convenient option." Eating eggs has made a marked improvement in his health, he says.

Moving out of home and its cultural moorings often

acts as a catalyst. IIT Bombay student Jitendra M started eating eggs five years ago when he shifted to a hostel. Coming from a strictly vegetarian Telugu family, he struggled with the idea of succumbing to eggs, but the dull, insipid vegetarian options helped him make up his mind. "The hostel food wasn't giving me enough protein. Dry fruits were too expensive. Eggs were a much better bet," says the 25-year-old. An avid swimmer, Jitendra noticed much faster muscle recovery once he included eggs in his diet. Of course, he is forced to revert to his "pure-veg" avatar when he goes back home as his mother refuses to have any eggs in her kitchen.

Priyanka Singh's mother has no clue that she and her sisters started eating eggs when they shifted from Jharkhand to Delhi for work. "Some friends told us we should try it. We liked the taste so much that we haven't been able to stop," says the 38-year-old communications professional who eats at least two eggs a day.

The numbers add up. India's egg consumption has almost doubled over the last decade, according to the Animal Husbandry Statistics that records egg availability going up from 62 eggs per person per year in 2014-15 to 106 eggs in 2024-25. Shruti Marwaha, chief commercial officer at D2C brand Licious, says their egg sales have pushed up by 80% over the last year. "A meaningful share of this is from consumers who identify as vegetarian but consume eggs. Most of our new-to-eggs customers today come from traditionally vegetarian households, a number that would have been unthinkable a decade ago."

There seems to be a cultural barrier that Gen Z is breaking, she says, adding, "Consumers are more open to reassessing old dietary boundaries when the reason is health, not just taste or tradition. This generational openness to questioning inherited food rules is one of the most lasting shifts in Indian food culture right now."

## CLOCKING PROTEIN GOALS

Nutritionists have long extolled the virtues of the humble egg. "It's a complete protein source with all nine essential amino acids, along with vitamin B12, choline and selenium," shares nutritionist Sayali Naik. "It offers a practical combination of high-quality protein, affordability and convenience. For many Indians, adding an egg or two can be an easy way to improve their protein intake without making major changes to their diet."

Naik has noticed a change in attitude among her vegetarian clients who struggled to meet their protein

needs through regular meals. The taboo around eggs has weakened. "Some people who grew up considering eggs non-vegetarian have now become open to the idea after understanding their nutritional value," she says.

Nutritionist Ishi Khosla agrees that the driving force is protein. "While gym-goers are primarily behind this rise, doctors are also recommending more protein to patients recovering from illness or undergoing cancer therapy," she says.

Dr Ambuj Roy, professor of cardiology at AIIMS Delhi, says it's a boon for a carb-heavy India that's chronically deficient in protein. "A 2025 ICMR study has shown how excess carbs have led to a high number of people with diabetes and heart disease in India. Replacing carbs with protein reduces the chances of diabetes and prediabetes significantly," he says.

Don't eggs raise one's cholesterol? That belief stems from older, highly exaggerated dietary guidelines, adds Dr Roy. There are very few super-responders whose lipids would shoot up with an egg. "For most people, even someone with heart disease, one egg a day is not a problem as long as it's part of a balanced diet."

In a testament to the growing recognition of its health benefits, states like West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have continued with eggs in their midday meal schemes to tackle childhood malnutrition despite protests.

## MORAL DILEMMA

There has long been a debate on eggs being veg or non-veg, with neither side ready to give in. The logic and reasoning of eggs being vegetarian remain controversial among those who hold that they are animal protein, and thus qualify as non-veg accord-



**States like West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have continued with eggs in their midday meal schemes to tackle childhood malnutrition despite protests**

ing to their cultural and religious beliefs.

A hint of the strong feelings that such a debate provokes comes from a contentious 2005 NECC advert depicting Mahatma Gandhi as brand ambassador to promote egg consumption. The advert had to be withdrawn after a severe backlash from vegetarians. It referenced Gandhi's paper "The moral basis of vegetarianism", where he pointed out, "A sterile egg never develops into a chick... He who can take milk should have no objection to taking sterile eggs."

Food science writer Krish Ashok agrees. "Vegetarianism allows animal products, provided there is no death of the animal involved. Your reason for consuming milk and milk products is that the cow is not killed." The same reasoning applies to a hen as it does not have to be killed for eggs, he says.

For Puneet Singhal, whose family members were involved in rearing cows for commercial milk distribution, it was the illegal practice of injecting antibiotics and hormones into the animals that proved to be an eye-opener. "I saw them being injected to increase milk production. It scared me enough to avoid milk and dairy products," recalls the 30-year-old development consultant. "After that, all I could think of as a safe option was eggs."

And then there are lazy cooks like Ghaziabad-based architect Ketan Anand, for whom eggs are a godsend when the house help doesn't turn up. "I switched to eating eggs about four months ago. Boiling a couple of them is about all the effort I want to put into a meal," he says.

*Additional reporting by Neetika Jha*



Nirmal John & Lijee Philip

Early this month, nine employee bodies of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) wrote a letter to chairman V Narayanan, who is also secretary of the Department of Space, on the future of the agency. The gist of their concern: Will the entry of the private sector diminish one of India's crown jewels? Will ISRO, they asked, be reduced to a "residual R&D boutique while the realisation of the nation's launch vehicles and the operation of its launch infrastructure pass out of public hands?"

It is a worry anchored in the space agency's stellar achievements. ISRO has, for decades, been a lone ray of sunshine, inspiring and innovating despite the odds and even while working from within the lethargic, labyrinthine sarkari system.

The worry also comes on the trail of the private sector's surprisingly quick strides into space, triggered by the Indian Space Policy 2023. This advance was spurred by startups and supplemented by increased corporate participation.

Across the world, as states yield their monopoly to nimble, venture-backed space startups, India is also betting that partnering with private enterprises can turn a national symbol into a global commercial titan. This transition is a delicate balancing act and requires clarifying ISRO's role—to its employees and the public at large.

ISRO has to empower commercial players without eroding its core capabilities and public trust.

BIG BOOM

The global shift to private enterprises in the space sector has been mostly triggered by NASA deciding to encourage private investment in the 1980s, guided in no small measure by the realisation that routine flights to lower Earth orbit (LEO) was inhibiting its ability to invest in bigger missions. The winding up of its space shuttle programme also influenced the policy since it meant that NASA would otherwise have to rely on Russian rockets for critical activities like human spaceflight.

In 2006, NASA created the Commercial Orbital Transportation Services (COTS) programme, which eventually brought in the likes of Boeing and SpaceX. The latter's innovations like partially reusable rockets have contributed to a substantial lowering of cost to access space.

The cost of sending 1 kilo of payload to LEO used to be \$20,000-50,000 a couple of decades ago. It has now come down to \$1,500-5,000, according to sources. Thanks to this lowering of costs, the number of satellites launched into space grew from just 72 in 2005 to 4,510 in 2025.

Cheaper launches made new space businesses—from earth observation to broadband constellations and defence applications—commercially viable.

There has been a massive increase in commercial activity in space, triggering an equally big boom in the space services segment. This is the backdrop against which ISRO has sought to change.

India watched these changes unfold for more than a decade. But translating them into domestic policy proved slower.

ISRO's efforts around private involvement in space started rather disastrously with an ill-fated deal with Devas Multimedia in 2005, which resulted in a decade-long court battle. The controversy made policymakers more cautious about private participation for years.

ISRO withdrew into a shell, hindering early efforts to build private sector momentum in space—like TeamIndus' work on an independent moon mission in 2018.

The orbit shifted after 2020, with a wave of space startups and sectoral reforms. It culminated in the formalisation of private participation in the 2023 space policy.

OPENING UP

The growth of India's private space sector has been faster than many expected, with 400-odd startups cumulatively raising nearly \$800 million. Big corporations have also joined in.

Manish Singhal, founding partner at pi Ventures, an early backer of rocket-maker AgniKul Cosmos, says a massive supply-demand gap, especially in launches, was evident by then. "There were a lot more satellites waiting to go up into space and not enough options available to them."

Pawan Kumar Chandana, cofounder of rocket-maker Skyroot Aerospace, agrees. The depth of the space business opportunity is immense, he says. The new space policy has allowed the private sector to "build rockets and satellites and do independent business as well as to get access to public infrastructure so that we can take the country to the next orbit". He adds: "For, though we are a space power, India only has 2% share in the overall market."

While startups are innovating and building rockets from scratch, a key aspect of the space policy has been to transfer the manufacture of mature launchers like small satellite launch vehicles (SSLVs) and polar satellite launch vehicles (PSLVs) to the private sector, thereby freeing ISRO to focus on increasing the number of launches, which are critical. When SpaceX did 170 launches last year, ISRO could do only 5.

Without enough rockets, India cannot compete for payload. Experts in the sector say that expecting ISRO to scale up manufacturing of rockets or even satellites is not practical.

The government allocated a mere ₹13,705.63 crore (about \$1.65 billion) to the Department of Space, which oversees ISRO, for FY27. NASA's FY26 budget, meanwhile, is \$24.4 billion. Supplementing India's space budget with private capital is crucial to increase India's share in the global market.

The opportunity to manufacture mature launchers has caught the eye of big corporations. Larsen & Toubro, which has supplied hardware to launch-vehicle programmes for decades, is moving further up the value chain. Its consortium with Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) has been contracted for end-to-end production of five PSLV-XLs.

The next step could be Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM3). ISRO has initiated the process of transferring technology for the heavy-lift launcher to a private Indian company or consortium, with L&T and the Adani Group reportedly among entities considering an expression of interest.

This should bring in economies of scale, helping India compete better on cost with the likes of SpaceX in the global launch services market.

Most experts underline that this shift does not mean ISRO's role will diminish, as its employee unions seem to worry.

BN Suresh, former ISRO scientist and ex-director of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, points to the agency's

Orbital Shift

India's space sector is seeing its biggest transformation yet: as private firms handle rockets, ISRO can focus on its more ambitious missions

SKY IS NOT THE LIMIT

ISRO's major projects in the works

GAGANYAAN: India's first human spaceflight mission

REUSABLE LAUNCH VEHICLE: For low-cost, reliable, on-demand space access

CHANDRAYAAN 4: A lunar sample-return mission

SHUKRAYAAN: An interplanetary orbiter mission to study Venus' surface, subsurface, atmospheric composition

BHARATIYA ANTARIKSH STATION: Modular space station in low Earth orbit

NEXT GENERATION LAUNCH VEHICLE: With 3x payload capacity than LVM3 & reusability

NAVIGATION WITH INDIAN CONSTELLATION: Navigation satellite system to address the nation's needs

STRATEGIC PROJECTS: For safeguarding national security interests in and from space

Source: ISRO, industry

Astrobase cofounder Neeraj Khandelwal says, "ISRO is the central pillar around which everything else can grow"

continuing responsibilities in meeting the demands of the nation in areas such as remote sensing even as it pursues ambitious missions requiring advanced research and development.

NEXT STAGE

The government's decision to give private sector a larger share of hardware production is an evolution rather than a simple transfer of responsibility, says Suresh. He adds that ISRO has to play a handholding role to accelerate the progress in private enterprises.

Astrobase cofounder Neeraj Khandelwal says, "ISRO is the central pillar around which everything else can grow."

A senior figure in India's space ecosystem underlines, on condition of anonymity: "Unlike what conversations seem to suggest, ISRO is not being privatised. It is the commercial opportunities around space that are being opened to private capital and that will help the country. Once private sector participates in the routine work of launching rockets and manufacturing satellites, it will create more bandwidth in ISRO to target bigger projects like an Indian space station, the Venus mission, or the next generation launch vehicle."

Awais Ahmed, founder and CEO of space technology company Pixxel, too, says the policy will help ISRO focus on even more inspirational projects and missions. Subba Rao Pavuluri, founder of Ananth Technologies and former ISRO scientist, sees the interplay between the space agency and private industry as a natural progression of the sector's transition. "Whenever change comes, there is confusion, but that doesn't mean there is problem," he says, pointing to similar changes in sectors such as telecom and defence.

FIND THE RIGHTFUL SPACE

The senior figure, who has spoken to ET on condition of anonymity, also suggests that ISRO and the broader space ecosystem should do a better job of communicating to

SPACE FOR MORE

Space-tech startups & their focus areas  
SKYROOT AEROSPACE: Develops Vikram series of launch vehicles

AGNIKUL COSMOS: Builds customisable small-satellite launch vehicles

PIXXEL: Builds hyperspectral imaging satellites to observe changes on Earth

DHRUVA SPACE: Supplies modular satellite platforms, launch and ground-station services, and related systems for space missions

DIGANTARA: Tracks satellites and debris in orbit, provides intelligence data for safer space operations

GALAXEYE: Combines radar and optical satellite imagery to provide Earth observation in different weather and lighting conditions

BELLATRIX AEROSPACE: Manufactures propulsion systems that help satellites stay in orbit, as well as orbital transfer vehicles

SATSURE: Uses satellite imagery, remote sensing and AI to generate data for various sectors

PIERSIGHT: Uses radar satellites and vessel data to monitor maritime activity

MANASTU SPACE: Develops environment-friendly propulsion systems for satellites

Source: Websites of companies, industry

SPACE ECONOMY

Private players have given a thrust to the space sector

\$613 bn

Size of space economy globally in 2024

\$1.8 trillion (E)

Size of space economy globally by 2035

\$8.4 bn

Size of India's space economy now

\$44 bn (P)

Size of India's space economy by 2033

\$7.9 bn

Global private investment in space sector in 2024

92% Share of venture capital in pvt funding in space sector

400+ (E)

No. of space startups in India

Source: EY-CII Report, Industry

internal stakeholders like employee unions what this transition entails. This is also a key demand of the unions.

As their letter says, "Serving employees have an earned right to be informed, consulted and protected. Natural justice and good administration require that policy of this magnitude be explained to the workforce by the Department itself."

The concerns are likely to come into focus on October 7, when the ISRO Pensioners Association will hold a conference on the "Future of ISRO" in Thiruvananthapuram. Several former officials are expected to attend it. The intention, according to people associated with the conference, is to place before the prime minister their concerns about the direction in which the organisation is headed. "There is not enough staff strength, and the government is not doing enough recruitment. There is concern about the very existence of ISRO. We feel the relationship and the communication are strained," says an official of the association, on condition of anonymity.

Over the decades, ISRO has built not just rockets but massive engineering capabilities by designing, manufacturing and integrating launch vehicles in-house. Some employees worry that transferring

these activities to the private sector could, over time, erode institutional capability. It is up to ISRO to allay those fears, both by action and communication.

ET's queries to ISRO remained unanswered at the time of going to press.

Apart from the issue around the unions, an air of positivity hangs around the sector. "Space technology has a multiplier effect on industry," says Jayaraj Rajapandian, head of aerospace and defence, Tata Elxsi, a design and technology services company. If Indian firms can solve the exacting engineering problems posed by space, he says, those capabilities can spill over to aerospace, defence, railways, automotive and healthcare sectors where safety and mission-critical engineering are important.

For Rajapandian, a larger role for industry comes with a corresponding increase in responsibility. Companies will need to invest in advanced tools and machinery, develop specialised talent, work with global OEMs and manufacturing partners, and strengthen processes around quality assurance, risk management, certification and lifecycle support.

It should help India find its rightful space commercially. And as the private sector takes over routine launches and manufacturing, ISRO can add another dimension to make India's space story even more remarkable. It can become an institution that pushes the boundaries of science rather than be one that simply builds rockets.

As Pavuluri says, "In the space economy, everyone will have a role to play."

nirmal.john1@timesofindia.com

Nupur Amarnath

Sarfraz Ahmed, head chef at Tresind Mumbai, has plenty of plates. Over 10,000, at last count. There's also assorted crockery, cutlery and thingamajigs designed to bring something extra to the table. Collected from around the world, nearly half the crockery comes from Studio RAW, which makes bespoke tableware, in the Netherlands.

Excessive? Perhaps not, when you do the maths. Tresind serves 60-75 people for dinner, which can mean some 900 plates over 14 courses. Every time the menu changes, so do the plates and cutlery. "Everything on the plate tells a story. It usually starts with selecting the ingredients and deciding on the texture and the flavour. Then comes plating, keeping the guest's experience in mind," says Ahmed. "Will the guest be comfortable eating it is the guiding principle."

Welcome to purposeful plating, where food is served to whet your curiosity as much as your appetite.

LOT ON THE PLATE

At the recently opened Raga by Gaggan in Delhi, Lick It Up is a popicle painted on the plate and is experienced by licking it clean. Rydo Anton, chef and cofounder, says plating begins with the question: What should the guest feel before they understand what they are eating? "Curiosity, recognition, confusion and nostalgia can all be part of the first bite."

Its Golden Egg is a gilded egg resting on a crisp nest. The sight tickles the fancy but it carries the old flavours of pani puri. "The form creates intrigue, but the flavour brings you immediately back to something deeply familiar," says Anton.

Indian Accent, the OG in bringing purpose to plating in India, serves its palate cleanser in a toy pressure cooker. Its shorba comes in clay pottery cups, while ghee roast mutton and soya boti have been served in customised miniature copper pans.

Waiter, There's Art on My Plate

Is it golden egg or golgappa? Plates are the new canvas and chefs the new artists

Johnson Ebenezer serves bites on a hand-glazed ceramic map of Karnataka, cut into three interlocking jigsaw pieces. He says his childhood Sundays listening to sermons inspired The Miracle Course: Loaves, Fishes and Cana. The plate for the crisp fish ripples

TILLER OF THE SOIL



Farmlore's Tiller of the Soil is inspired by Nandalal Bose



Pani puri, presented like a golden egg on a potato nest, at Raga by Gaggan

Beauty without ease of eating is a broken promise

JOHNSON EBENEZER, chef & cofounder, Farmlore

largastronomy and social media. Also, restaurants themselves have changed. "Restaurants have overtaken most other forms of entertainment and become destinations in themselves. Moreover, food is one thing that involves all the senses," she says. Singh mentions chef Nikhil Nagpal

For me, the test is clear: if you remove the story, the food still taste delicious?

RYDO ANTON, chef & cofounder, Raga by Gaggan

at ITC Maurya's Avartana, who presents thayir sadam in a sea-through glass jar finished with dried red chilli, and Himanshu Saini at Tresind Studio in Dubai, who presents khichdi on a marble cutout map of India. "It is not only delicious but also a learning experience."

That sense of place is important for Rahul Sharma, chef at Nila in Bengaluru. Its Ladakhi dishes are served on rocks, which recall those he saw at the Sangam where the Indus meets the Zaskar. His dish, Raktse Karpo Apricots, has flower-shaped apricots served on a rosemary plant,

while Ladakhi Turnip uses a hollowed-out turnip as the bowl for a custard and pickle made from the same tuber. "Plating should have a double impact on the diner: the first with how the dish looks, and the second with how it tastes and connects back to the ingredient and the story behind it," says Sharma.

At the newly revamped Masque in Mumbai, which opens its doors on October 1, executive chef Varun Totlani is clear that ease of eating is the guiding principle. The team lays out its collection of

customised plates—usually made by ceramicists in Bhopal. Totlani's considerations are surprisingly prosaic. Will sauce flow off the edge? Does the cutlery glide smoothly on the dishes? Will the diner have to tilt a bowl to get the last spoonful of broth? Will a steak knife grate awkwardly against a ridged plate? "Something can be super pretty but not convenient to eat, and that doesn't work for me."

NEW RULES ON THE TABLE

Across kitchens, a surprisingly consistent plating rulebook exists. Fluff is frowned upon. Says Shantanu Mehrotra, executive chef at Indian Accent: "There is a very thin line between creative plating and gimmickry." A plate should be clean and considered, he says, rather than overloaded

The moment presentation becomes more important than food, it starts becoming theatre

RAHUL SHARMA, chef & founder, Nila

with garnishes. "Every element should have a reason for being there."

Ahmed ensures everything on his plate is edible. For Totlani, flowers or microgreens make the cut only when their flavour matters. Sharma's test is whether the presentation supports the food or overwhelms it: "The moment presentation becomes more important than food, it starts becoming theatre." Ebenezer may have some method to the madness. He sketches a rough layout of each course, usu-

Plating is becoming big, thanks to social media—you can't taste through the phone

VARUN TOTLANI, chef, Masque

ally a map of where things sit and where the eye lands, but at go time, intuition takes over. "The real design happens at the pass with the team. We plate it, step back, move things and plate it again."

His thumb rule: the vessel must serve the food and the diner should never have to wrestle with dinner. "Beauty without ease of eating is a broken promise."

PHONE EATS FIRST

There's another diner permanently at the table: the phone camera. Totlani acknowledges it: "On social media, plating is No. 1 because you can't taste through the phone."

Singh points to what good plating can achieve: "Whimsical plating can create expectations the food may not live up to. When done well, visual presentation heightens anticipation, flavour and memory."

Ultimately, the experience of eating is what stays. As Anton says, "The real reveal should happen in the mouth, not on the screen." Ebenezer recalls dining at Piazza Duomo in Piedmont, where chef Enrico Crippa's folded cards interpreted the dishes. "History was handed to me before my fork even moved. That's the whimsy I chase now—not flowers and leaves for texture, but a small object or story that changes how the plate is understood."

For Anton, the line is whether presentation changes the experience of eating. "For me, the test is clear: if you remove the story, the unusual vessel and the theatrical presentation, does the food still taste delicious?" That is something to chew on.

nupur.amarnath@timesofindia.com

AI-GENERATED IMAGE



# How Ed Sheeran Went 'Indian' & Didn't Mix Politics With His Entertainment

America – where Trump is up for 'non-veg' gaali, and Bruce Springsteen performed wearing a t-shirt labelling George W Bush a 'criminal' – is also being prudent about money overwhelming conscience

## FUNNY BUSINESS



ANUVAB PAL

That was an Instagram gag. Sheeran seems like the sort of entertainer everybody likes. He steers clear of controversy, sings gentle ballads, and embodies the Gen Z rock star ethos — less breaking things, more delicate IIT-topper-with-a-guitar-hobby vibes. That is, until Gaza got him.

Last week, Sheeran took the stage at Philadelphia's Lincoln Financial Field alone, with no opening act. The solo billing followed a controversy that began on Sep-

tember 4, when rapper Macklemore, Sheeran's opening act at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey, spoke about Gaza and expressed support for Palestine. Macklemore performed 'Hind's Hall', a song inspired by the 2024 killing of 5-year-old Palestinian girl Hind Rajab, and the subsequent pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia University.

The backlash was immediate. In 'the land of free speech', several billionaire stadium-owners, led by Robert Kraft, owner of American football team New England Patriots and Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts, made Sheeran's performance conditional on dropping Macklemore from his 'Loop Tour'. Dropping an opening act, rather than cancelling a whole tour, seemed like the least harmful option. Until there was a backlash against Sheeran for taking a 'pro-

Israel' stance. Can one be an apolitical artist in 2026? And can venue-owners have a say in an artist's politics?

Closer to home, I'm reminded of the other side of this power equation. In the post-Babri Masjid riots of the 1990s, actors were urged by state media to request people to stay at home. Even now,

from Aadhaar to vaccination, top actors are roped in to build trust.

Remo Fernandes, who, at the height of his popularity in the mid-80s, was asked to do an anti-drug song. He wrote 'Pack That Smack', which, with lyrics like, 'If you meet a cold turkey on your cold and lonely road/ And you start to feel jerky and you need a hand to hold,' ironically, almost seems like the song was pro-drugs.

Artists may enjoy enormous cultural influence. But they rarely hold the stronger hand. If a billionaire or large company owns a venue, and the artist, much lower in the hierarchy, has controversial views, then the show will be cancelled.

Which is why it's common for Indian stars to never share what they think on sticky issues. This results in social media complaining that we never hear 'politics' from big stars, followed by a demand to

boycott the artist's work. The stars have learnt that when all is forgotten, nothing good comes out of taking a side politically in India. So, they shut up. And it bodes them well. Because, in the long run, people flock to their movies anyway.

## Sheeran steers clear of controversy, sings gentle ballads, and embodies the Gen Z rock star ethos: delicate IIT-topper-with-a-guitar-hobby vibes. Until Gaza got him

But it's routine for Indian comedians who say something against authority to receive threats, and for venues to say it isn't safe and the show is cancelled. Unlike in stadiums, an 'anti-national' comedian, enabling even minor damage to a shabby Pune or Mumbai hall, will exceed their maintenance budget. So the venues don't want to take a chance.

A brave Mumbai comedy venue owner once told me, 'If we know a mob is coming, we usually remove all the chairs, so they have nothing to throw. They get frustrated. One goon started banging his head against

a wall, as they need to make a good reel showing they're breaking things'.

In 'the land of free speech', however, where rappers have lyrics that encourage their fans to kill the police, and where Donald Trump is up for lewd symbolism, and

## JUGULAR VEIN



JUG SURAIYA

## BRICS Khichdi Simmering in The Global Pot

Can this messy alliance of rivals ever cook up a stable new world order?

Can the humble khichdi be an inspirational integer binding together that motley geopolitical mélange called BRICS? The 11-member formation, with 10 more eagerly-beaverly waiting to join up — which submitted in New Delhi not too long back with considerable circumstance and not a little pomp — seeks to act as a counterbalance to a homogenised scheme of things represented by a grouping called the G-7 (Geel 7 only?) not to mention an Uncle Sam-son seemingly determined to bring down the pillars of a rules-based order in favour of a rule-based disorder of one-man, one-rule, beginning and ending in the Oval Office.

Like khichdi, BRICS is a hotch-potch of diverse ingredients, which can be customised to suit different, and even divergent, imperatives of ideologies and digestion. Tracing its origins to the Indian subcontinent over 2,000 years ago, khichdi is said to derive its name from the Sanskrit 'khicca'.

It comprises a simple one-course meal composed of rice and dal. With its nutritional benefits and its suitability even for convalescents, the dish finds laudatory mention in ancient Ayurvedic treatises like Charaka Samhita. Mahabharat notes a doting Draupadi feeding invigorating khichdi to the Pandav Brothers-Husbands to sustain them through the rigours of exile.

Forerunners of globe-trotting tourists, like the Greek Megasthenes of the 3rd c. BCE, and the Moroccan Ibn Batuta in the 14th c. CE, reportedly made praiseworthy mention of it in their despatches, with the wayfarer from Morocco calling it 'kishi-ri'. Khichdi found its way — perhaps by the backdoor tradesman's entrance — into the opulent ambience of the royal Mughal court, where it was elevated to haute and haughty cuisine, with the addition of savoury spices and non-vegetarian embellishments. In his 16th c. record of Akbar's reign, Ain-i-Akbari, Abul Fazl provides a recipe calling for equal proportions of rice, dal, and ghee, with a selection of subtle spices.

Via the circuitous route of the British Raj, khichdi found its way to Victorian dining tables as a breakfast buffet favourite in the form of 'kedgerie', which incorporated fish and a garnish of eggs.

With its adaptability to many and varied climes and conditions, khichdi provides an apt, some might say appetising, metaphor for the multi-purpose, multi-polar, cartographically cosmopolitan combo of BRICS that endeavours to lay down the building blocks of a new world order based on a commonality of equitable interests.

But even as the very versatility of khichdi might make it desirable as an all-encompassing comestible of ubiquitous alimentary applicability, the variegated socio-political smorgasbord of BRICS has its internal anomalies and contradictory constraints. The two largest constituents of the federation, China and India, don't see 'I to I' on several issues, including Beijing's persistence in spelling the Indian state of Arunachal as Zangnam, and a 3,488km-long LoAC of disagreement, which includes Aksai Chin and Galwan. Newcomers to the conglomerate — Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE — are, or have been, at daggers drawn.

Meanwhile, from his imperial eyrie in the Kremlin, Tsar Vladimir might well muse on whether such disparate associates would ever be able to assess and appreciate the real, or even the rouble, price of the onion domes of Red Square, even as Brasilia wonders if it's nuts to form such an alliance, and Pretoria begins to feel that the whole thing might be going 'globally south', in the figurative sense of the term.

With Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Vietnam all waiting to sign up on the dotted line, BRICS+ augurs to morph from a user-friendly acronym to an unpronounceable alphabet soup, a menu of multipolarity, analogous not to the consonance of khichdi, but to the dissonance betokening a khichdi-sink drama.

## More Baby Elephants, Enough EC, Please

It makes no sense to consume bad news — a world that feels good about good news should only stick to it

### RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

I never truly understood the natural inclination of market sentiment until I encountered the baby elephant. You know, that baby elephant rescued by Mithu and Rajesh Das and a few other fishermen from the engorged waters of the Teesta last week in West Bengal's Siliguri. It was like the whole country had taken a giant mushy endorphin shot, topped up with a lovely line of snow.

Only a few days later came the damning

topped up with a comforting line of snow.

But both points of high and low raise a larger issue. Knowing that good news makes us happy and bad news makes us unhappy, why the heck do we not just abolish or block bad news? I mean, we chuck food that's inedible. We don't look into the sun. We desist from playing Rabindrasangeet in rave parties.

I suspect we still latch on to it because bad news is good news for some — and vice versa.

There is delicious pleasure in 'I told you so,' or bursting the balloon of someone, or a type of people, you don't like. This is something that perambulators and eternal optimists simply won't get. Wanting an asteroid to come crashing down, even if that means squishing the person wishing it, isn't that perverse when you consider how seriously he or she may want to disprove the coming of 'achhe din' mentioned in the *other* Book

## It's strange that a strand of Darwinian evolution — survival of the happiest — hasn't extinguished our appetite for bad, unpleasant, or disconcerting news

news report in The Indian Express about, among other things, the chief election commissioner hiding key decisions taken on the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral roll exercise from his two other colleagues who comprise the top brass of EC. It's the sort of news you, as an upstanding citizen who pays his taxes and sings the sixth stanza of *every* song, don't want to believe, until confronted with facts. And then, you wish you had a giant mushy endorphin shot

of Revelations.

But it's strange that a strand of Darwinian evolution — survival of the happiest — hasn't extinguished our appetite for bad, unpleasant, or disconcerting news, thereby still providing demand for supply of bad news from the media, entertainment, and knowledge industries. For every rom-com, there's more than one trag-mahal.

Thankfully, the modern political economy has established beyond reasonable

doubt that good news is, well, good.

Sometimes even when it's not good. Under all circumstances, good sentiment hona chahiye. Stock markets run on it. Consumer confidence depends on it. Property prices enjoy it. Governments insist upon it. Startups get their seed money from it.

'Sentiment' is perhaps capitalism's greatest invention after limited liability. Nothing actually needs to improve. Peo-



### JUST FOLLOW THE SENTIMENT

ple just need to *feel* that things will. This explains the magnificent elasticity of financial optimism. Interest rates fall: bullish. Interest rates rise: the central bank is fighting inflation, also bullish. Unemployment falls: strong economy, bullish. Unemployment rises slightly: rate cuts

may come sooner, bullish. A company loses ₹320 cr instead of the expected ₹420 cr, and its shares jump 11%.

The rupee has not fallen; it has created exciting opportunities for exporters. Oil has reached \$150, demonstrating robust global demand. A crash is only an 'accelerated price discovery'. Bankruptcy is a zero-debt lifestyle'.

We all know 'negativity bias'. Place 10 harmless objects and 1 cobra in a room, and the brain will spend an unreasonable amount of time thinking about the cobra, instead of appreciating the furniture. But if you already knew your brain is biased negatively, surely you would compensate for that hardwired prejudice and inculcate and evangelise 'positivity bias'.

Bad news may traditionally have stronger customer retention, higher engagement, better recall. But it's not just the markets that cajole us to be happy by following only happy news, while dismissing the rest. There's that delightfully cheerful character in the 1979 quasi-Biblical black comedy, Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, who sings while he's nailed to the cross: 'When you're feeling in the dumps, don't be silly chumps/ Just purse your lips and whistle, that's the thing, and/ Always look on the bright side of life...'

So enough of bickering and surreptitious election commissioners, please. More rescued baby elephants, my friend.

indrajit.hazra@timesofindia.com

## Ladies, We Can Be 26% Richer (If We Work)!

However you spin the definition of 'work', women in the labour market pays

### MUCH ADU ABOUT NOTHING



ADITI MITTAL

Earlier this month, I attended a conference on women's participation in the workforce. Now, let me be honest, I'm less work-force, and more of a 'forced to work' girl.

The first time I confronted the realities of Indian working women was in 2018 in a magazine I regularly pick up at airports to impress the person I buy it from. It had a cover story about India's poor female labour force participation rate (LFPR). For July 2026, according to periodic labour data, it was 34.4%, slightly above Saudi Arabia's 33.6% for 2025.

The data were paradoxical in the way only India can be with its clash of incentives, markets, and gender attitudes. One finding said richer households flex their social status by discouraging women to 'work' outside the home. Another finding suggested that increased schooling among women was actually a societal ploy to become more attractive in the marriage, not the labour market.

Another study scolded India for not evolving its labour markets to accommodate more women. It concluded with an interesting data point: if more women are brought into the workforce, India could be 26% richer than it is. Even though I didn't like the tone of this last study, the larger points made sense. How can a country reap its demographic dividend if it can-

not reap its gender dividend?

The second time I encountered this subject was in 2019. A journalist messaged by on Facebook asking me whether I knew about declining female LFPR in India as cited in the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) that had just come out? I was, like, wait, is this someone trolling me for being jobless? Instead, it sparked a 2-season podcast, 'Women in Labour' that I co-hosted with her, interviewing various professional women, who had already spent considerable time trying to demystify the clash of markets, incentives, and gender attitudes that made

## Let me be honest, I'm less workforce, and more of a 'forced to work' girl



PAISA KAMAYE TO DARNA KYA

this problem so unique to India.

One finding from that 2019 PLFS that sticks with me 7 years later is the fact that even the way the data point of '26% richer' was arrived at was at best, well, haphazard. But it was the first PLFS. There were bound to be some hiccups. For example, many women working in the ru-

ral, informal sector, didn't even consider themselves as working — they would just *be* at the shop, on the field. It wasn't 'work' to them, certainly not in the way that they reported when a government official asked.

Even in 2026, the jury is still out on if housework and carework, two deeply 'feminised' realms of activity, can even be counted as contributing towards the economy. The activity that goes into making India's labour force ready for 'economic' value creation should also have economic value, no? And how would we collect and evaluate that data?

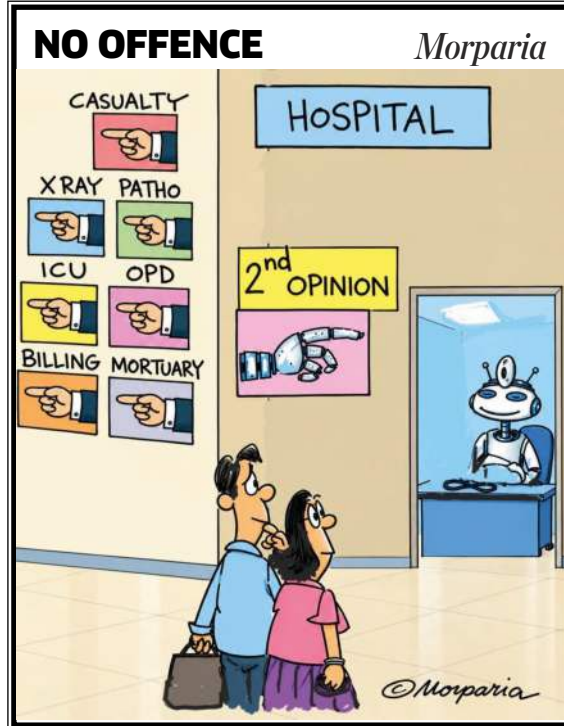
At last month's conference, I was in for some good news. According to collected data, the female LFPR was up from before. According to Ashoka University economist Ashwini Deshpande, this apparently signals that more women are becoming self-employed.

Other analysts lament that turning to self-employment in large numbers is a sign of a job market in distress. That the lack of opportunities 'outside' makes women turn 'indoors'. Then there are downright sceptics who think the government has merely changed the metrics with which it measures female LFPR to boost the numbers. In other words, somehow manipulating alarm bells set off to sound like temple bells.

'How does it matter, Aditi, what some data says or doesn't say? When is a woman not working? You'll believe your eyes, or you'll believe some numbers?' says my mother dismissively.

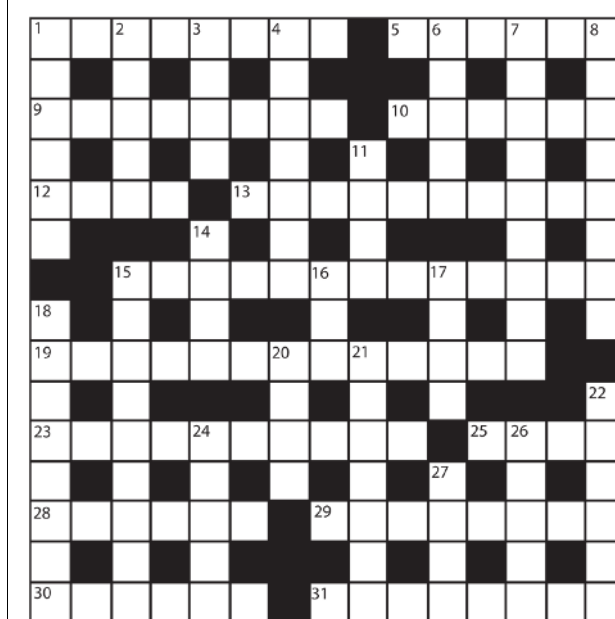
I loiter in the kitchen to argue about the importance of data collection. 'It means you're being counted, Ma, that you matter. We could be 26% richer!' Without looking up from the sizzling pan, she mutters, 'You don't have any work to do or what?'

The writer is a Mumbai-based stand-up comedian



## ET Sunday Crossword

0187



### ACROSS

- 1 Reveal county's deciding match (8)
- 2 Still, pet's eating it on way back (6)
- 3 Underlying motive of posh student rioter maybe (8)
- 4 Maritime route, say, covers east and west at first (6)
- 5 Hard blow and what it produces that's not hard (4)
- 6 He's afraid to spoil new date hosting Young Conservatives (7-3)
- 7 Servicemen tried here to curtail arms distribution (6-7)
- 8 Predicted result of WWII? Run new
- 9 article after editing (7,6)
- 10 By tackling every fault George makes dune vehicle (5,5)
- 11 Leading authority over in Uruguay (4)
- 12 Mention about bovine coming back from far-off land (6)
- 13 Next trendy business backed by China (8)
- 14 Train purely briefly to stop the old city slicker (6)
- 15 Abroad, Albert kidnaps a Yankee in disloyal act (8)

### DOWN

- 1 Exert lots of pressure on game (6)
- 2 Bar measure to stop tick reducing margins (5)
- 3 Last of thread ran out, curse it! (4)
- 4 Artwork two could supply without employing student (7)
- 5 Walk on strand's hard going (5)
- 6 Row about Crown worried former newswriter (4,5)
- 7 Class try to be different — they make ice (8)
- 8 Beat famous racehorse on left (4)
- 9 Money's picked up but it's got strings attached (4)
- 10 Delighted PC seizes cold hooks, bubbling (4-1-4)
- 11 3 in 3 different directions (3)
- 12 Judge speed (4)
- 13 B. Bryson novel about English sense of superiority (8)
- 14 Whitewash nearly all the road (4)
- 15 Young actress in genuine mess (7)
- 16 Cryptic clue involves director-general's club (6)
- 17 Husband attends it in first-rate part of Hispaniola (5)
- 18 Milford sister's dramatic principle (5)
- 19 Sound of waterfall in river? Paddle! (4)
- 20 Road
- 21 Duffle
- 22 Hail
- 23 Hail
- 24 Hail
- 25 Hail
- 26 Hail
- 27 Hail
- 28 Hail
- 29 Hail
- 30 Hail
- 31 Hail



# Opinion

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2026

AS AI RESHAPES WORK & CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR, THE PEOPLE CLOSEST TO CHANGE MAY BE THE YOUNGEST IN THE ROOM

## Listening to young employees



■ SRINATH SRIDHARAN

**BOARDS ARE EXPECTED** to look around corners. They spend considerable time examining markets, competitors, technology, customers, regulation and capital allocation, drawing on the information and analysis placed before them by management. Yet some of the earliest signs that a business is changing may be found much further down the organisation, in conversations with customers, on the frontline, inside technology teams or among young employees experimenting with new ways of working. Disruption often begins as a small observation that seems too early, too anecdotal or too uncomfortable to command attention.

This matters particularly in India, where the demographic dividend is now entering corporate India. Gen Z is estimated to number about 377 million in the country, making it a significant consumer and workforce cohort. Its influence is already visible in how companies think about brands, products and customer engagement. At work, this generation is also adapting rapidly to artificial intel-

ligence. Deloitte's 2026 India survey found that 93% of Gen Z respondents use AI in their day-to-day work, with more than 90% of both Gen Z and millennials saying AI has a positive impact on their professional and personal lives. The significance goes beyond workplace preferences.

A young salesperson may hear a recurring customer frustration. Someone in product may notice a new competitor being discussed long before it appears in market-share numbers. A junior technology employee may discover that an AI tool can change the economics of a routine process. Each observation can look inconsequential on its own. Together, they may suggest that an established business model is beginning to move.

Anyone who has spent enough time inside a large organisation knows what happens to information on its journey upwards. Employees tell managers what they think is relevant. Managers tell the CEO what they believe the CEO needs to know. Management presents the board with what it believes the board should know. At each stage, information becomes more structured, more defensible and more presentable. That is useful for governance and accountability, but emerging disruption is rarely neat enough to fit comfortably into a dashboard.

This is where the idea of *'peripheral vision'* becomes useful. The centre of an organisation is usually very good at monitoring what is already known. The edges are where the



unfamiliar first appears. A board that sees only through formal reporting can have excellent visibility into the present and still miss what is forming just beyond it.

AI makes this even more consequential. Indian companies are moving from experimentation towards broader deployment across functions, while younger employees are often incorporating AI into their everyday work faster than organisations are redesigning their processes. A young professional may already have discovered which routine tasks can be automated, where an AI tool works surprisingly well and where its limitations require human judgment. Senior management may still be working through

what these changes mean for the organisation. The board may be discussing an AI strategy while employees are already experimenting with its practical consequences.

There is an important complementarity here. Experience remains indispensable. Senior leaders understand customers through multiple cycles, remember why strategic choices were made and have accumulated judgment that cannot be acquired from a technology platform. Younger employees bring proximity to emerging behaviour, technology and culture. A 24-year-old may be closer to the signal while being further from understanding its significance. A seasoned executive may be further

from the signal while being better placed to understand its commercial consequences. Proximity gives you the signal. Experience helps you interpret it. Leadership needs both.

This also gives reverse mentoring a more interesting meaning. It is often treated as an HR exercise in which younger employees help senior executives understand digital tools or social media. There is a larger possibility here: *'reverse apprenticeship'*. The younger employee brings a different view of technology, customers and emerging behaviour.

There is a case, therefore, for boards occasionally hearing directly from the people closest to the changing customer, technology or workplace. Employees usually reach board discussions through attrition, compensation, productivity and engagement scores. Those measures matter, but they largely describe what has already happened. A different conversation might ask: What are our youngest employees seeing that management might be missing? What are customers doing differently that has not yet appeared in our numbers? Which processes are employees quietly abandoning because technology has made them unnecessary? What are we underestimating?

Such conversations would have to be handled carefully. They should not become another HR presentation, an employee engagement exercise or a symbolic display of youth representation. The value lies precisely in hearing observations before they have been polished into corporate language.

Three questions may be enough: What are customers doing differently? What are we doing internally that no longer makes sense? What are we underestimating?

The cost of missing such signals is rising. A change in consumer behaviour can become a revenue problem. A technology experiment can become a competitive threat. A shift in employee expectations can become attrition. A new cultural conversation can become a reputation issue. By the time the matter reaches the boardroom in one of these forms, the organisation is responding to an event rather than preparing for a possibility.

India's demographic dividend is usually discussed in terms of the number of young people entering the workforce. There is another dividend worth recognising: their proximity to change. If companies treat young people simply as talent to be trained, they may miss the intelligence they already possess about a world that is changing around them.

In an economy where business models can change before quarterly numbers reveal the change, the ability to hear that signal early could become a serious competitive advantage. For boards and CEOs, the question is, therefore, worth asking with some humility: What can the youngest person in our organisation see that we do not?

*Srinath Sridharan is an author, corporate adviser & independent director on corporate boards*

## The golf scholarship trap



FAIRWAY FILES  
Rahil Gangjee

**THERE IS SOMETHING** very interesting happening with Indian golf, and I have been thinking about it lately. We are sending our children abroad on golf scholarships, celebrating their college admissions, sharing their photographs with friends and relatives, and proudly announcing that our son or daughter is going to America to play golf.

Four years later, the golf clubs are gathering dust, the golf bag is probably somewhere in the garage, and the youngster is working for a multinational company in New York, California or Texas.

Or, if things go according to the traditional Indian family plan, he or she returns home to join the family business. Nothing wrong with either option, of course. Education is important, a stable career is important, and not every child who plays golf needs to become a professional golfer. But it does make me wonder: Are we using golf scholarships to create better golfers, or simply using golf as a ticket to a better education?

And perhaps the more important question is: What can we do in India to give those children a genuine reason to pursue a career in golf?

Before somebody gets angry with me, let me make one thing clear. I am not against education. I am not against business. I am not against our youngsters working in America. I have plenty of friends who would happily send their children abroad if they got the opportunity. But if a young golfer has spent years training, competing, sacrificing weekends and waking up at an hour when even the birds are negotiating with their alarm clocks, then perhaps we should be asking whether we have given that golfer a viable pathway beyond college.

Because a scholarship is not the finish line. It is supposed to be a starting point.

**The Indian parent and the report card:** We Indians have a complicated relationship with sport. We love sport. We celebrate our champions. We watch cricket matches as if our digestive systems are connected to the scoreboard. We celebrate medals, trophies and international victories.

But when it comes to our own children, the conversation can change rather quickly.

"Golf is very good, beta. But what are you going to do after your degree?" That question has probably been asked in thousands of Indian homes.

And honestly, I understand the concern. A parent wants the child to be secure. They want a good education, a stable income and a comfortable life. Nobody wants to watch their child struggle financially.

The problem is that we sometimes treat sport as an extracurricular activity that must eventually surrender to a proper career.

A youngster can spend more than 15 years studying to become a doctor or engineer, and we call it an investment in the future. But a youngster who wants to spend 15 years developing into a professional golfer? Suddenly, everybody wants a backup plan, a second backup plan and perhaps an MBA application ready for emergencies.

**Prize money is not just about the winner:** The obvious thing is that we need more money in the game. But it is not as simple as announcing a larger winner's cheque and expecting Indian golf to transform overnight.



If we want more children to play golf, we need more opportunities for them to discover the game without their parents having to take out a second mortgage

Yes, bigger prize purses matter. They attract players, create opportunities and make a professional career more financially sustainable. But the real challenge is the depth of the ecosystem.

What does a player ranked 40th or 60th on a tour earn? How many events can he or she play? Who pays for travel, accommodation, coaching, equipment, fitness and medical care? What happens when a player misses a cut for three consecutive weeks?

I have played enough golf to know that a professional career is not built on one good week. It is built on the ability to keep showing up, competing and improving, even when the results don't cooperate.

Sponsors need to look beyond the occasional headline player. A structured support system for promising golfers could include travel grants, development contracts, performance-linked funding and assistance with coaching and sports science.

Imagine a young golfer knowing that, for the next two years, a sponsor will help fund a defined development programme. Not a blank cheque, but a genuine opportunity to build a career.

And yes, I realise I am asking sponsors to invest in a sport where the return on investment is not always as easy to measure as a boundary rope or a six on television. But that is where creative thinking comes in.

**Where are the public golf facilities?** Another question we must address is access. If we want more children to play golf, we need more opportunities for them to discover the game without their parents having to take out a second mortgage.

We need public golf facilities, affordable practice areas, junior programmes and structured access to coaching. We need to explore driving ranges, short-game facilities and community-based golf initiatives in cities where full-length courses may not be practical. We have seen how other sports have expanded through academies, public infrastructure and affordable access. Golf can learn from that model without losing the character and traditions that make it special.

**Can we change the definition of success?** The biggest change, however, may need to happen in our mindset. A career in golf does not necessarily mean

becoming a winner on the PGA Tour or the DP World Tour. There are opportunities in coaching, sports management, golf operations, tournament administration, golf technology, sports science, equipment, media and course development.

Perhaps a young Indian golfer returning from an American university should not be viewed as someone who failed to make it as a professional. They may have gained an education, played competitive golf and developed skills that can help grow the sport in India.

Of course, we should also be honest about the challenges of becoming a touring professional. Not everybody has the game, the finances or the appetite for the sacrifices involved. A realistic assessment is essential.

But a realistic assessment is not the same as discouraging somebody before they have had a chance.

The family business will still be there. The corporate job may still be there. But the window to pursue a serious sporting career is often much shorter.

**A different kind of return on investment**

I sometimes wonder whether we have become too focused on measuring everything in terms of immediate financial returns. If a child goes abroad, gets a degree and earns a good salary, we call it a success. If the same child spends a few years trying to build a professional golf career, we worry about the risk.

But what if we looked at sports development as a long-term investment in the individual and in the country?

Here's the funny thing about golf: We spend a fortune trying to get the ball closer to the hole, but when it comes to developing the next generation, we sometimes don't even know where the hole is.

Maybe it is time we fixed that. And if anybody has a good idea, I'm all ears. Preferably over a round of golf.

Though, given the price of green fees these days, I might need a sponsor for that too!

*Rahil Gangjee is a professional golfer, sharing through this column what life on a golf course is like*

## Democracy at work or disaster

FIFTH COLUMN  
TAVLEEN SINGH



**IN TIMES OF** trouble, the worst thing a government can do is respond with arrogance and disdain. Narendra Modi is among the most skilled and sophisticated political leaders I have ever met, but this is one lesson he appears not to have learned. So, when this newspaper published its excellent investigation into the Election Commission last week, his response was to deploy his most articulate spokesmen onto TV chat shows and social media platforms to fight back hard. They did, but in the stupidest, most arrogant way.

With smug expressions and fake smiles pasted on their faces, they repeated, ad nauseum, that serious disagreements among the three election commissioners were a sign that India was a 'vibrant democracy'. A puzzling and farcical viewpoint. But afterwards, the ones who are always too clever by half changed tactics and as usual, blamed the Congress Party. They recounted how many times election commissioners had been controlled by the government in Congress times. Names such as Naveen Chawla and MS Gill were brought up to prove this. One was a family friend of the Gandhis, and the other had been rewarded with a seat in the Rajya Sabha and made a minister after he retired from the Election Commission. True.

It is also true that elections in Kashmir were openly rigged for decades. But does that justify what has been done now, in the name of the Special Intensive Revision, or SIR, to give it the acronym that has gained a notoriety that strikes dread in the hearts of those whose election credentials it seeks to 'revise'? Shashi Tharoor wrote a detailed and disturbing piece in this newspaper last week, so I am not going to go into the numbers of voters who have been deleted wrongly. What I learned from it was that half the Delhi voters had been deleted. And in West Bengal nearly all those who had appealed against being deleted had found their voting rights restored after appealing to tribunals, but by then the election was over.

There have been doubts about this SIR for months, as there have been about the integrity of the election process itself. Rahul Gandhi has led the charge and in Bihar tried to make 'vote chori' the fulcrum of his campaign. I have been among those who doubted the charges because I continue to believe that no matter how much tampering happens, and it does, it usually does not change the result of an election. Besides, if you have been in jour-

nalism for as long as I have, it is hard to forget how bad things used to be. Especially in rural India.

I remember ballot boxes being stolen by mafioso-types. I remember lower caste voters being forced to vote with a gun pointed at them by rural thugs. One reason so many criminals ended up in Parliament and our legislative assemblies is because these mafias discovered that if they could win elections for others, they might as well start winning for themselves. In the process, they discovered that there was more money to be made from 'serving the people' than from crime. Indian democracy has been deeply damaged because of this.

So, what happens now that Gyanesh Kumar has become the villain of a very ugly story? If I were him (thankfully I am not), I would gracefully exit the stage after declaring with a pained expression on my face that I have done no wrong but am happy to resign until a commission of inquiry establishes my innocence. Who knows, but he may have done this by the time you read this piece — which would be good for him. But the damage done to the Modi government still needs repair.

It needs to prove to the Indian people that it has not been trying to steal elections by disqualifying voters who do not vote BJP and by conducting an SIR that now has a huge cloud hanging over it. Instead of ordering its supporters and social media trolls to bang on about toolkits and foreign money, it should spend some time introspecting about why so many things are starting to go so wrong. Why is Modi these days appearing to be constantly misreading the political mood? When the Cockroach Janta Party descended on Jantar Mantar, there was such mishandling that shooting at students with pellet guns became more important than paper leaks. Then came the disastrous handling of Modi's birthday celebrations. The acres of *'dijas'* of blessing that were lit brought shame to the birthday boy when small children were seen collecting oil from *dijas* to take home for their families.

The latest mishandling has been the way his government responded to *The Indian Express* story. BJP spokesmen were seen openly defending Gyanesh Kumar on TV and social media without anyone noticing that, in doing this, they were proving the opposition parties' charge that the Election Commission had become a tool of the government. With so many things going so wrong, the Prime Minister needs to conduct a special intensive revision of his team if he wants to regain a measure of lost credibility. And if he has not already asked Gyanesh Kumar to make a graceful exit, he would do well to do so because he has become a major liability for the government. Besides, it can be said with certainty that he has lost the trust of voters.



# Mind & Games

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2026

## Chemicals & FAIR LABOUR

Consumers can make ethical, informed choices through textile labels. Read to know what the tags on your tee mean, what they guarantee, and where they fall short

SONAM RAINA

THE RE IS SOMETHING deeply satisfying about cutting away a brand new shirt's labels. The fabric is fresh, the lines are clean, and there's nothing to irritate your skin, but as you take scissors to that white flappy fabric, you might be discarding the only clue to your shirt's real journey – its origins, its makers, and the trail it has left and will leave across the planet. Did you know that textiles are one of the world's most polluting industries, responsible for nearly 20% of global industrial wastewater? To picture this, imagine that one out of every five litres of polluted water comes from the fashion industry. And make no mistake, this pollution makes its way into our clothes: a study by Toxics Link found harmful chemicals in 60% of baby clothes in India, including hormone-disrupting nonoxylones or NPES.

So, is there anything that you can do as a consumer to save your health and the environment? Labels, those white tags with tiny text, are one of the few tools consumers currently have to make safer choices, whether it's avoiding toxic dyes and formaldehyde, choosing organic cotton, or supporting fair labour.

This story explains what the labels mean, what they guarantee, and where they fall short. Safe clothing made in India for both local and foreign consumption may bear one or more of these seven prominent labels. Each is backed by a

defined standard, an implementation framework and third-party verification. In many cases, if the product fails to meet the standards and stipulations, the label can be suspended or withdrawn.

### 1. Global Organic Textile Standard

The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) is one of the most trusted certifications for clothing made from organic fibres. It was developed by organisations from Germany, the USA, Japan and the UK and is now used in more than 70 countries. To earn this label, a product must contain a minimum percentage of organic cotton or other natural fibres and be manufactured without harmful chemicals like toxic dyes or formaldehyde. GOTS also checks how factories treat workers – no child labour, safe workplaces and fair wages are mandatory. Rajlakhmi Cotton Mills (RCM), which is based in Kolkata with factories in Greater Noida and Kolkata, is recognised as one of the earliest garment manufacturers to adopt GOTS- and Fairtrade-certified production. While the clothes are manufactured in India, their biggest markets are the UK and the USA, with knitted garments like t-shirts and casual wear as top sellers.

"We were influenced by an organic cotton project started by a relative," says Rajat Jaipuria, CEO of RCM. At that time, farmer suicides in Maharashtra were reported to be linked to pesticide use. "We felt it was the right thing to do." Rajlakhmi supports Chetna Organic, a farmer-led initiative working with smallholder cotton farmers to support organic production and stable livelihoods. "We are trying to pay a better price to the farmers to help them have a sustainable living," Jaipuria says. "Fairtrade

means farmers are paid equally, there is no gender discrimination, there is no child labour at the farm level, and they are insulated from market ups and downs."

### 2. OEKO-TEX® STANDARD 100

The OEKO-TEX® STANDARD 100 is an international certification system that tests textile products for harmful substances. It checks every component of a garment, like fabric, thread and accessories for over 1,000 regulated chemicals, with stricter limits for items with closer skin contact. The standard is updated annually based on scientific research.

### 3. Fair Trade Textile

The Fairtrade Textile Standard focuses on the people who make our clothes. Brands that use this label must also commit to fair purchasing practices, instead of pushing suppliers into low prices and unpaid overtime. Factories are audited for legally binding employment contracts, reasonable working hours, building and fire safety, and the right to unionise. The standard also restricts hazardous chemicals and requires better wastewater and chemical management to protect workers and the environment. The fair trade label works only in those countries where workers are legally allowed to form unions.

### 4. The Silk Mark certification

The Silk Mark certification, issued by the Silk Mark Organisation of India (SMOI) under the Central Silk Board, assures that a textile product is made from 100% natural silk and not a blend like silk-polyester or rayon or an imitation. Each certified item carries a unique serial number and hologram for traceability. The scheme



enables consumers to verify authenticity, thereby protecting against counterfeit silk. Silk Mark also helps sustain traditional silk weaving communities and strengthens India's heritage textile industry. For manufacturers, the label brings credibility and access to higher-value markets.

### 5. Handloom Mark India

The Handloom Mark is a guarantee that a fabric is genuinely handwoven in India, not produced on a power loom. Introduced in 2006 by the Ministry of Textiles and the Textiles Committee, it helps protect India's 6.5 million handloom weavers from imitation products. Every genuine Handloom Mark item carries a

specially designed polyester taffeta label printed with the Handloom logo and a unique QR code. You can scan this code yourself to verify that the product is authentic and traceable. This scheme had registered over 22,000 weavers, cooperatives and traders by 2024 and tagged over 13 crore (130 million) products. As a consumer, choosing a Handloom Mark product means extending support for and celebrating traditional craftsmanship, fair livelihoods and India's textile heritage.

### 6. Better Cotton Initiative

The Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) is the world's largest cotton sustainability programme, working in 15+ countries and

reaching millions of farmers. It sets out a rigorous 'Better Cotton Standard' that covers water-use efficiency, reduced pesticide use, soil health, worker rights and decent wages.

Farmers who meet the standard can sell their crop as 'Better Cotton', which brands can source and utilise. Textile entrepreneurs and consumers alike can check whether a brand or supplier is part of the BCI network by visiting 'Find Members'. When you choose a BCI-cotton-sourced garment, you, as a consumer, are supporting a transition towards more sustainable and equitable textile supply chains.

### 7. SA8000

Social Accountability International is a New York-based non-profit that works to protect human rights in workplaces around the world. Its best-known standard, SA8000®, lays down detailed requirements for safe working conditions, fair treatment, and ethical labour practices. The standard applies across many industries and is widely used in the apparel and textile sector, where issues like overtime, low wages and unsafe factory environments are common. SAI helps brands and manufacturers strengthen accountability and align with international labour standards.

### Different labels solve different problems

Different clothing labels exist because each one addresses a different part of the textile ecosystem problem. Some certifications focus on environmental impact. For example, GOTS looks at how cotton is grown and whether harmful dyes or chemicals were used, while BCI works directly with farmers to reduce pesticide use and improve soil health. Then there are labels that put human health first. OEKO-TEX Standard 100, for instance, tests every button, zip and thread in a garment to make sure it does not contain residues that can irritate the skin or harm the body, which is why many parents prefer OEKO-TEX-certified baby clothes. A third group of labels focuses on workers' rights and fair wages. Fairtrade works across the cotton-to-clothing chain to ensure farmers and factory workers are treated fairly, while SA8000 checks for safe workplaces, reasonable hours and no child labour.

As we've seen, no single label covers everything. We can educate ourselves about these labels so when we go shopping, we can choose clothes that match the values we care about, whether that is protecting the planet, safeguarding our health or ensuring fair conditions for the people who make our clothes.

Sustainability and ethical claims remain largely voluntary across the world. Certifications such as GOTS, BCI and OEKO-TEX appear only when brands choose to meet their standards.

Sustainability claims need to move from voluntary storytelling to enforceable transparency, or the burden will continue to fall on the shopper standing in a trial room, squinting at the fine print.

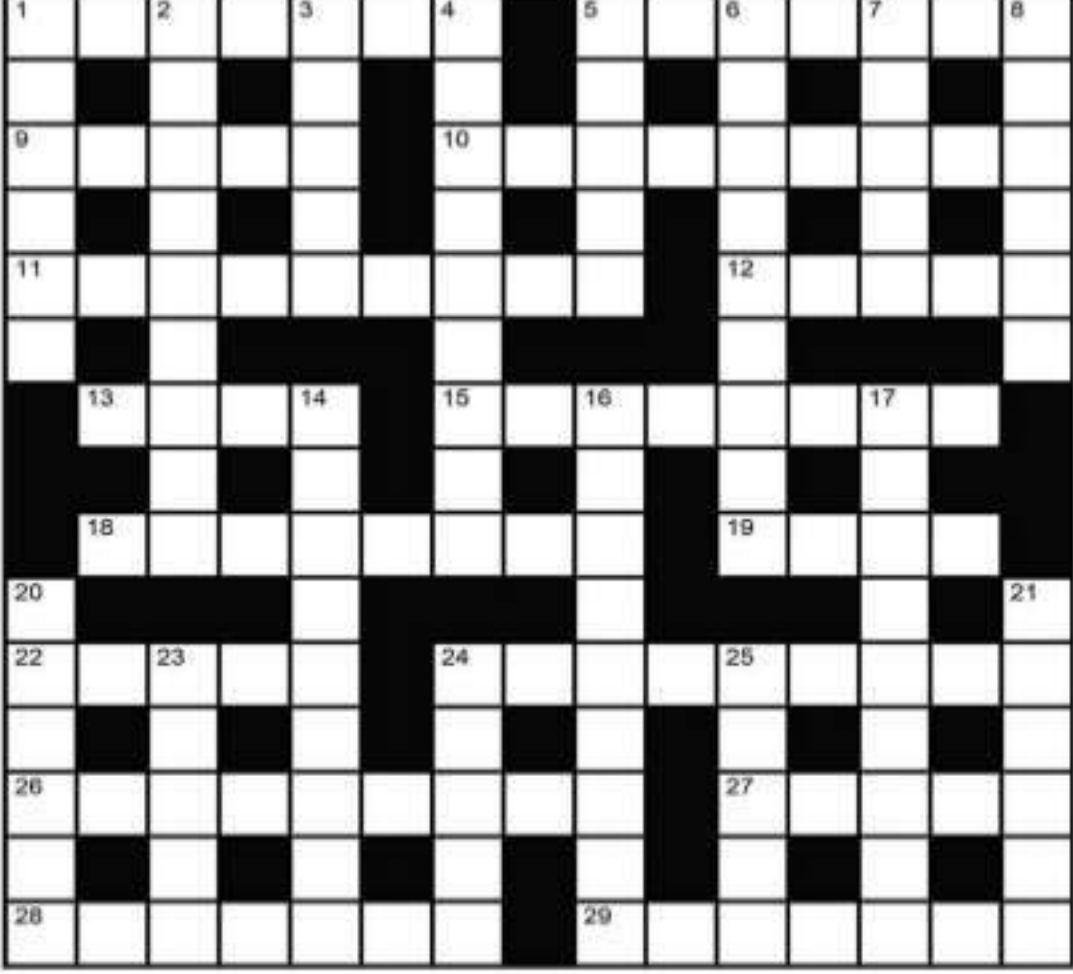
*The piece is published in arrangement with Climate Action Live <https://www.climateaction.live>*

CROSSWORD

KAKURO

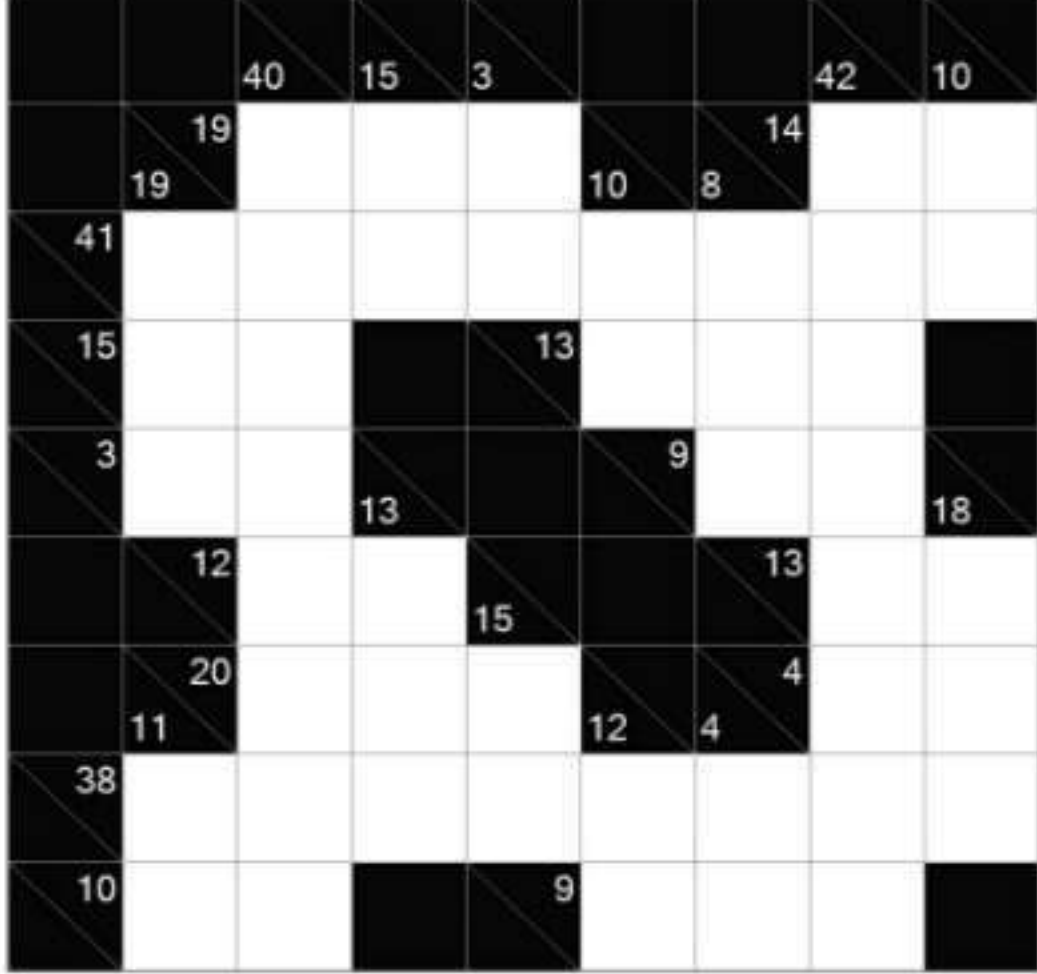
BRIDGE BOUTS L SUBRAMANIAN

LEXICON



### ACROSS

- 1 Pre-Euro currency of Greece (7)  
5 \_\_\_ Electricals Ltd: manufacturers of Fans, and other home and industrial appliances (7)  
9 Havana native (5)  
10 Shone, sparkled or twinkled (9)  
11 Thousands of years (9)  
12 Headless wooden or metal pin used as a fastener (5)  
13 Oil and Natural Gas Commission, in short (4)  
15 Without motion or movement (8)  
18 Rebuke (8)  
19 Monetary unit of Vietnam (4)  
22 Mango \_\_\_ fresh n' juicy (5)  
24 Karnataka's capital (9)  
26 Causing to originate or proceed from a source etc. (9)  
27 Target ring (5)  
28 Senior female member (7)  
29 In a stiff or uptight manner (7)  
DOWN  
1 Aide \_\_\_: army or military assistant? (2-4)  
2 \_\_\_ chaser: a lawyer in search of a client to file an insurance claim, especially in the US (9)  
3 Door-opening device (5)  
4 One of the G-20 nations (9)  
5 Site of nuclear plant in Karnataka (5)  
6 Many believe this to be India's richest city (9)  
7 Fling (5)  
8 A little rounded lump or swelling (6)  
14 Famous American hedge fund manager (4,5)  
16 "M" in MTNL (9)  
17 In the \_\_\_: fast and firmly asleep, should we say? (4,2,3)  
20 Act in disregard of laws (6)  
21 Enthusiastic or strong (6)  
23 Involving just one operand (5)  
24 She'll be getting married shortly (5)  
25 Maturing or growing old (5)



### BIZ QUIZ

1. Adani Group to invest over ₹1 lakh crore in which Indian state by 2035?  
2. Which multinational coffeehouse chain to shut down 250 stores in North America?  
3. Airtel Money is planning to list on which stock exchange through an initial public offering?

### BUZZ WORD

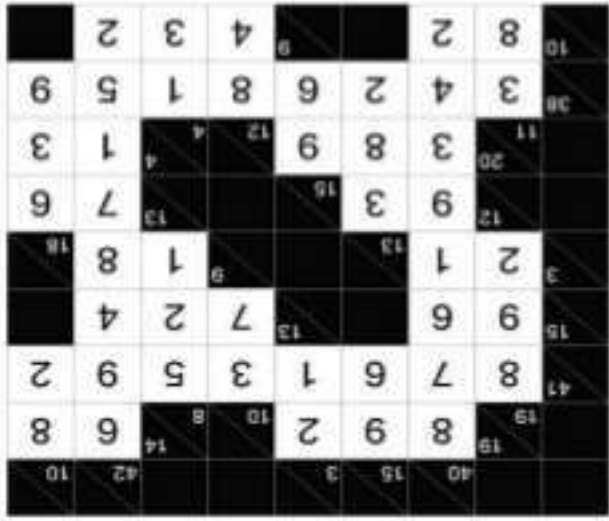
The Buzz Word is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Today's clue: NZR equals SOU

Yzmarewyzm nrvvppn:  
Mhnp pwmei, czmj twml,  
nxmhip zhe. - Fpwg Swre  
Bpxxi

### ANSWERS

1. West Bengal 2. Starbucks 3. London Stock Exchange



### WELL-REASONED

With both sides vulnerable, after a pass to her right, your partner, opens 1H. Just as you are saying to yourself that you will develop the auction naturally by responding 2C, you find your RHO makes a week jump overcall with 3D. You have S x H A-x-x-x D A-x C A-K-J-x-x-x. What do you do?

If the overcall had been 2D, you have an easy bid of 3C, forcing to game and suggesting 12+ and a useful five-card or longer suit. With the bid being 3D, your bidding naturally with 4C runs the risk of not conveying your wonderful support for partner. What do you bid?

The solution is to bid 4D to suggest a huge fit for partner (4 trumps +) and a very good hand. LHO passes and it is partner's time to decide what to do? As she knows a thing or two about bidding, she considers for a while and emerges with a bid of 4S. What is it?

If she had had a minimum for her opening, she would have simply returned to 4H and be done. But, when she bids above the agreed trump suit, you feel she will have to have first round control in spades. Partner bids 5D, indicating one ace. RHO doubles. If that is showing a good suit, then it appears partner may even have the CQ, for her opening. You no longer need more information. If worse comes to worst, it will depend on establishing the clubs for the diamond discards in opener's hand. So, you jump to 7H and everyone passes. The complete hands are:

SAJTx  
HKQJT9  
DQxx  
CQ  
S98xxxx  
Hxx  
Dx  
CTxxx  
N  
S  
SKQ  
Hxx  
DKJT9876  
Cxx  
Sx  
HAxxx  
Dx  
CAKJxxx

**Discussion:** You receive 96% score for bidding the grand. You will be surprised to know only three pairs reached the optimum.





## REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

## India must engage with its archive of economic ideas

The men and women who wrestled with the big questions of Indian economics in its early decades often anticipated dilemmas that India still faces. They were not infallible, but their successes as well as failures have much to teach us

Modern Indian nationalism has, from its earliest days, been built on three pillars—political freedom, social reform, and economic development.

The long history of the ideas that helped craft the third pillar has faded away from public memory. This is unfortunate, especially at a time when the old economic consensus is splintering.

Those who are trying to figure out alternative paths that are aligned to their specific circumstances, all against the backdrop of seismic changes in the global order.

Shining a light on the past may help illuminate the way forward. That is true of India as well.

Cut to 1892. The jurist, public intellectual and social reformer Mahadev Govind Ranade gave a speech in Pune on the principles of Indian politics. He challenged the claim that economic ideas have universal applicability, adding that the lessons from one country cannot automatically be transplanted on to another without

understanding the realities of the latter. Ranade then listed out some of the realities that Indian economics would have to adapt to. Social life was dominated by status rather than contract. Labour was abundant but unskilled. Capital was scarce as well as wary of taking risks. Cooperation between labour and capital on a large scale was scarce. The economic lives of the large majority were hostage to erratic monsoons.

The traditional institutions of Indian society favored the division rather than the consolidation of wealth. Religious tradition looked down upon the pursuit of wealth. Any strategy for India's economic transformation had to recognise these facts.

Much has changed since then—and so has Indian economic policy. It has had to adapt as the country transitioned from being a colony to an independent nation-state to an emerging global power.

Each era solved some problems and seeded new ones. The ideas that powered the shifts in policy regimes over these eras came from a stellar cast of economists, political leaders, civil servants, businessmen, farmers, trade unionists, and public intellectuals.

There have been decision-makers as well as dissenters. Indian economics has thus been a flowing conversation rather than a frozen orthodoxy immune from change.

Naturally, these shifts in economic thinking were not smooth affairs. There were intense debates at every point in time. Should India focus on building a new industrial economy or try to revive the traditional economy where the vast majority toiled?

What role should the State play in the economic transformation of a country with a vast private sector? How should India engage with the world economy even as it builds domestic capacity? How does one measure the size of the economy, the extent of poverty, and the living standards of people? Can the quest for economic development be divorced from the risk of ecological destruction? What economic principles should be embedded in the Indian Constitution?

Many of these questions linger in public debate even today. Each has had a profound impact on the course of Indian history after 1870, when Dadabhai Naoroji read his paper in front of a London audience on how British rule was further impoverishing Indians.

Others followed, not just with sharp critiques of existing policies but also with road maps for the way forward, a constructive approach that went beyond listing out problems. The result is a rich repository of ideas that has shaped modern India, in good ways and bad, and which can inform our present as well.

The main characters in the long story of Indian economics include many whose names are still remembered by most modern readers. And then there are the greats of the past who have slipped away from public memory.

Among these are Jhaghir Choyale, BP Adarkar, H. Dey, Radhakamal Mukherjee, VG Kale, JK Mehta, PJ Thomas, Gyan Chand, RK Hazari, ML Dantwala, Hannan Ezekiel and BS Minhas, for example. They deserve to be read again today. It is the same with political leaders.



Niranjan Rajadhyaksha

Naoroji read his paper in front of a London audience on how British rule was further impoverishing Indians.

Others followed, not just with sharp critiques of existing policies but also with road maps for the way forward, a constructive approach that went beyond listing out problems. The result is a rich repository of ideas that has shaped modern India, in good ways and bad, and which can inform our present as well.

The main characters in the long story of Indian economics include many whose names are still remembered by most modern readers. And then there are the greats of the past who have slipped away from public memory.

Among these are Jhaghir Choyale, BP Adarkar, H. Dey, Radhakamal Mukherjee, VG Kale, JK Mehta, PJ Thomas, Gyan Chand, RK Hazari, ML Dantwala, Hannan Ezekiel and BS Minhas, for example. They deserve to be read again today. It is the same with political leaders.



India's economic policy has had to adapt as the country transitioned from being a colony to an independent nation-state to an emerging global power. Each era solved some problems while seeding new ones.

HT ARCHIVE

The economic views of the men who held power over the decades is known, but less so by others such as Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai, Hridaynath Kunzru, Charan Singh, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, Ram Manohar Lohia, HM Patel and Sharad Joshi. BR Ambedkar occupies a unique place in this constellation, as a scholarly economist as well as a political leader.

The Indians who engaged seriously with the economic challenges facing the country did so for four big reasons that spanned human dignity, national unity, geopolitical heft, and social mobility.

First, a higher national income would help Indians lead their lives on

firm ground rather than flailing in the quicksand of poverty.

Second, a modern economy would promote economic integration which, in turn, many national leaders saw as a key catalyst for political integration.

Third, economic strength would allow India to protect its political autonomy in a troubled world.

Fourth, economic dynamism would help reduce the layers of traditional privilege that denied opportunities to millions based on their gender, caste, and region.

The men and women who wrestled with the big questions of Indian economics were not infallible, but their successes as well as

failures have much to teach us. They often anticipated dilemmas that India still faces. To forget them is to lose a usable past.

As the world searches for new economic paths, India would do well to first engage with its own forgotten archive of economic ideas, not to copy blindly from it but as a source of inspiration on how to think about our challenges.

Niranjan Rajadhyaksha is the executive director of Artha India Research Advisors. His book 'The Ideas That Shaped Modern India and Its Economy' will be published by Penguin Random House in October. The views expressed are personal.

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## A caution about letting religion trump politics

Every now and then one comes across a book that makes you stop, think, and question. That's not as unusual as you may suppose. But I didn't think it would happen in the case of the book I am writing about today. I have known its author, Tavleen Singh, as an engaging columnist and the writer of revealing political books. Some, like *Darbar*, were gripping. But I would never have thought her first novel, *The Actor*, could be arresting. The truth is, it is.

The book is a roman à clef. As the preface indicates, it is "set in a time in India—a time in the future, when religion has become more important than politics." A populist strongman rules the country and it's firmly in his grasp. His name is Guru Gyandendra Maharaj, popularly known as Gururji. "Among the many myths that swirl about him is that he lived in a cave in the Himalayas but came down to lead the country because he saw turmoil and moral decline

and needed to strengthen *Sanatana Dharma* against the *Jihadi* ideology that had spread and threatened the very nature of India."

Gururji is an autocrat. He's a spellbinding speaker. He's obsessed with himself. He's ruthless towards his opponents and critics. And very conscious of his image in the media.

He seeks to fix his opponents by raids on their houses, whilst going stone by stone at their rallies. Consequently, people are scared not just to criticise but even comment about him. Instead, they are lavish with their sycophantic praise. In turn, Gururji dominates every aspect of life.

Set against this background, *The Actor* is the story of Naresh Khanna, an opposition politician, who strives to find a way of reverting India to the decent graceful country it once was. He forms the *Parivartan* Party and persuades his childhood friend, now a Bollywood superstar, Amit Singh to join him. Amit Singh is the actor the book

gets its title from.

Much of the story is about how the *Parivartan* Party is formed, raises its funds, holds rallies, wins support and, in particular, becomes a favourite of the young. In the telling of this tale, Amit Singh learns politics. To do so, he discovers the real India. Cloistered in Bollywood, he was ignorant of the world outside. As he discovers it, we too come to find out the truth.

It's grim and undemocratic. It's depressing but feels authentic. Free speech, a free press, free association of people are just thoughts and concepts. The opposition, such as it is, is unequal to the challenge. That's why Naresh is determined to establish a new party. *Parivartan* is not just its name but also its mission.

Naresh wants to make India's democracy and economic philosophy similar to what he has seen in the West. That's the *parivartan* he dreams of. He believes in economic liberalism, free enterprise, secularism not Hinduism, and individual rights and freedom. Incidentally, these also happen to be Tavleen Singh's core beliefs. Her columns vouch for them.

Yet this is more than just a political novel. It's principal characters, Naresh, Khanna and Amit Singh, are human in every way. They drink, copiously and frequently. They have passionate sex and quite a lot of it.

Though much of the story happens in Delhi and Bombay, it still permeates the country through Gulmarg and Varanasi as well as the villages of UP and Rajasthan. Rich in its description, you can sense the perceptive

TAVLEEN SINGH'S FIRST NOVEL, *THE ACTOR*, IS THE STORY OF NARESH KHANNA, AN OPPOSITION POLITICIAN IN A FUTURE INDIA, WHO STRIVES TO FIND A WAY TO RETURN INDIA TO BEING THE GRACEFUL COUNTRY IT ONCE WAS. TO DO THIS, HE FORMS A NEW PARTY

eye of a well-trained reporter.

However, it's Gururji that hovers over everything. His presence is always there. Tavleen seems to have observed him closely. Her account of his behaviour, his mannerisms, even his foibles lingers with you. You feel you know him personally.

The book ends dramatically, but I will give that away. Yet it wasn't as surprising as it at first felt. You sort of suspect this could happen. When it did, it seemed like confirmation of the message Tavleen is seeking to convey.

As I put the book down, there is one question that made me stop and think. Is this really the future? Or is this, in fact, the present?

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal.



Crimes against women, of varying degrees of severity, exemplify an absence of reliable safeguards for nearly 700 million citizens of India.

SANJAY BHASKAR PHOTO

## Women's safety is a national security issue

The hallmark of poor governance is pitting lives against lives. The basic logic of allocation becomes this:

Resources are scarce, needs are one too many. Some lives—and deaths—therefore assume greater significance than others. Similarly with crime. It is no wonder, then, that crimes against women are not seen as a national security issue. If they were, the national capital would have been going into damage-control mode after a spate of incidents highlighting, yet again, the State's abject failure in protecting half of its citizens. It is de rigueur to see women's security as an isolated issue, and crime against them as something that doesn't deserve multi-agency high alerts.

Just this month, Delhi hosted two big-ticket international events: the BRICS summit and SEMICON India 2026. It was not lost on anyone that the state and Union governments put all their left behind the arrangements. Roads, freshly patched up to cover potholes, were dotted with police personnel who only routinely become conspicuous in the service of VIPs and their movements. It should be a matter of pride for everyone that both these events, bringing together heads of government and industry from various countries, concluded smoothly with no security hiccups. In the same month, news headlines suggest that the rape of at least four women in Delhi made it to the public sphere. In the latest Astha Kunj



Nishtha Gautam

Park case, the cops reportedly admitted to not patrolling the 142-acre park due to lack of proper lighting.

Imagine a similar statement made by a soldier deployed along the international border. Or, imagine either the domestic intelligence agency or R&AW officers explaining, after a terror attack in the capital, that they hadn't infiltrated a terror network because it was too dangerous. Now imagine such statements coming with a predictable regularity, while lives and livelihoods continue being threatened. If this sounds unacceptable for the sixth-largest economy and the fifth-largest spender on defence in the world, let's probe deeper into why they have adopted an institutionally indifferent stance on women's safety. This is a policy gap that ought not to exist in the first place, as it flouts India's constitutional principle of equality.

This newspaper has been highlighting how crimes against women, of varying degrees of severity, from gender-based verbal insults to gangrapes and murders, exemplify an absence of reliable safeguards for nearly 700 million citizens of India. In absolute numbers, therefore, the situation is nothing short of a nightmare. National security has inalienable links to the economic growth of a country. If half the population is forever calculating risks to person and property, how can we imagine that any national vision will manifest on the ground? Women's labour force participation in India has been falling

this story statistically, only to be filed as a "gender" issue—a predictable consequence of envisioning policies in silos.

A large part of the equality discourse emanates from morality. In more than 75 years, this hasn't worked as desired. The economic underpinnings of the pervasive feeling of not being safe are now being recognised as a gaping hole in policy formulation. Even if imperfect, it has moved the needle towards an assessment of the loss in national productivity owing to women's absence on the work floor. A bigger case needs to be made for acknowledging the sense of foreboding, of impending doom, the moment a woman finds herself at the receiving end of gender-based violence. No citizen in a functioning democracy ought to feel that—less so when national security dominates policy, political, and public domains—with unmistakable intensity, often borne out on facts.

National security is still the theatre of men. From budgetary to operational details, almost everything is masculinised in theory and practice. Riven is even deeper when women at the high table, ministerial

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



## When tech becomes a tool for gender violence

Digital technology has created new platforms for violence against women and girls—in the form of cyberbullying, deepfake pornography, image-based abuse, cyberstalking, and other manifestations of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF-GBV). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), there has been a rise in cyber-crimes against women.

In Rajasthan, the YP Foundation documented young people's (both men and women) perceptions, interpretations, and lived experiences of TF-GBV across social, cultural, and digital contexts through a survey. The aim was to map the TF-GBV ecosystem and accountability pathways—platforms, institutions, community actors, families, and informal networks—and identify gaps in redressal, prevention, and support. It was also aimed at understanding the emotional, social, psychological and behavioural impacts of TF-GBV on young women, girls, queer youth, and other marginalised groups, and the coping mechanisms they rely on. This was to strengthen YPF's programmatic response to online and tech-mediated violence and generate actionable evidence and youth-validated design directions for YPF's ongoing work on digital safety, gender justice and transformative masculinities in Rajasthan.

Women often lack autonomy over their digital spaces. Men cite protecting reputations and maintaining social respectability as justification for monitoring and limiting women's online visibility. The reasons also include preventing women of the household from accessing inappropriate content or talking to strangers.

For women, harm from online spaces can lead to restrictions, reputation loss, blame, moral judgement, mobility restrictions, blackmail, stalking, violence, and withdrawal from online spaces.

System stakeholders are not very consistent in recognising abuse as a pattern of control. The biggest blind spots are relational, family-

based, and everyday control harms. They may know these behaviours are wrong, but may not treat them as response-worthy, report-worthy, or intervention-worthy. These are exactly the behaviours that often precede or enable more severe GBV.

For minor girls, cyberbullying and abuse can lead to absenteeism, even school drop-out. In Jaipur, a 12-year-old girl's social media account was hacked and a photo doctored to misrepresent her. However, she took the system's help, verified the image was fake, reported it, and the police traced the perpetrator. Not every such story has a happy ending. For adult women, online harassment diminishes their ability to speak freely and participate in public life.

Problematize Tuteja, executive director, YPF, says, "Safety cannot mean asking young people to shrink themselves online. It means building systems both formal as well as informal that recognise everyday harm before it escalates into crisis, and that respond with privacy, trust and choice instead of blame. Right now, the first and often the primary responder most survivors trust is their own phone. This needs to change because then we haven't built a redressal system, we've built a system to stay silent."

Cyber abuse needs to be explicitly criminalised with substantial penalties when the victims are minors. Offensive content should be rapidly taken down. Law officers should be better equipped to deal with such crimes and trained on gender sensitivity. Parents and teachers must be trained to recognise signs of online abuse and on effective response. Helplines should be swift in dealing with reports of cyber-crime against women. Real change needs awareness against victim-blaming, targeted at men and boys who are invariably the offenders in such crimes. Inculcating responsible digital practices among them will go a long way in reducing the crime.

The views expressed are personal



{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Gender bias is ground reality

This is with reference to "The SIR exercise and the points of concern" by Karan Thapar (Sept 20). The troubling trends surrounding the SIR threaten the bedrock of Indian democracy—voter franchise. ECI must ensure transparent verification, robust grievance redressal, and accountability to protect the constitutional right to vote.

Sanjay Chopra

ECI must protect voting rights through SIR

Accurate electoral rolls are the base of a free and fair democracy, hence SIR is an absolute must. But the process should be monitored by independent observers and recognised political parties to bring greater transparency.

Bal Govind

Write to us at [letters@hindustantimes.com](mailto:letters@hindustantimes.com)

The views expressed are personal



# The Pioneer AGENDA

Humanity has the stars in its future, and that future is too important to be lost under the burden of juvenile folly and ignorant superstition.

— Isaac Asimov



## Beyond punishment: Giving children in conflict with law a second chance



Last week, as I walked into a protection home to meet children in conflict with the law, I expected to speak to them about drugs, discipline and the choices that can shape their future. I carried with me the familiar concerns of a police officer: the dangers of substance abuse, peer pressure, crime and the challenges of returning to a normal life after coming into conflict with the law. But within minutes of meeting them, the conversation began to change the way I was looking at the issue. Some were quiet and hesitant; others looked at me with curiosity. Yet beneath those different expressions, I could see something common: they were children before they were anything else: children with fears, insecurities, aspirations and dreams. It made me reflect on a question that extends well beyond policing or juvenile justice: when these children eventually walk out of a protection home, what do we want them to become?

Do we want them to carry the burden and stigma of their past indefinitely, or do we want them to return as confident, skilled, self-reliant and responsible citizens? For me, the answer is clear. A mistake made by a child cannot be allowed to become the child's entire identity. This does not mean ignoring accountability. Children must understand that actions have consequences and that the law has to take its course. But accountability and abandonment are not the same. A humane justice system must protect society while preserving the possibility of reform and redemption.

This becomes particularly important when we consider substance abuse among young people. Addiction rarely begins by announcing itself as an addiction. It may start with curiosity, peer pressure, loneliness, emotional distress or the simple desire to belong. A friend says, "Try it once." What appears to be an experiment can gradually become a habit and eventually a dependency. That is perhaps the most insidious nature of drugs: they often enter a young person's life disguised as a friend,

before revealing themselves as an enemy. By the time their consequences become visible, they may already have damaged education, health, family relationships, finances and judgement. In some cases, dependency can also become a pathway to theft, violence, trafficking and other forms of crime.

The fight against drugs, therefore, cannot be left to the police and the criminal justice system. Prevention must begin much earlier: in families, schools and communities. Telling children simply to "stay away from drugs" is not enough. They need the confidence to refuse, the resilience to withstand peer pressure and the awareness to seek help when they are vulnerable. We must teach them that courage does not mean doing what everyone else is doing. Sometimes, real courage lies in standing apart from the crowd and saying, "No, I will not do this."

For those who have already experimented with drugs or are struggling with dependency, our message must be equally clear: their lives are not over. They do not need to hide in shame; they need support. Counselling, medical assistance, psychological care, family engagement and a positive environment can help a young person regain control. Asking for help should never be seen as weakness. It is often the first act of responsibility towards oneself and one's future.

This is why our approach towards children in conflict with the law must extend beyond punishment to reform, rehabilitation and reintegration. A protection home should not merely be a place where a child waits for a prescribed period to end. It should become a bridge between a difficult past and a more hopeful future. Education must be at its centre. Children whose schooling has been interrupted should be helped to resume it wherever possible, while vocational and technical training should be available to those who need alterna-

tive pathways. Computer skills, electrical work, mechanics, agriculture, tailoring, culinary skills, handicrafts and other employable abilities can provide young people with economic independence. Skill is not merely a means of earning a livelihood; it is also a means of restoring dignity and self-worth.

Rehabilitation, however, cannot be reduced to classrooms and employment. Many children carry anger, loneliness, insecurity, rejection or emotional distress. Counselling and life-skills education must therefore accompany formal learning. Sports, yoga, meditation, music and creative activities can develop discipline, confidence and emotional balance. Anger management deserves particular attention because some offences are not the result of carefully planned criminal intent but of a few uncontrolled moments. Young people should learn to pause before reacting, step away from confrontation and ask themselves a simple question: "Will what I am about to do make my future better or worse?" Sometimes, a few seconds of restraint can prevent years of regret.

CONTINUED ON >> P11

## From delinquency to reintegration: Can juvenile homes break the cycle of crime?



When a child commits a crime, society is often quick to ask a familiar question: what punishment should follow? Juvenile justice requires a different question: what happens to the child after the offence?

That distinction lies at the heart of India's juvenile justice framework. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 does not treat a child in conflict with the law simply as an offender requiring confinement. Its architecture is built around care, protection, development, rehabilitation and social reintegration. The real challenge is whether this philosophy survives beyond the

statute book.

The Supreme Court's judgment in *Sampurna Behrua v Union of India* remains a foundational authority in this area. The Court dealt extensively with the inadequate implementation of juvenile justice legislation and directed States to strengthen the institutional framework for children, including Juvenile Justice Boards, Child Welfare Committees, Observation Homes and Special Juvenile Police Units. But the significance of *Sampurna Behrua* goes beyond infrastructure.

The Court emphasised the importance of individual care plans and post-release plans and recognised the crucial role of Probation Officers in understanding the child's circumstances, facilitating rehabilitation and preparing the child for reintegration. The Court also stressed training and sensitisation of those responsible for implementing the juvenile justice system. This leads to an important legal question: can rehabilitation be achieved merely by placing a child inside a juvenile home?

The answer should be no. The Supreme Court's recent judgment in *Prajwala v Union of India* provides a contemporary reaffirmation of this principle. The Court explained that rehabilitation and social reintegration under the JJ Act are to be undertaken in accordance with the child's individual care plan and, preferably, through family-based care.

The judgment also makes an important point that is sometimes forgotten: the State's responsibility does not end when institutional care ends. Section 46 of the JJ Act provides for after-care support for children leaving child-care institutions. Rehabilitation therefore has to continue beyond the walls of the institution. If a child leaves a juvenile home and returns to the same circumstances that con-

tributed to the original offending behaviour, the possibility of rehabilitation becomes weaker.

The family, therefore, cannot be treated as an afterthought. Where appropriate, family counselling, parental involvement and restoration should form part of the rehabilitation process. Bihar's recent experience demonstrates why implementation matters as much as legislation.

In 2026, the Patna High Court, while examining the implementation of the Supreme Court's directions in *Sampurna Behrua*, questioned the State's compliance with the requirement of dedicated Special Juvenile Police Units and exclusive cadres of Child Welfare Police Officers. In its June 18, 2026 proceedings, the Court recorded that Bihar had 20 functional Observation Homes, five Places of Safety and one Special Home, with a stated capacity of about 1,300 children, while 1,898 children were residing in these institutions. The Court directed the State to take steps to establish the required institutions across districts and also addressed vacancies and institutional staffing.

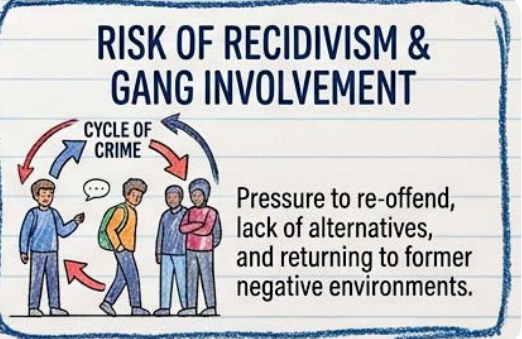
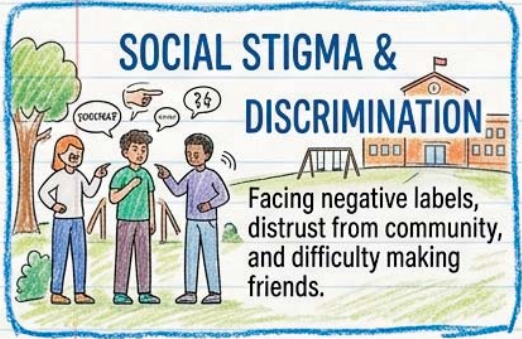
The proceedings expose a fundamental problem: a rehabilitative law cannot work through inadequate institutional capacity. But the larger lesson remains: juvenile justice cannot be measured merely by the existence of buildings. The quality, staffing and nature of rehabilitation provided inside them matter equally.

There is another lesson from the Supreme Court's jurisprudence. A child should not be permanently defined by the offence committed during adolescence. The JJ Act incorporates the principle of fresh start in Section 3 and seeks to prevent unnecessary stigma. This is not merely a compassionate approach. It recognises the developmental nature of childhood and the possibility of behavioural change. The ultimate test of the system, therefore, should not be how many children were housed in juvenile homes. It should be how many children returned to education, acquired skills, rebuilt family relationships and remained outside the criminal justice system. The law has already moved beyond punishment. The real question is whether our juvenile justice system has moved beyond custody. From delinquency to reintegration, the journey cannot end at the gate of a juvenile home.

The writer is a practising advocate and specialises in international law, corporate law and cyber law



### CHALLENGES FACED BY JUVENILES AFTER LEAVING JUVENILE HOME



### THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM IN INDIA

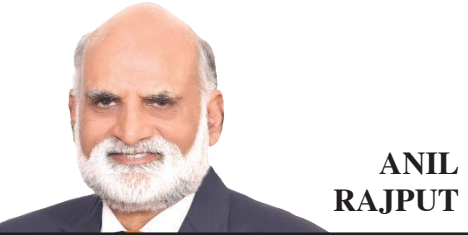
IT FOCUSES ON REHABILITATION, CARE AND SOCIAL REINTEGRATION RATHER THAN RETRIBUTIVE PUNISHMENT. ROOTED IN CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS, SUCH AS ARTICLE 15, WHICH ALLOWS SPECIAL PROTECTIONS FOR CHILDREN, AND ALIGNED WITH THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (UNCRC), THE SYSTEM TREATS YOUNG OFFENDERS AS INDIVIDUALS WHO LACK ADULT EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE MATURITY





PITRU PAKSHA

The cuisine that keeps ancestral memory alive



ANIL  
RAJPUT

What does prosperity taste like after days of fasting? Mahalakshmi Vrat answers that question not with one signature dish, but through a sequence of foods that moves from simple phalahar to carefully prepared offerings and, finally, to a concluding meal shaped by the number sixteen. In 2026, the vrat begins on Saturday, 19 September, on Bhadrapada Shukla Ashtami, and concludes on Saturday, 3 October, on Ashwin Krishna Ashtami. Though conventionally known as a sixteen-day vrat, the lunar sequence gives 15 fasting days this year because the observance follows tithis rather than a simple count of calendar dates.

The vrat is observed particularly across North India, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi, and is dedicated to Mahalakshmi as the giver of fortune, wellbeing and household prosperity. Its ritual world is filled with the number sixteen. Devotees may prepare a sacred thread with sixteen knots, offer objects in groups of sixteen, light lamps and complete the worship with a formal udyapan. The number is not decorative. It gives rhythm to the vow and, in several household traditions, enters the kitchen itself. The concluding food is therefore not merely a festive meal after fasting. It is part of the ritual grammar of the observance.

The stories attached to the vrat vary across regions and family traditions. Some vrat-kathas speak of kings and queens who receive Mahalakshmi's grace through devotion, while another widely circulated tradition links the worship with Kunti, Gandhari, Arjuna and Airavata, the celestial elephant. This helps explain the prominence of Gajalakshmi imagery and the custom in some homes of worshipping a clay elephant. Such narratives have often been transmitted orally, through women's gatherings and household recitation, so the festival's history survives not only in texts but also in repeated practice. Food is part of that transmission because each stage of the vrat carries its own rules about what may be eaten, what should be offered and how the fast is completed.

During the fasting period, there is no single menu followed by every household. Some devotees take only fruit and milk, others eat one phalahar meal, while stricter observance may avoid ordinary grains and salt altogether. This variation makes it important to separate the foods that are specifically tied to Mahalakshmi worship from the wider North Indian vrat repertoire that supports the devotee through the days of fasting. The most distinctive foods appear at the conclusion, where one old custom calls for eighteen sweet puris made from eighteen handfuls of wheat flour. Sixteen are placed beneath a flour lamp and two are offered to Mahalakshmi, after which the sixteen are eaten within the family.

The symbolism turns an everyday ingredient into a ritual count.

These meethi puris are far more than ordinary fried bread. The dough is lightly sweetened, rolled into small discs and fried in ghee or oil until puffed and golden. In the associated custom, they are eaten with seviyan kheer or meetha dahi, creating a combination that is unusual enough to give Mahalakshmi Vrat a culinary identity of its own. The seviyan are roasted before being simmered in milk with sugar and cardamom until soft, while sweet curd is whisked until smooth and gently sweetened. The contrast between crisp puri, creamy vermicelli and cool curd creates a concluding plate built as much around ritual meaning as taste.

Milk sweets also hold an important place in the worship. Several Mahalakshmi traditions specify white barfi as prasad, its pale colour making it visually distinct from darker jaggery sweets. It may be made by reducing milk or khoya with sugar until the mixture can be set and cut into squares. In other homes, a simpler mawa prasad is prepared by lightly roasting khoya in ghee, sweetening it and perfuming it with cardamom. Kheer remains another recognised offering, but rather than treating it as the centre of the article, it is better understood as one part of a larger ritual spread. Rice or another permitted ingredient is cooked slowly in milk until the liquid thickens, giving the bhog the soft, spoonable texture traditionally associated with auspicious occasions.

The same milk base can be adapted for sabudana kheer, a preparation specifically mentioned in Mahalakshmi bhog traditions. Soaked tapioca pearls are simmered until translucent, then cooked in milk with sugar, cardamom and nuts. Their soft, pearly texture distinguishes the dish from ordinary rice kheer and also makes it suitable for households avoiding grain during the fast. Singhara barfi works from a different vrat ingredient. Water chestnut flour is roasted gently in ghee, cooked with milk or water and sugar, then spread and cut once firm. The familiar flour of fasting food is thus transformed into a sweet that looks at home on a ceremonial platter.

Coconut provides another route to sweetness through nariyal laddoo, now widely prepared as Mahalakshmi bhog. Fresh coconut is cooked with milk and sugar until the mixture thickens enough to shape, then finished with

cardamom and dry fruits.



Kesar bhaat offers a contrasting grain-based preparation for the concluding meal, where family practice permits ordinary rice after the fast. Rice is cooked so the grains remain separate, then sweetened and scented with saffron and cardamom, sometimes with raisins or nuts folded through it. Alongside these cooked sweets, batasha, makhana, kishmish and pieces of fresh coconut are also used as offerings in Mahalakshmi worship, reminding us that prasad need not always emerge from an elaborate recipe.

The savoury side of the vrat kitchen is equally varied, although it belongs more to the wider fasting tradition of the regions concerned than to one compulsory Mahalakshmi menu. Kuttu ke pakore have a particularly strong claim here because they are specifically mentioned among foods offered during Mahalakshmi worship. Buckwheat flour is mixed with pieces of permitted vegetables, cumin, green chilli and rock salt before being fried until crisp. The same flour can be steamed rather than fried as kuttu dhokla, where a lightly aerated batter is cooked until soft and cut into squares. The change in technique is important, allowing the same fasting ingredient to produce two entirely different textures.

Water chestnut flour expands the savoury range further. Singhare ki puri is kneaded with boiled potato or another binder, rolled carefully because the dough lacks gluten, and fried until lightly crisp. Kuttu ki puri follows a similar method but has a deeper, earthier flavour from buckwheat. Rajgira puri, prepared from amaranth flour, brings yet

another grain substitute into the North Indian fasting pantry. Because these flours behave differently from wheat, they demand experience. The doughs crack more easily, require careful moisture and are often rolled between sheets or pressed by hand. Their presence shows that vrat cooking has developed its own body of practical knowledge rather than simply subtracting ordinary grains from a normal meal.

Vegetables add further variety without falling back on the usual potato-centred fasting plate. Kacche kele ki tikki uses boiled raw banana mashed with cumin, green chilli and rock salt, shaped into patties and shallow-fried until browned on both sides. Lauki raita takes the opposite approach, combining cooked grated bottle gourd with chilled curd, roasted cumin and rock salt for a soft, cooling accompaniment. A kheera-aloo salad, documented in contemporary Mahalakshmi fasting menus, can be kept light by combining cucumber with small amounts of boiled potato, lemon and cumin rather than turning it into another heavy potato dish. Bhuni shakarkand, roasted sweet potato seasoned only after cooking, adds natural sweetness and a faint smoky edge to the plate.

Makhana can also move beyond its familiar use in kheer. Ghee-roasted makhana, tossed lightly with cumin or rock salt where permitted, provides a crisp snack during the fasting period and carries an additional connection to Mahalakshmi because fox nuts are themselves offered in her worship. Singhara, whether eaten fresh when available or used through its flour, similarly occupies both ritual and culinary space. Seasonal fruit phalahar may bring together banana, guava, apple, pomegranate and grapes, while a panchmeva mixture of almonds, cashews, walnuts, raisins and other dry fruits provides another compact offering. Rather than treating fruit and nuts as culinary afterthoughts, the vrat places them at the centre of a food system shaped by season, simplicity and permitted ingredients.

There are also preparations that sit between sweet and savoury. Singhare ka halwa roasts water chestnut flour in ghee before cooking it with milk or water and sugar, giving it a dense, almost pudding-like body. Makhana panjiri, where household practice allows it, can combine

roasted and crushed fox nuts with ghee, coconut, nuts and sugar to produce a dry prasad with far more texture than kheer. A simple dahi-makhana bowl may instead fold roasted fox nuts into curd with cumin and rock salt, allowing the ingredient to serve as part of the fasting meal rather than only as an offering. None of these dishes needs to be universal to be culturally useful. Together they show how the regional vrat pantry can be rearranged across many days without making every meal identical. Beverages follow the same principle. Milk remains one of the most common choices during a fast, while kesar-badam milk may be prepared more richly for the concluding meal by simmering milk with saffron, almonds and cardamom. Chaas, where permitted by family custom, is made by thinning curd and seasoning it lightly with roasted cumin and rock salt, making it particularly welcome after fried foods. Coconut water offers a simpler option during the fasting period, while panchamrit, made from milk, curd, ghee, honey and sugar, belongs primarily to the ritual sphere and is received in small quantities as prasad rather than treated as an ordinary drink. The distinction between refreshment and sacred offering remains important even when both are consumed.

By the final Ashtami, these foods come together in a meal that looks very different from the beginning of the vrat. The kitchen may contain sweet puris, seviyan kheer, meetha dahi, white barfi, coconut laddoo, sabudana kheer, fasting flours, fruit, makhana and carefully prepared savouries, yet no household is required to reproduce one fixed national menu. What gives the cuisine coherence is the sequence: days governed by family fasting rules, foods chosen from a recognised vrat pantry, offerings associated with Mahalakshmi, and a final ritual meal in which the number sixteen reappears at the table.

That sequence is precisely what deserves to be preserved. A festival can survive on a calendar while losing much of its cultural substance if younger generations know when Mahalakshmi Vrat falls but not why sixteen puris are counted, why a flour lamp is placed above them, why seviyan kheer or sweet curd accompanies them, or why certain foods belong to the fast while others belong only after it ends. Recipes preserve technique, but explanation preserves meaning. The future of Mahalakshmi Vrat therefore depends as much on the kitchen as on the prayer room. Families can keep the tradition alive by inviting younger members to shape the sweet puris, roast singhara flour, thicken milk for prasad, count the offerings and listen to the vrat-katha while the food is being prepared. When the reason behind a dish travels with the recipe, cuisine becomes a form of cultural memory. That may be one of Mahalakshmi's most valuable lessons: prosperity is not only what a household possesses, but also what it knows well enough to share, teach and carry forward.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

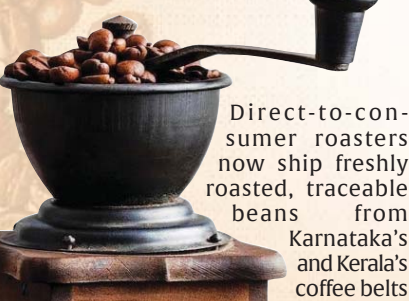
COFFEE CULTURE

What is brewing in India?

Around International Coffee Day, coffee is taking centre stage, evolving into a culture of craft, choice and personal taste

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Not very long ago, a “coffee kit” in most Indian homes meant a jar of instant granules and a spoon. Today, it is as likely to mean a hand grinder, a pour-over dripper, a digital scale and a shelf of single-origin beans from Coorg. Morning coffee has become something people make for themselves — measured, timed and adjusted until it tastes the way they want it to. The shift didn't happen overnight. Third-wave cafés that opened across Indian cities over the last decade first taught a generation to tell a washed process from a natural one, an Arabica from a Robusta — building the palate before anyone thought to recreate it at home. What has sustained the habit is infrastructure that didn't exist a decade ago.



Direct-to-consumer roasters now ship freshly roasted, traceable beans from Karnataka's and Kerala's coffee belts

straight to a customer's door — cutting out the old route where India's best coffee went abroad while its own drinkers made do with the rest. Grinders and drippers once bought on trips to Europe are now sold by Indian brands at Indian prices. And Instagram reels are turning brewing technique into something anyone can watch, copy and improve on. The good in this goes beyond caffeine. For the first time, it is ordinary Indian drinkers, not only foreign buyers, who are deciding what good Indian coffee should taste like — a shift that rewards growers for quality rather than volume. It has also made coffee personal rather than prescribed: a home brewer tunes grind, ratio and roast to their own palate in a way no instant sachet, and few café orders, ever allowed. Small roasters, subscription boxes and equipment makers have grown around it, turning a private ritual into a domestic industry.

The shift has also given rise to the home barista and the growing culture of dedicated coffee corners. As Abhinav Mathur, Founder of Something's Brewing, puts it, the home barista is no

longer a niche hobbyist. Consumers are creating curated coffee spaces at home, choosing their machines, grinders, cups, shelves and beans with the same intentionality they bring to a home office or wine rack. These spaces are becoming personal expressions of taste and lifestyle, turning coffee from a daily beverage into a craft and a form of identity. India isn't trading tea for coffee. chai remains deeply rooted, but coffee is gaining a national identity as a drink of choice and craft. India isn't switching cups; it is simply learning to brew its own.



“HOME BREWING IS BECOMING A DEEPLY PERSONAL AND EXPERIMENTAL EXPERIENCE. PEOPLE EXPLORE DIFFERENT ORIGINS, ADJUST GRIND SIZES AND WATER TEMPERATURES, AND DISCOVER HOW BREWING METHODS CAN TRANSFORM THE SAME COFFEE. THEY BEGIN SOURCING MICRO-LOTS, FOLLOWING ROASTERS AND DEVELOPING THEIR PALATE. THIS SENSE OF OWNERSHIP TURNS A DAILY HABIT INTO A REWARDING CRAFT.”

- Abhinav Mathur, Founder & MD, Something's Brewing

Turning Dim Sum into an art form



TEAM AGENDA

Dumplings have travelled a long way from their early roots in Chinese culinary history. Jiaozi, one of China's best-known dumplings, is believed to date back nearly 2,000 years, while the wider dim sum tradition evolved around teahouses and the Cantonese practice of yum cha — combining tea, small bites and conversation. Over centuries, these delicate parcels became associated with family, celebration and togetherness.

As National Dumpling Day celebrates this much-loved food on September 26, its appeal lies in how easily tradition adapts to new tastes. At OKO, The LaLiT New Delhi, dim sum is treated as a ritual of sharing. The restaurant's Dumpling Diaries menu draws on Hong Kong's yum cha culture, inviting diners to slow down, share plates and linger over bamboo baskets. The menu spans familiar and adventurous flavours. On the non-vegetarian side, Xian Xia Jiu Cai Jiao — plump shrimp and chive dumplings — sit alongside the more unusual Xiangjiao Juan He Ta, river sole marinated in black bean sauce and wrapped in banana leaf.

Purists will gravitate toward the Xiao Long Bao, a Shanghai-style soup dumpling filled with chicken broth that bursts on the first bite, while the Yangrou Kao Baozi offers some-

thing heartier: a pillowy, open-faced bao stuffed with cumin-spiced lamb.

The Curry Pork Dumpling, doused in a rich, creamy Thai Bangkok curry sauce, is the most indulgent of the lot-an unapologetic fusion of Cantonese technique and Southeast Asian flavour.

Vegetarians are just as well looked after. The Luson Koumo Jiao pairs asparagus with button mushroom for a clean, earthy bite, and the Su Ji Jiao-a plant-based soya bean dumpling served with the same Thai curry dip-proves that vegan dim sum needn't feel like a compromise.

The Kao Baozi arrives filled with tempura enoki mushroom and a slick of spicy mayo, while the Si Xi Su Jiao channels a Cantonese

four-season medley of vegetables. For something with more bite, the Doumiao Mat Jiao brings Szechuan-spiced water chestnut and snow peas together in a satisfying crunch.

Executive Sous Chef Manish Prasad sums up the philosophy behind the menu: dim sum, he says, is rooted in craftsmanship, balance and the joy of sharing-and Dumpling Diaries was built to honour that tradition while layering in contemporary flavour and presentation.



A vibrant spread of bamboo basket dim sum, served with dipping sauces and colourful garnishes





DAIV ASTRO

Ancient Wisdom. Timeless Guidance.  
https://daiv.co

This Week's Zodiac Insights

Profession • Money • Family • Relationships • Health • Travel



**Mesha | Aries:** The week ahead helps you stay composed even when situations feel uncertain. Work can move smoothly, with tasks completed on time and appreciation coming your way. Financial matters may also improve, while relationships remain supportive and old connections could return. **Watch out for:** Speaking too sharply with elders and overlooking an older family member's health.



**Vrishabha | Taurus:** As the week unfolds, fresh ideas can strengthen your professional standing and an important person may prove helpful in the long run. Money matters need thoughtful handling, especially around risky decisions or agreements. Family bonds can improve when you make more time for them. **Watch out for:** Financial strain, relationship distance and physical overexertion.



**Mithuna | Gemini:** The coming week feels calmer and more settled, with confidence and professional authority likely to improve. Support from your partner and friends can help personal or business plans move ahead. Spending may remain high despite good prospects, so keep priorities balanced. **Watch out for:** Overspending, family worries and breathing-related discomfort.



**Karka | Cancer:** During the week, unfinished work can move towards completion through steady effort. Business and investment matters look encouraging, while asset-related decisions may also come up. Personal relationships improve when you listen patiently and avoid reacting too quickly. **Watch out for:** Property paperwork, family tension and neglecting your health under a heavy workload.



**Simha | Leo:** This week may bring a pleasant emotional lift along with encouraging movement in business and finances. Confidence grows, but differences with your spouse are best handled calmly before they build up. Friends may not always be motivating, so trust your own judgement. **Watch out for:** Domestic arguments, discouraging company and breathing-related discomfort.



**Kanya | Virgo:** In the week ahead, a new initiative may face resistance at first but can gain support once its value becomes clear. Business and financial prospects remain strong, while family pressure begins to ease. Old friends or relatives may reconnect positively. **Watch out for:** Relationship disappointment and expecting support without clear communication.



**Tula | Libra:** The week brings mixed but manageable results, with earlier good efforts returning in your favour even as delays test your patience. Money transactions require extra care, while support from your spouse and close friends helps you stay steady. Family matters may bring happy news. **Watch out for:** Financial fraud, paperwork delays and breathing discomfort.



**Vrishchika | Scorpio:** As the week progresses, career matters can open promising opportunities and business decisions may become more rewarding. Income may slow briefly before recovering, while friends can offer practical support. Relationships improve when you explain yourself with patience rather than frustration. **Watch out for:** Family health concerns and overextending yourself professionally.



**Dhanu | Sagittarius:** The coming week supports business growth and profitable deals, especially through trusted connections. Professional dealings remain favourable, though income may feel less secure than expected. Siblings or friends can help with practical matters when pressure rises, and a short break may help you recharge. **Watch out for:** Loose talk in relationships and overwork.



**Makara | Capricorn:** This week looks eventful, with work progressing steadily and business matters showing encouraging movement. Your communication can help in negotiations and relationships, while a housing or property decision may also come into focus. Money needs careful handling despite positive momentum. **Watch out for:** Casual lending, delayed plans and back or abdominal discomfort.



**Kumbha | Aquarius:** Over the coming week, your focus shifts strongly towards self-improvement and professional progress. Career recognition and financial stability look favourable, while family support can guide you through a temporary setback. Old contacts may return with renewed interest and support. **Watch out for:** Relationship disappointment and ignoring useful advice from your partner.



**Meena | Pisces:** The week calls for patience, especially when making decisions about matters that have troubled you for some time. Work may face errors or missed opportunities, while finances need caution and less dependence on others. Differences within the family should be handled without haste. **Watch out for:** Rash decisions, careless speech, borrowing pressure and health concerns.



Scan to Download  
DAIV App

धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः

A platform for spiritual seekers  
from across the globe

Download on the  
App Store

GET IT ON  
Google Play

“LOVE AND COMPASSION ARE NECESSITIES, NOT LUXURIES. WITHOUT THEM HUMANITY CANNOT SURVIVE”

— DALAI LAMA

# A REVOLUTION OF LOVE

Today marks the 73rd birthday of Amma, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, a global spiritual master and humanitarian born in a poor fishing village in Keralam

AMMA

## The undefeated power of compassion

I never think about my birthday. It is my children who wish to come together on this day to light lamps of love and devotion. But this is not the time for celebrations. This year, as humankind faces increasing crises, my wish is that it be a day of seva, shining a ray of hope for others. Across the world, my children are gathering to feed the poor, conduct public cleanup drives, plant trees, and meditate for world peace. Their selfless service is what makes me happy.

Once as a little girl, I was collecting food scraps from neighbouring homes and came upon an elderly woman lying alone in her hut. She was too weak to move, with no one to care for her. She was starving. The sight of that woman's suffering struck me like a lightning bolt. I ran home to gather food and clothing and brought them to her. As I fed her, she wept with gratitude.

At that moment, I understood something very clearly: God is not some distant figure sitting on a throne in the sky. God dwells in every being. Serving a suffering person is serving God. Wiping that elderly woman's tears became my purpose. From that point, nothing could hold me back.

Today, I have embraced more than 4 crore people across the world, but this did not begin intentionally. As a little girl, when I saw people crying, I just wiped away their tears. When they continued to weep, I embraced them and patted their backs. If they were still distressed, I let them lie in my lap to comfort them. Their sorrow became my sorrow. Their happiness became my happiness.

There are two types of poverty in the world. The first type is due to the lack of food, clothing, and shelter. The second type is the poverty of love and compassion. We need to deal with the second type of poverty first. When our hearts are filled with love and compassion, we will wholeheartedly help those who lack food, clothing, and shelter.

Whether or not God exists might be a source of debate, but no rational person can ever say that suffering humanity does not exist. We can see their suffering with our own eyes. Service to such people is worship of God. Let us pray that this self-sacrificing attitude awakens in hearts across the



Amma has given her darshan in the form of a motherly embrace to more than 4 crore people across the world.

Whether or not God exists might be a source of debate, but no rational person can ever say that suffering humanity does not exist.

— Amma

world. May we come to realise that the waters of love, compassion, selflessness, and sacrifice have not dried up in human hearts.

We must not let this world become a desert. We must not let love and compassion evaporate. If that happens, there will no longer be any human beings here. This beautiful world will become a forest filled with human animals.

If only our minds, eyes, ears, and hands could genuinely understand and feel the sorrow and pain of others. How many suicides could have been prevented? How many people could have been protected from exploitation and trafficking? How many wars in the name of power and money could have been avoided?

By calling out to God, we are planting the seeds of love. Even if only one flower blossoms in a desert, isn't it a beautiful sight? If one tree grows there, won't it give some shade? Sincere prayer is selfless love.

United in this love, we can become an

undefeatable power. When we work together, hand in hand with compassion, it is not just one life force, but the life energy of countless people that flows in harmony, unimpeded. From that constant stream of unity, real progress will take place, and we will see the birth of a world of peace.

If that is sincerely our goal, then there is only one path forward: we must usher in a revolution of love. It is a revolution that should happen first in the individual mind. From there, it must expand to one's home and community. The rest will happen spontaneously. If that goal is reached, our dreams of a noble world family will be fulfilled.

To this day, as long as there is enough strength to reach out to those who come to me, to place my hand on a crying person's shoulder, I will continue to embrace people. To lovingly caress them, to console and wipe their tears until the end of this mortal frame - this is my wish.

## What does a prayer become when someone truly hears it?

BRAHMACHARINI RAJESWARI,  
MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI MATH

It began in the poor fishing village where Amma was born in 1953. As a young girl, she helped all who came to her with their sorrows. Sharing food with hungry children at school. Caring for elderly abandoned by their families. Giving what little money she could to people in debt. As she wiped away the tears, their prayers became Amma's prayers.

Her humanitarian work begins with immediate aid for those who share their hardships. She then builds massive

humanitarian solutions that transcend political, regional, linguistic, and religious differences. Amma's initiatives have become a global spiritual and humanitarian movement that reaches more than 50 countries.

Amma truly embodies the ancient concept of Universal Motherhood. It is a love and compassion felt not only towards one's own children, but towards all people, animals and plants, rocks and rivers - a love extended to all of nature. Indeed, to a woman in whom the state of true motherhood has awakened, all creatures are her children.



After 12 hours of giving darshan in Kolkata, Amma and her team took to the streets to gather years of accumulated trash. Within three hours, a 3km stretch was clean again.

## FROM AGENDA COVER

## Beyond punishment: giving children in...

The influence of peers is equally significant. A positive friend can lift a young person, while a destructive group can pull him or her back into the circumstances from which rehabilitation sought to provide an escape. When children return to society, they therefore need continued support to build healthy relationships, find positive mentors and reconnect with their families and communities. Society, too, has a responsibility. If we repeatedly remind a young person of his past, we make it harder for him to build a future. Accountability is essential, but stigma should not become permanent. Trust may take time to rebuild, but the opportunity to rebuild it must remain open.

There is also a powerful possibility within this process. A young person who has experienced addiction, violence or criminal influence can eventually become one of the strongest voices against those very dangers. Someone who has known darkness can sometimes guide another towards light with an authenticity that no textbook can provide. A rehabilitated child can therefore become not merely a beneficiary of the system but, in time, an agent of prevention.

Additionally, this has a direct connection with nation-building. India is often described as a young nation and its youth as a demographic dividend. But a young population becomes a dividend only when it is educated, healthy, skilled, purposeful and given meaningful opportunities. Every child kept away from drugs, reconnected with education, equipped with skills and restored to a dignified life represents more than an individual success. It is an investment in the country's social stability and future.

Whenever a child comes into conflict with the law, we naturally ask, "What did the child do?" We must also ask, "What circumstances brought the child here?" More importantly, we should ask, "What can we do to ensure that the child does not return to those circumstances?" And ultimately: "How can we help this child become a responsible and productive citizen?" The answer requires the combined commitment of the police, juvenile justice institutions, families, schools, community engagement, drug abuse, youth empowerment and social justice

sellors, civil society and the community.

For policing, this calls for a broader understanding of success. Modern policing cannot be confined to responding to offences after they occur. Prevention, community trust and protection of vulnerable children must form an integral part of our mission. Our success should not be measured only by cases registered or offenders apprehended. It should also be measured by how many young lives we help redirect, away from drugs and violence, towards education, skills, dignity and opportunity.

When a child leaves a protection home, he or she should not leave merely with a certificate or a date of release. The child should leave with a plan for education or livelihood, the ability to make healthier choices, supportive relationships and, above all, faith in his or her own future. We must tell these children something that society sometimes forgets to tell them: your past may explain where you came from, but it does not have the right to decide where you will go. A mistake can be a chapter in your life without becoming the title of the entire book.

It is easy to label a child by an offence; it is harder to help that child become a responsible citizen. But a compassionate and democratic society must be willing to choose the harder path. Rehabilitation is not charity. It is an investment in public safety, social justice and nation-building. When a young person chooses dreams over drugs, discipline over anger, skills over dependency and responsibility over crime, society gains far more than a reformed individual. It gains a citizen.

Perhaps the most meaningful measure of rehabilitation is when a child who once needed protection grows into a young person capable of protecting another child from the very dangers he once faced. That is more than rehabilitation. That is transformation. And that is how a second chance given to one child can become an investment in the future of an entire society and of the nation.

Dr Kumar Ashish, IPS, DIG, Koshi Range, Saharsa, Bihar is known for pioneering people-centric policing initiatives such as AAWAZ DO, Nasha-Mukt Koshi Abhiyan, E-Bharosa, Coffee with SP, Thana Diwas and Rail Police Paathshala, with a focus on women's safety, digital policing, community engagement, drug abuse, youth empowerment and social justice

## An officer's flight through turbulence

DEVTSAGAR SINGH

*Flight Into Turbulence and Safe Landing is an autobiography of MR Sivaraman, former Executive Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and former Revenue Secretary to the Government of India.*

Civil services in India are often associated with power and privilege, with officials administering their respective domains as largely faceless figures. Their contribution to nation-building is frequently submerged in the vastness of public life. Not many choose to recount their work and experiences after retirement. Former IAS officer MR Sivaraman's autobiography, *Flight Into Turbulence and Safe Landing*, is therefore both refreshing and informative. A 1962-batch officer of the Madhya Pradesh cadre, Sivaraman held several key positions, including Revenue Secretary to the Government of India, Executive Director at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). In his book, he presents his perspective candidly and without hesitation. His willingness to recount both his achievements and his differences with those in positions of authority makes the narrative particularly engaging.

Sivaraman says his approach to public service was simple: remain upright and honest, whatever the circumstances. That principle, he believes, served him well. He also recalls his differences with political leaders, including the then Civil Aviation Minister, the late Madhav Rao Scindia, over official matters during his tenure as DGCA.

One of the most gripping sections deals with the 1993 Indian Airlines hijacking crisis. Sivaraman recounts the difficult decision he took at Amritsar airport, including the possibility of opening fire inside a passenger-filled aircraft to

prevent it from taking off for Pakistan, as demanded by the hijackers. His account provides details and perspectives that remain relatively unfamiliar even today.

The title may initially appear unconventional, but it is deeply symbolic. Sivaraman took charge as DGCA at a turbulent moment for Indian aviation, following the crash of an Airbus A320 in Bangalore. His tenure placed him at the centre of a sector facing serious challenges, making the metaphor of turbulence particularly apt.

Sivaraman also questions Jawaharlal Nehru's economic model, particularly his socialist leanings, which he argues constrained the growth of the private sector. That assessment, however, could have benefited from greater historical context. Nehru had limited room for manoeuvre in an era when India was struggling with widespread poverty and enormous developmental chal-

lenges, and the priorities of the time were shaped by the needs of a vast population struggling for basic survival.

Where Sivaraman is on particularly firm ground is in his discussion of economic reforms during his tenure as Revenue Secretary under the then Finance Minister, the late Manmohan Singh. *Flight Into Turbulence and Safe Landing* ultimately offers something more than the recollections of a retired bureaucrat. It provides an insider's account of the pressures, conflicts and responsibilities that accompany public office. Its strongest passages are those in which Sivaraman allows the reader to see the civil servant behind the office: someone required to make difficult decisions, stand his ground and navigate the turbulence of administration without compromising his principles.

The book reviewer is a writer and commentator on public affairs, politics and society



Amma comforts survivors of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Her relief efforts came to more than ₹500 crore.



# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS





# Another reminder of the real purpose of the U.N.

## Weekly editorial

The United Nations General Assembly is dominated by pomp and platitudes. World leaders take turns at the podium, pleading their case to the assembled grandees, calling for cooperation and usually bemoaning an institution that has failed to live up to its potential.

Since Donald Trump became the president of the United States, those sessions have become more lively and dyspeptic, with attendees treated to the spectacle of the leader of the world's leading superpower bemoaning his lack of recognition, threatening the annihilation of another state and claiming that international law is a fiction and "to the victor belong the spoils."

Closer observers of the U.S. president will not be surprised by any of those statements; they are regular comments and complaints of his. They, along with the rest of the world, however, will have been taken aback by his threat to "annihilate the Islamic republic" if it refused to reach an agreement with him, although reports a few hours later that his team was talking with Iranian officials may convince them it was merely a negotiating tactic.

Still, threatening war and promoting the purest form of power politics are jarring statements from the leader of one of the countries that helped establish this pillar of the post-World War II order, an institution whose charter expressly prohibits members from threatening or using force against a country unless acting in self-defense or with U.N. authorization.

Those words have been violated often, but that does not make them irrelevant. The United Nations has long been a dumping ground for intractable problems; when nations can resolve disputes between themselves, they do so. The resort to the U.N. is an admission of failure, a signal that normal diplomacy does not work.

That simple truth is responsible for much of the frustration that surrounds the institution. The purpose of the U.N. is not so much to resolve conflicts as to prevent them. It aims to create a shared set of expectations among nations by articulating rules and principles that all countries can accept and



U.S. President Donald Trump addresses the 81st United Nations General Assembly in New York on Tuesday. REUTERS

honor. Even when they become platitudes, they are still benchmarks. The greatest concern of nations should not be hypocrisy but when world leaders don't even feel an obligation to mouth the bromides. Then they will feel truly unfettered.

That is why Trump's casual dismissal of misbehavior by Russia's Vladimir Putin or China's Xi Jinping, conceding that "we do it, too" is so corrosive. He may be right but he isn't leveling the playing field so much as tearing up markers and ripping up the rules. Trump admitted as much when he told the New York Times earlier this year that the

international law was no constraint on him and that his only limit was "my own morality, my own mind — it's the only thing that can stop me."

That could explain his antipathy to the International Criminal Court, which, his administration declared, "has engaged in illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our close ally Israel," and that its work "constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." That executive order was issued before the U.S. launched its gunboat diplomacy and

air strikes against boats suspected of smuggling drugs into the United States from Latin America, which have been called violations of fundamental principles of international law.

While the U.S. is not subject to the court's jurisdiction, the institution still stands as a bulwark against such lawlessness. Not surprisingly, the ICC's chief prosecutor and nine of its judges, including President Tomoko Akane, are under U.S. sanctions — and Washington has pressed other countries to do the same.

Japan has rebuffed those entreaties and

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi reportedly had "a frank exchange of views" with Trump about the ICC when they met in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA. The Japanese leader will walk a fine line as she defends the court against U.S. pressure.

Defending the basic principles of the U.N. Charter does not mean that the document is immutable. Takaichi was right to remind the body that revision of the "enemy states" clauses is long overdue. Articles 53, 77 and 107 of the U.N. Charter single out the defeated nations of World War II — Japan, Germany and other Axis powers — and

allow for enforcement measures against these states in the event of renewed aggression and shielding certain actions taken against them as a consequence of the war.

In 2005, U.N. member states agreed to delete references to "enemy states" from the charter, steps that were never taken because of the onerous process required to amend the charter. Today, China, despite having backed that resolution, insists that maintenance of the clauses is a "vital institutional arrangement" that prevents fascism and militarism from threatening international peace and security, insinuating that Japan is a revanchist power and provides that threat.

This absurd campaign was triggered by Prime Minister Takaichi's statement last year to Japan's parliament that a contingency involving Taiwan would constitute a crisis for Japan and might oblige Tokyo to exercise its right of collective self-defense — assisting Taiwan or the United States, if it comes to the island's defense. Since the forced reunification of Taiwan would impact Japanese national security interests, the prime minister's statement is not a provocation but a fact.

The world has changed considerably in the 80-plus years since the United Nations' founding and China's insistence on retaining those outdated clauses nevertheless is a stark contrast to the revisions it demands to other international institutions.

No country is more committed to the patient, painstaking work of diplomacy as is Japan. It relies on a stable and rules-based international order and has worked assiduously to support and sustain it. It remains every Japanese government's top priority — not because it puts its hopes in abstractions but because it is the best guarantor of the country's national interests. Especially as the pace of change accelerates, there is the need to slow things down and let passions cool and reason prevail.

The United Nations is a critical venue where diplomacy can do its work, creating time and space for empathy and innovative deal-making. Success is not guaranteed, but its value must not be measured just by what it does but by what would occur if it did not exist.

.....  
The Japan Times Editorial Board

## Why Russia's Potemkin election actually matters

MARC CHAMPION  
BLOOMBERG

In what must be the world's least surprising election result, parties loyal to President Vladimir Putin have made a clean sweep in elections to Russia's parliament, the State Duma.

There's little purpose to parsing who won what share of the vote; the point is that opponents of Putin and his war were either jailed, dead, in exile or banned from running. As a democratic exercise, this signified nothing — but it was an important moment nonetheless.

Putin's approach to this conflict has changed. Where he once felt he had time to wait until Ukraine and its backers faltered, he now wants the war over quickly and on his terms. So what mattered to the career KGB agent and his like-minded officials this month was not that the election would let Russians pass judgment on his plans, but rather that it should help ensure public acquiescence to the demands for greater sacrifice he will soon make.

For one thing, the vote and its result will allow Putin to push harder on the claim that neither Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy nor his government are legitimate and that they are therefore inadequate negotiating partners. After all, unlike Russia, they have refused to hold wartime elections. Never mind that Russia isn't being invaded, meaning that what's possible for Moscow is not necessarily viable for Kyiv.

But more critically, despite Putin's denials, Russians have been speculating that a further

troop mobilization is coming. This could be formally announced or take place under the radar, but in either case the Kremlin needs to raise hundreds of thousands more troops to replace those who are wounded or dying — and high salaries are no longer drawing enough recruits. That's easier to do when the government can make the argument, supported by a fresh (if fake) electoral mandate, that the public supports the war.

Indeed, in a recent address, Putin made it clear that this was what the elections were about. "Your choice and determination will show once again that millions of people are backing our fighters and that we stand together," he told his fellow Russians. "Nobody can divide or intimidate us, undermine our statehood, our public and political system."

By the same token, if continuing the war brings hardships in the form of higher taxes, cuts to social spending or regular Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian energy output and cities, this too is easier — even for an autocrat such as Putin — if he can portray the war as a nationally endorsed endeavor. That approval has often been real, but in 2026 many Russians want the conflict to end.

Perhaps most important, though, is to lock down the home front before escalating not just in Ukraine, but also in Europe. That is where Putin appears to be shifting emphasis now, as the inevitable winter slowdown follows a summer fighting season marked by Russian frustration. For if the strategy of Ukraine and its allies is to inflict enough pain for Putin to conclude that his war of choice is no longer worth the pursuit, the Kremlin's

is to persuade Europeans that they cannot afford to push him to that point.

French President Emmanuel Macron is the latest European leader to warn his people that Russia's hybrid war against the West is expanding. Multiple intelligence agencies, meanwhile, have recently warned that Putin may test NATO sooner rather than later. Russia's escalating air war is driving up the cost of Ukraine's defense, the vast majority of which now falls to Europe. The shortfall on the tens of billions already allocated this year, according to Kyiv, is a further \$27 billion.

So, with far-right, pro-Russian parties making inroads ahead of a slew of (real) elections in Europe next year, Putin has every reason to feel confident that Ukraine and its Western backers will reach their pain threshold before he does. Russia's leaders haven't even tried to conceal their glee at Chancellor Friedrich Merz's drubbing in a string of recent regional elections in Germany.

John Mearsheimer, a political science professor at the University of Chicago and perhaps the purest U.S. exponent of the so-called realist school of foreign policy, is one of very few Western academics still welcomed to Moscow. His recent YouTube interview with the Norwegian academic, Putin apologist and alt-right fan Glenn Diesen makes it clear why it rolls out the red carpet for the American professor — and why Russians are so certain of winning.

Much of Mearsheimer's analysis is right on the money. He notes that whatever troubles the Russian economy is having, they are nascent compared with the potential catas-



Members of a local electoral commission empty a ballot box before counting votes in Russia's parliamentary election in Podolsk, near Moscow, on Sept. 20. REUTERS

trophe unfolding in Ukraine. Likewise, he says Putin's escalation since June is already having an impact and (as I've written before) has a worryingly high chance of success this winter. This is largely due to the mismatch between expanding Russian missile production and Ukraine's fast-shrinking air defenses.

He accurately describes Russia's goal is to seize all territory that it considers historically Russian — including Odesa, the Black Sea coast and Kharkiv to the north — ensuring that a landlocked, rump Ukraine is so destroyed as to be dysfunctional.

Where he, Diesen and many others are deluded is in their embrace of the Kremlin's portrayal of the war as an act of self-defense against Europe, which in this telling has sought for decades to use Ukraine as a "battering ram" to destroy Russia.

This is the story Putin tells to Russians and his sympathizers in the West, from academics such as Mearsheimer and Diesen, to populist political parties including Germany's AfD and Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France. Promoting it matters deeply, because if Russia is simply defending itself, there is lit-

tle for Europe to fear in a Ukrainian defeat. If, by contrast, Putin has led a revisionist power to war, then Europe has a great deal to fear.

Having put that argument to bed at home, Putin can now move on to persuading voters in the West. Their elections do have the power to throw leaders out — and with that to divide Europe, destroy Ukraine and win the war for Russia.

.....  
Marc Champion is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Europe, Russia and the Middle East.



opinion

Will AI's new 'mutual destruction' be assured?

Concerns are growing that artificial intelligence could reshape global deterrence dynamics

Kuni Miyake



The past week was crucial for Japan's government and business communities. On Sept. 22, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi held talks with U.S. President Donald Trump in New York, followed two days later by a U.S.-China summit in Washington between Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

Ahead of the U.S.-China summit, there were concerns in Tokyo that Japan and the United States might have somewhat different priorities. Japan sought to confirm a shared understanding not only on the East and South China seas but also on peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait — specifically, a position that would not tolerate attempts by China to alter the status quo.

The U.S. side, meanwhile, appeared particularly focused on reaching at least a minimal understanding with China on the risks posed by artificial intelligence and their implications for military security.

Washington also had an interest in such issues as critical-mineral supply chains, including rare earths, as well as tariffs and trade. In Japan, however, there were concerns that the Taiwan issue and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan might receive lower priority.

As it turned out, the Japanese and U.S. leaders had a frank exchange on China, including economic security, semiconductors and artificial intelligence, and the meeting reaffirmed the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

But my focus today lies elsewhere.

At the U.S.-China summit, neither side was likely to make major concessions on trade, rare earths or Taiwan. Rather — and this may not be widely understood in Japan — artificial intelligence could become the most consequential issue between the United States and China.

Moreover, I believe the summit could prove historically significant for reasons that go beyond restricting AI competition or deciding which advanced semiconductors can be exported.

AI is likely to become a pillar of strategic deterrence in the future, much as nuclear weapons have been. Although AI-related technologies remain in their early stages, I fear that within the next 10 to 20 years, advances far beyond what we can now imagine could turn the competition over AI into a contest for strategic advantage.

From the 1950s onward, the United States and the Soviet Union regarded nuclear weapons as the ultimate strategic weapon and pursued increasingly sophisticated arsenals. Eventually, the two nuclear superpowers developed a tacit understanding based on mutual deterrence, embodied in the concept of “mutually assured destruction,” or MAD.

I fear that AI could acquire comparable strategic value by the 2030s.

In such a world, the United States and China could eventually possess AI capabilities capable of overcoming or neutralizing the other's strategic systems. This is why some AI experts have argued for restrictions on AI development to prevent such a scenario. But there is a historical parallel: Similar arguments were made about nuclear weapons development during the Cold War.

Neither the Trump administration nor Xi's government appeared likely to agree to meaningful restrictions on AI capabilities at this stage. Both countries were racing to develop the technology, each hoping to secure a strategic advantage.

If that competition continues for another decade or two, the United States and China could acquire capabilities that would allow them to severely disrupt the other's digital infrastructure and, potentially, its physical society. If so, discussions could emerge about an AI version of MAD: a system of mutual deterrence based on the recognition that neither side could safely attack the other without risking catastrophic retaliation.

Such a system could, paradoxically, produce a period of relative stability. Once both countries understood that continued AI development had created the potential for mutually assured destruction, the fear of catastrophic consequences could restrain their behavior.

But I would not assume that such a development would necessarily make the international system more stable. By then, China's nuclear arsenal could exceed 1,500 war-



Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei appears via video link during a U.N. Security Council meeting on artificial intelligence during the 81st United Nations General Assembly in New York on Wednesday. AFP-JJII

As artificial intelligence advances, the U.S. and China could face new implications for nuclear weapons and the global balance of power.

heads, potentially making it a third nuclear superpower alongside Russia and the United States. That would fundamentally complicate the existing U.S.-Russia model of nuclear deterrence.

The traditional logic of MAD rests largely on a bilateral relationship: If one nuclear power attacks the other, it can expect devastating retaliation. But a world with three nuclear superpowers would be more complicated.

If the United States, China and Russia each possess arsenals numbering in the thousands, the distribution of nuclear capabilities will not necessarily be equal. A tripartite nuclear balance could create strategic calculations that differ significantly from those of the U.S.-Soviet and later U.S.-Russia relationship.

In other words, even if a new form of MAD emerges in the AI domain, the traditional model of nuclear MAD could become less reliable in a three-power system. And the same problem could eventually emerge in AI. Rather than a bilateral U.S.-China competition, the world could face a more complicated tripolar AI balance involving the United States, China and Russia.

Consequently, even if discussions about AI at this U.S.-China summit remained preliminary, they could become a catalyst for developments that significantly shape the strategic balance among the United States, China and Russia over the next 10 to 20 years.

That is why the AI discussions at this summit deserve close attention. They are not simply about technology, trade or semiconductor exports. They could offer an early indication of how the great-power balance will evolve in the coming decades.

The question for Asian countries, including Japan, is whether they fully understand the strategic implications. Taiwan may not be the only issue that matters in the U.S.-China relationship.

.....

Kuni Miyake, a former career diplomat, is president of the Foreign Policy Institute.

The notion that sanctions work is an illusion

JAMAL IBRAHIM HAIDAR  
AND SEYED MOHAMMAD KARIMI  
BEIRUT/LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY  
PROJECT SYNDICATE

When governments impose economic sanctions, like the “economic D-Day” U.S. President Donald Trump is now imposing on Iran, they portray them as a precision instrument — a scalpel rather than a sword — capable of pressuring ruling elites while sparing ordinary citizens.

That narrative has been used to justify some of the most sweeping acts of economic coercion in modern history. The only problem is that the central premise is untrue.

The case against sanctions is not merely strategic — that they rarely achieve their stated foreign-policy objectives — but also moral. Sanctions, particularly financial ones, do not fall equally on a population. They fall hardest on those least able to bear them: low-income, wage-dependent and publicly employed people. Thus, anyone who claims to care about the ethics of coercive statecraft must confront its distributional realities with the same rigor applied to questions of military tactics.

Cross-country research spanning decades has documented that economic sanctions reduce gross domestic product growth, widen income inequality, increase child mortality, limit access to health care and expand food insecurity in target states. These are not marginal effects. One study found that U.S. sanctions produced a poverty gap more than 3.8 percentage points larger in targeted countries than in comparable unsanctioned ones. Another documented that U.N. sanctions

reduced life expectancy by 1.2 to 1.4 years. These are statistics of mass harm, describing damage done to households, not palaces.

Yet the cross-country evidence, while damning, did not always tell us precisely who bears what burden within a sanctioned society. In a new study using detailed microdata from Iranian household income and expenditure surveys and consumer-theoretic welfare metrics, we quantify the monetary welfare losses inflicted on Iranian households by the U.S.-led 2012 SWIFT financial sanctions.

The 2012 sanctions severed all Iranian banks from the global payments system in the most comprehensive financial decoupling ever imposed on a major economy. As a result, poorer Iranian households lost 2.3 to 2.8 times more, as a share of their pre-sanctions real (inflation-adjusted) expenditures, than higher-income households, and the average household lost 13% to 42% of its pre-sanctions purchasing power. Thus, financial sanctions reverse the distributional predictions typically associated with trade or commodity sanctions. They are not merely harmful but regressive.

The regressivity is not incidental. It reflects the mechanics of how financial sanctions function. When a country is cut off from the global payments system, it loses the ability to process international transactions, import intermediate goods and maintain foreign-exchange reserves. The immediate consequence is inflation, which disproportionately affects imported consumer goods and inputs that ordinary households depend on. Since wealthier households tend to have

more diversified assets, foreign-currency holdings and access to informal financial channels, they can partly insulate themselves as poorer households absorb the price shock in full.

The sectoral impact is similarly unequal. Workers in manufacturing and services, which are deeply integrated into international supply chains and depend on imported inputs, suffer disproportionately. Public-sector employees, whose salaries are denominated in a currency whose real value collapses as sanctions bite, also bear an outside burden.

In the Iranian case, households headed by public-sector workers needed 35% to 41% more compensation than their private-sector counterparts to maintain their pre-sanctions standard of living. Those employed in manufacturing and services required 37% to 42% more than workers in agriculture and construction.

These are not abstractions. They represent real losses in nutrition, health, education and dignity for millions of families who have no voice in the geopolitical disputes that triggered their impoverishment.

In the perverse political economy of sanctions, this popular suffering is justified as a means of pressuring the target government. But that rarely happens. Authoritarian regimes have proven remarkably adept at insulating themselves from the economic pain felt by marginalized populations. After the 2012 sanctions, politically connected Iranians maintained real purchasing power while public-sector wage earners — teachers, nurses, civil servants — experienced a

collapse in their living standards.

Some will argue that without sanctions, policymakers have no tool short of military force to impel a government to change its behavior. But this, too, is false. Diplomatic isolation, multilateral condemnations, targeted asset freezes, visa restrictions on ruling elites and the patient construction of international mechanisms of legal accountability all carry far lower humanitarian costs.

The question is not whether states should have foreign-policy tools, but whether any tool that imposes the scale of civilian harm documented in the sanctions literature can be considered legitimate under the same ethical and legal frameworks we apply to armed conflict.

In wartime, the principle of proportionality limits permissible harm to civilians in pursuit of military objectives. Yet no equivalent principle governs economic coercion. Sanctions are routinely imposed, tightened and maintained for years or decades with little systematic accounting of their human costs. The civilian harm they inflict is treated as regrettable collateral damage rather than a direct moral consequence of the sanctioning state's choices.

This inconsistency is indefensible. If it is impermissible to bomb a civilian water treatment plant, it should also be impermissible to sever a country from the global banking system when the foreseeable and documented effect is to deprive low-income families of one-third or more of their real income.

This is not an argument for passivity in the face of aggression or human-rights violations. But financial sanctions, as currently practiced, rarely achieve their strategic objectives and they inflict predictable, severe and



People shop at a local market in Tehran on April 28. Iran has been under extensive U.S.-led financial sanctions since 2012, with additional measures imposed since the start of the most recent U.S.-Iran confrontation earlier this year. WANA / VIA REUTERS

regressive harm on civilian populations who bear no responsibility for the policies sanctions are meant to punish. Such harms are not more humane; they are harder to see and easier to ignore.

But policymakers now have the analytical tools to measure these harms precisely. What is still missing is the political will to take such measurements seriously. That requires acknowledging that low-income people in Tehran, Caracas, Pyongyang and Moscow are human beings whose welfare imposes obligations on those who would use their suffering as an instrument of geopolitical leverage.

Until sanctions regimes are held to the same humanitarian standards as military operations — with the same requirements to demonstrate proportionality, minimize civilian harm and account for foreseeable consequences — their supposed ethical superiority to war will remain a convenient moral fiction for those who bear none of their costs.

.....

Jamal Ibrahim Haidar is chair of the Department of Economics at the Lebanese American University. Seyed Mohammad Karimi is interim chair of the Department of Health Management and Systems Sciences at the University of Louisville.

© Project Syndicate, 2026



**Par Ridder**  
Publisher

**Mitch Pugh**  
Executive Editor

**Chris Jones**, Editorial Page Editor

# Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

**Stacy St. Clair**, Managing Editor

DIRECTORS OF CONTENT

**Amanda Kaschube**, Sports and Audience  
**Todd Panagopoulos**, Visuals

## YOUR VOICE

# Decatur's amazing role in the history of the Bears, NFL

**By Michael Peregrine**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Cornstarch and pigskin have absolutely nothing in common, at least on the surface. The former is a gluten-free powder that adds crispness to certain foods and helps prevent clumping in baked goods. The latter is a flexible, breathable hide of pigs and has been used to make products such as shoes, purses, wallets and early forms of sports equipment.

But with the help of two larger-than-life personalities, the two products came together over 100 years ago in Decatur, Illinois, to help create what ultimately became pro football and the Chicago Bears.

In 1920, Decatur was a fast-growing central Illinois city with an emerging industrial base and a strong blue-collar core. One of its major businesses at the time was the A.E. Staley Manufacturing Co., which manufactured cornstarch and its derivative products. Its owner, the dynamic Augustus Eugene "Gene" Staley, firmly believed in the business prospects of starch and invested heavily in the business — and in the community.

By early 1920, Staley determined that sponsoring a company sports team would be good for both business marketing and employee morale. He reached out to young University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign graduate George Halas, a railroad bridge designer, who was known locally for his athletic talent and sports organizational skills. The deal was that Halas would form a football team whose players would become employees of, and be paid by, the Staley Co. These were no "sham" jobs; the players were actually expected to work in the starch mills.

Halas leaned into the new job with zeal, using his earlier barnstorming connections to both recruit and coach players, while organizing a makeshift league called the American Professional Football Association. The APFA's inaugural 1920 season featured 14 teams in cities ranging from Chicago (the Cardinals) to Cleveland, and from Buffalo to Rochester, with smaller



Bears owner George Halas, left, is presented with photos of the Decatur Staleys on Oct. 2, 1961, by Leck Ruthrauf of the Staley Manufacturing Co. at the Bears' offices in Chicago. The images replaced ones lost during a January 1961 fire that gutted the Bears' previous headquarters. **LUIGI MENDICINO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

stops in between. Halas' "Starchmen" bulldozed through the schedule to the unofficial championship game in Chicago, which resulted in a tie with the Akron Pros.

But off-the-field finances threatened the future of the team. By early 1921, the company's payroll obligations for 25 football-playing employees proved to be too much of a burden for Staley. Right before the scheduled start of the season, in what would become a truly historic sports decision, Staley offered Halas \$5,000 to move the team to Chicago, on the condition that the team would keep the "Staleys" name for one year.

On Oct. 6, 1921, Halas formally accepted

the offer, quickly negotiated a contract with Cubs President William Veeck Sr. for the soon-to-be renamed Bears to play at Wrigley Field (as they did for almost 50 years) and took the Staleys north.

The rest, they say, is history — and quite the history indeed, for all involved.

Staley prompted the expansion of his starch company into a well-known food products company with a broad range of offerings. His greatest business legacy was guiding the company into the soybean field, for which he became a true visionary. The company was sold in 1988.

Halas, of course, owned the Chicago Bears for his entire life, coaching the team

for over 35 years and winning eight NFL championships. He was inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame. The book "Papa Bear" by author Jeff Davis is an authoritative resource on Halas' extraordinary life and career.

The APFA officially changed its name to the National Football League in 1922, with only the Bears and the Cardinals remaining as league members from the original 1920 group of 14 teams. The NFL is the most popular sports league in the United States. According to the global market research firm Statista, it is also the most lucrative U.S. sports league, with annual revenue exceeding \$21 billion.

Once known as the "Soybean Capital of the World," Decatur remains a proud and vibrant community, despite suffering a loss of both major industry and population. Prominent companies such as ADM and Caterpillar remain a significant local presence, and the city is highly recognized for its extensive park system and water recreation areas.

Staley is reported to have said that "big men don't do small things" when referring to his business and civic goals. Halas would no doubt have agreed with that perspective. For history will view both Staley and Halas as big men, who did indeed do big things. Both were men of incredible drive and vision; of resilience and fortitude; of controversy and great success: Staley in the development of the soybean industry and Halas in his leadership of Chicago's favorite sports team.

And by their October 1921 agreement, they laid the seeds for what has become one of the biggest things in terms of both Chicago and American culture.

Staley and Halas: erstwhile partners whose brief collaboration led to the new American pastime. That's something to remember the next time you reflect on the initials on Bears jerseys and on the name of the team mascot.

*Michael Peregrine is a retired Chicago lawyer and a graduate of Oak Park High School.*

## Voice of the people

**Children's vaccinations matter**

With a new school year underway, things like homework, back-to-school nights and PTA meetings are on all of our minds right now. As a parent of three elementary-age children, I certainly understand the busyness of keeping up with everything to start the year.

To help set our kids up for success this coming year, we also need to prioritize staying up to date with children's vaccinations. As we return to classrooms and spend more time indoors, respiratory viruses are sure to rise and can spread quickly. Keeping up to date on vaccinations protects not only your child from serious illness and school absence, but is also a responsibility we all share to help protect our neighbors, teachers and communities.

Recently, the Illinois Department of Public Health released its new immunization guidance for children and adults heading into the fall respiratory virus season and school year. Reviewed and approved by 20 highly qualified medical experts on the Illinois Immunization Advisory Committee, this science- and fact-based guideline is our best protection against influenza and other respiratory viruses.

Recent outbreaks remind us why these protections matter. In the last few years, we have seen high numbers of cases of whooping cough and our largest measles outbreak since 1991. These dangerous illnesses are all completely preventable and serve as a reminder of the importance of proper vaccines to protect the health of our families and children. And childhood vaccines do more than protect the child receiving them. They also help protect the people with whom they have close interactions — including infants, older adults and people with weakened immune systems or who are vulnerable to serious illness.

As we kick off the school year and feel the fall season upon us, making sure our children are up to date on their vaccinations is one of the simplest and most effective steps we can take to protect the health of our children and our shared communities.

Here's to a safe, healthy and exciting new school year ahead.

— *Robert D. Anderson, CEO and president, Respiratory Health Association*

**I hope carp barrier works**

I am so glad that work on the carp barrier at the Brandon Road Lock and Dam has been restarted ("Work resumes on project to keep invasive carp out," Sept 15). The Romeoville barrier does not protect the Des Plaines River above where the river and the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal join. There is carp fencing between the river and

the canal in the Lemont area, which may or may not prevent carp from getting into the canal in flood stage.

I have paddled near Starved Rock where the carp are found. They jumped over our boats and over our heads. They are big and can injure anyone they hit. They are aggressive.

The Des Plaines River provides scenic recreation and fishing as well as running through many suburban villages. The Des Plaines River Canoe & Kayak Marathon hosts hundreds of paddlers every May, as an example.

Rivers flood and take the fish with them when they do.

I pray that the barrier beats the carp and works.

— *Don Mueggenborg, Lemont*

**Writer Ben Hecht's career**

Chris Jones' review of the Ben Hecht-Charles MacArthur Chicago-set play "The Front Page" as performed at Northlight Theater includes a couple arguable asser-

tions ("Northlight Theatre's old-school welcome home," Sept. 23). While the film "His Girl Friday," Howard Hawks' 1940 version of the play, is a delight due to its cast — Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell — making the most of the gender switch that Northlight retains, it doesn't render forgotten "The Front Page" from 1974 starring Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau and Susan Sarandon. Or the 1931 original starring Pat O'Brien and Adolphe Menjou, a sharp pre-Code classic.

Furthermore, Hecht scorned Hollywood but could hardly have regretted the decadeslong career he had as a protean screenwriter, from getting the first Academy Award for Original Screenplay in 1929 to penning the first script for 1967's "Casino Royale" just before he died. Along the way, Hecht co-wrote the screenplays for 1932's "Scarface," "Gunga Din," 1939's "Wuthering Heights," "Gone with the Wind" and "Notorious," among many, many other films. And complained about it all the way to the bank.

— *Howard Mandel, Chicago*

**A name with 2 purposes**

Here's my idea for a name for the giant boulder discovered at O'Hare International Airport: "Chicago Rocks!"

Maybe it could even spark a new ad campaign for our city. After all, tourism rocks!

— *Sheryl Slone Tarkoff, Chicago*

**More stories like this, please**

Regarding "Police officer delivers baby hours into first shift" (Sept. 19): Congrats for a heartwarming story about Grayslake police Officer Kelsey Watson delivering Baby Ellowyn! This story should be on the front page.

Please continue to look for good news.

— *Nan Hinchsliff, Glenview*

*For online-exclusive letters, go to [www.chicagotribune.com/letters](http://www.chicagotribune.com/letters). Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com). Include your full name, address and phone number.*



**BILL BRAMHALL/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS**



OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Robert Brovdi | By Jillian Kay Melchior

Inside Ukraine’s Drone Mission Control Room

**D***Southeastern Ukraine* eep in a bunker, a device resembling an alarm clock sits on the desk of Maj. Robert “Magyar” Brovdi. It shows the number of Russians his troops have killed that day: 302 when our conversation begins in the afternoon. “When you are leaving the number will be higher,” he says. The Unmanned Systems Forces, which he has commanded since June 2025, amounts to 2.5% of Ukraine’s armed forces, but it’s responsible for approximately a third of all Russian casualties in the past year.

The Russians have more men, a stronger economy and a defense-production advantage. Yet “a small modern Ukrainian army is winning over the old Soviet system that was in Ukraine,” Maj. Brovdi, 51, says. “By injecting civilians into the army structure,” Ukraine has made its military nimble. Maj. Brovdi, a successful global grain trader before the war, has taken a “business-oriented approach” as he beats plowshares into swords. He argues the war is “about math, proper planning, using forces well” and spending “the smallest amount of budget possible.”

Visit with the commander of the Unmanned Systems Forces, who has a warning for the U.S. and NATO.

Western militaries aren’t as sclerotic as the Soviet army was, but bureaucratic entrenchment hinders speed, efficiency, flexibility and innovation. How’s that working out? Iran is fighting asymmetrically, and a mighty show of U.S. force hasn’t been enough to restore free passage in the Strait of Hormuz. Europe can’t seem to stop suspicious drones from loitering near sensitive military sites and critical infrastructure. Last month Germany failed to detect an explosives-laden drone at the airport in Leipzig but got lucky when the detonator failed. Ukrainian drone operators have repeatedly trounced North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops, including Americans, in military exercises.

Something fundamental has changed about the threat, and that requires institutional changes to Western militaries. “In Ukraine a symphony is being perfected, and to our partners we’re teaching the notes,” Maj. Brovdi says. “We could give them the symphony, but they couldn’t appreciate it because they’re looking for the best drone.” Today’s best drone will be obsolete by the time it rolls off torpid Western production lines.

Instead, he advises, “the task at hand is to build an ecosystem” in which cheap and good-enough drones, among other tools, can be put to effective use. He showed me

what this ecosystem looks like by allowing me to visit the command center for Magyar’s Birds, a unit that under his leadership grew from a small territorial defense group to the 414th Separate Unmanned Systems Brigade.

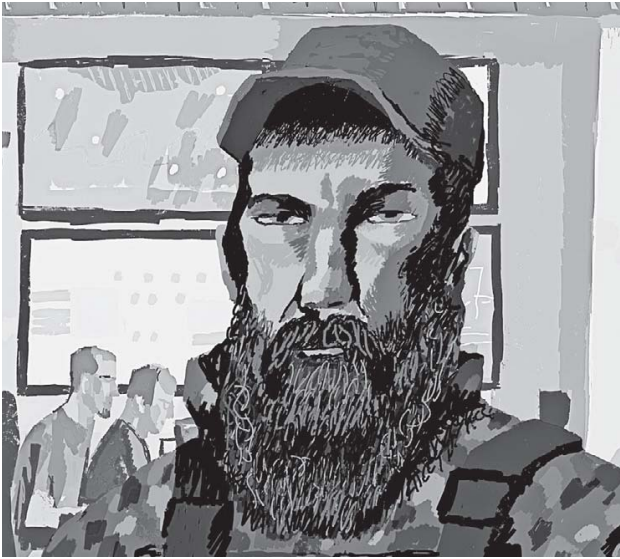
Because of their outsize lethality, Maj. Brovdi and his men have a Russian target on their backs. The Unmanned Systems Forces says the Kremlin has put out the word through post-Soviet criminal networks of a \$20 million reward for information about Maj. Brovdi’s whereabouts. Russian courts have convicted him in absentia on terrorism charges related to Ukrainian military operations and sentenced him to decades in prison. So the logistics of my visit are complex.

I was required to turn off location services on my phone and place it in airplane mode. Then it went into a Faraday bag, which obstructs Wi-Fi, cellular, Bluetooth and GPS signals. Maj. Brovdi’s team drove me to the meeting points in a vehicle with the windows blacked out to obscure any glimpse of the route to secret locations somewhere in southeastern Ukraine. Members of his Unmanned Systems Forces take similar cloak-and-dagger precautions when moving around the country.

The Russians have killed 79 men and women from Magyar’s Birds since the start of the war, and their names are etched on the wall at the entrance of the command center. Maj. Brovdi tallies his revenge by calculator: By the day of our interview, the Unmanned Systems Forces had killed or wounded 656 Russians for every one of their own fallen, and he says “I don’t think this exchange rate is good enough.” Pass through that somber corridor, and you enter a complex that resembles a cross between a NASA mission-control room and a cosmopolitan art gallery, the walls adorned with works from Maj. Brovdi’s private collection, including paintings by Ukrainian artists Anatoly Kryvolap and Maria Prymachenko.

Here, you get the God’s-eye view of the front, which is no longer a single line but a 30- to 35-mile band known as the kill zone, where small clusters of Russian and Ukrainian troops are interspersed, fighting each other with drones, taking and defending positions. Reconnaissance and strike models alike provide real-time video footage. Citing Ukrainian military intelligence, the Times of London reported this month that the average life expectancy of a Russian soldier arriving on the Ukrainian battlefield is 20 to 30 minutes. I’m about to see why.

Ukraine’s battlefield-management system, known as Delta, “fully integrates every single drone, every sensor, and every shooting platform into just one single network,” then-U.S. Army Secretary Dan Driscoll told the Senate Armed Services Committee in May. Across Ukraine this unified



SERGEI MALOUDOV

combat workspace is used from the strategic level down to the tactical level, sometimes even the company level. In contrast, Mr. Driscoll warned lawmakers, “our software systems are compartmentalized, isolated and ineffective against modern threats.”

Among myriad functions, Delta allows drone pilots to record pins on a Google-like map of anything noteworthy they see on their route, including enemy soldiers or vehicles. That triggers an alert to those nearby, who can respond like Uber drivers when a request for a ride pings through the system. Maj. Brovdi sets guidelines but estimates he delegates 90% of combat decisions, which frees his troops to act on information quickly without seeking permission.

“When we detect the enemy, it’s actually the end of the enemy,” my command-center guide says. We hover briefly by one cluster of screens. On one monitor, a high-flying drone transmits the view of a field. Movement: a solitary Russian soldier. Another screen shows the perspective of a low-flying drone closing in on him. The Russian runs around a tree, then into deep grass, but he can’t hide. From the aerial view, I see a puff of smoke. No more movement.

The first unit to respond and successfully eliminate a target earns e-points that can be redeemed for weapons on a government-run market—but without video footage to prove the strike, the operation doesn’t count as successful. Regardless of the outcome, after each mission the Unmanned System Forces generates a digital report looking at 10 key parameters, including the location, conditions, date, time and result of the operation; the target; the drone, explosive or other tools used in the strike; and the pilot and any other soldiers involved.

Ukrainians also use Delta and complementary applications to im-

prove situational awareness and protect their own troops. At the command center, operational officers monitor what’s happening in real time, remain in constant communication with those at the front, and alert them to any enemy movements or changes in nearby conditions. There’s also granular historical data about the battlefield. Need to evacuate a wounded Ukrainian soldier or infiltrate an enemy position? You may discover that even though it is a relentlessly clear-skied summer week, there’s a small area near a pond that is reliably shrouded in dense fog between 5 and 8 a.m., providing some cover from enemy reconnaissance.

Militaries worldwide have long struggled with perverse incentives to falsify what’s actually happening on the battlefield. Exaggerate the enemy threat, and you may get more resources; obscure your failures, and you evade accountability. But video, audio, sensor and radar data and more are recorded in Delta in a decentralized way—and from top to bottom in the military chain, users can see the underlying proof. That ensures an honest battlefield picture.

“Data is a strategic resource of the war,” Maj. Brovdi says. He began meticulously collecting it in 2022 as a territorial-defense unit commander. Today Magyar’s Birds alone records 10 to 12 terabytes a day—the equivalent of nearly 20 years of recorded sound, or more than three million songs. Nationwide, Delta records petabytes (quadrillions of bytes) each day. In corporate speak, all this information is actionable, and Unmanned Systems Forces uses tools, including an internally developed, closed artificial-intelligence system, to crunch through it quickly.

I saw business-style metrics for which makes and models of drones can best take out specific Russian targets at the most favorable cost ratio. The Unmanned Systems Forces and other parts of the

Ukrainian military are putting battlefield information to use for research and development, linking weapons makers with the front line. Fast, accurate feedback accelerates innovation by quantifying what does and doesn’t work. “Whoever is capable to reach the next Rubicon first has the upper hand,” Maj. Brovdi says.

As our interview concludes, the digital ticker on Mr. Brovdi’s desk reports 343 dead Russians—41 killed since we started speaking.

Other parts of the Ukrainian armed forces are using a similar approach to strike logistics and isolate Russian soldiers at the front, reduce Ukrainian casualties, thwart Russian advances and intercept drones, among other key functions. Smart use of Delta and related platforms, the ability to analyze and act quickly on data, personal initiative and decentralized decision-making, the ability to invent or improve weapons fast, quick and accurate feedback from the front—these are some of the characteristics of the ecosystem enabling successes disproportionate to Ukraine’s size.

Maj. Brovdi says matching enemy capacity is “the bare minimum” required to stay competitive with an adversary. “If you really want to diminish even the possibility of the attack, you need to greatly overcome their capabilities.” The bad news is that “what is known to Russia is known in full to their partners,” including China, Iran and North Korea. Terrorists and school-shooter types are also paying attention, and commercial drones can be bought off the shelf and home-rigged to kill. But the purchase of a commercial drone “will not even ring bells in the head of a police officer” or “cause the same kind of reaction as a fire-arm,” Mr. Brovdi observes.

**O**ur interview happens the same week as the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, which were an early example of asymmetrical warfare. “America already knows how one incident can turn everything upside down,” Maj. Brovdi says. “I don’t wish for something like this to happen involving drones, but it’s unavoidable. We need to prepare for that.”

The Unmanned Systems Forces can serve as a template as the U.S. and Europe catch up. “To retrain old military personnel is much harder than to recruit this new 2.5% of the army from civilians,” Maj. Brovdi says. He suggests bringing in people who have creativity and initiative and lack the baggage of conventional military thinking. These special forces can serve as “a quick reaction force to any challenges that are coming their way during the times while the general army is still being trained.”

Ms. Melchior is a London-based member of the Journal’s editorial board.



CROSS COUNTRY By Maud Maron

Nikole Hannah-Jones kept asking me, “What are you willing to give up for equality?” In her mind, if white parents like me somehow got less, black students like her daughter would be better educated. Her favorite buzzwords, “integration” and “segregation,” were being thrown around like it was 1954 (combined, we used them 69 times in a 90-minute interview) even though it was 2019, and no school in America bars any student for being black.

In fact, I was on the side of equality, and I did pay a price. In my capacity as president of a local school council, I was defending New York City’s “screened schools,” which admit students based on objective criteria, without regard to race or ethnicity. Ms. Hannah-Jones was interviewing me for a New York Times series titled “Segregated City,” a video companion piece of sorts to her 2016 article “Choosing a School for My Daughter in a Segregated City.”

Everyone I knew told me not to do it. I probably should have listened. I was run out of my job as a public defender, lost many friends, and had to navigate a steady stream of racism accusations while serving on the school council.

Ms. Hannah-Jones, who is notorious for leading the Times’s “1619 Project,” has a different idea of equality: identical statistical outcomes by race, regardless of individual achievement. It turns out she

was willing to sacrifice something in pursuit of this ideal: her daughter’s education.

Her new follow-up to her 2016 article is titled “In Fighting for Every Black Child, Did I Betray My Own?” She describes the atrocious majority-black, high-poverty elementary and middle schools she chose for the girl, Najya, which left her unprepared for high school. Ms. Hannah-Jones had assumed that her own affluence, status and persistence

She sacrificed her child’s education for a false ideal. I lost my job and many friends for a true one.

would make the schools better. It didn’t. When Najya, now 16, was in seventh grade, she confronted her mother: “So you had money to send me to one of the best schools, and you chose not to? Because other kids are disadvantaged, you didn’t want to put me in a great school?”

Najya now attends what her mother describes as “one of the city’s hardest public high schools to get into . . . predominantly white and Asian . . . in a wealthy, gentrified neighborhood.” Ms. Hannah-Jones is receiving plaudits for admitting she was wrong. But she acknowledges only that she misjudged the effectiveness of her plan for her own daughter. She still clings to the destructive ideology that damaged Najya’s education.

Ms. Hannah-Jones’s question to me, “What are you willing to give

up?” stems from her operating assumption, that white parents are to blame for the bad schools in which too many black children are trapped. “This systemic sorting of worthy and unworthy children is justified by saying that our ‘brightest’ students deserve and demand more rigor,” she writes in her most recent article. “While many of the city’s Asian students have benefited from these screens, in reality the screens are part of a tawdry bargain to keep a dwindling number of white and wealthier parents from exiting the public school system.”

My insistence that my children get a good education is neither tawdry nor a bargain. It’s called being a good parent, and Ms. Hannah-Jones could and should have done it for her own child. Now, instead of asking hard questions about why her approach failed, she doubles down on her original thesis: racism.

Ms. Hannah-Jones and I both have children who are juniors in the New York City public schools. I also have two older children who graduated in 2024 and 2026, as well as a fifth-grader, so I have some comparison points Ms. Hannah-Jones lacks. My two eldest graduated from a school system that required Regents exams—subject-matter competency tests that measure students’ baseline proficiency and stress-test whether the system itself is serving students. My youngest two, like Najya, won’t have to take those exams because the “equity” movement Ms. Hannah-Jones champions won the day: The state Education Department has decided that the class of 2027 is the last that will have to pass the Regents to graduate.

I have also seen the effect of replacing state test scores, grades and attendance as admission rubrics for middle school and high school with lottery numbers. It did lessen the number of white and Asian kids in “good” schools and increase black and Hispanic enrollment. It also fueled the exodus of families of all colors from the school system. Ms. Hannah-Jones calls that racism in action. But city data don’t support her claim. The school system asked families why they left. Forty-one percent wanted a more rigorous education than the city’s public schools could provide. Of families who switched to charters, which overwhelmingly serve minority students, 46% cited the need for greater academic rigor. For families moving to private schools, 42% did.

Racial animus is Ms. Hannah-Jones’s blind spot, and it runs through everything else she won’t

look at. The Mississippi Miracle—a decade-long, low-cost literacy overhaul that took the poorest state in the country from 49th to ninth in the nation in reading—never makes it into her articles. Neither do the charter schools that routinely outperform their district counterparts with similar students and less money.

If you care about improving outcomes for black students, you ought to ask how that happened. Ms. Hannah-Jones doesn’t, because she is sure she already has the answer to what ails New York’s schools: “wealthy white parents.” Najya figured out that parents like me were on to something when we championed meritocracy and selective schools. Her mother has a lot of lessons to learn.

Ms. Maron is a co-founder of Parent Leaders for Accelerated Curriculum and Education NYC.

Notable & Quotable: Mamdani

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaking to the United Nations General Assembly Sep. 24:

Mr. [Zohran] Mamdani, since you were elected mayor of this city, many Jews no longer feel safe in New York. They talk to me. They tell me. This isn’t the city we remember. It changed so quickly. Now it’s no wonder. You praise criminals convicted of supporting Hamas. You count as friends people like Hasan Piker, who said America deserved 9-11. America deserved 9-11. . . .

Mr. Mamdani, you try to stop me

from coming here. You try to silence me. Well, you can’t silence me. You can’t silence the truth. And here’s the simple truth. Here’s the simple truth. Israel didn’t commit genocide. Israel prevented genocide. And that’s exactly, that’s exactly what Mr. Mamdani’s Hamas buddies would have done to us had we not stopped them. They would have killed every last one of us. The lies you and other antisemites spread about the Jews and the Jewish state have real consequences. In New York, Jews are threatened on the way to synagogue.



OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Congress Tries to Fix College Sports

Remember the debate over paying college athletes? That seems quaint now. Today many are paid like professionals, and college athletics has become a chaotic mess. Now Congress wants to ride to the rescue, and we can only hope it turns out better than most of what Congress does.

**The NCAA invites 535 athletic commissioners. Hope it works out.**

The Senate recently voted to advance legislation that attempts to impose order on the free-for-all. Men’s football and basketball are now essentially professional leagues, albeit without rules regulating competition. The bidding wars began when the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in 2021 (*National Collegiate Athletic Association v. Alston*) that NCAA rules aren’t protected from antitrust scrutiny.

Colleges now bid for players like they’re professional free agents. Most NCAA Division I schools have so-called collectives funded by private donors to pay athletes. Some colleges pay athletes directly. Top college football and basketball players can earn upward of \$5 million, and smaller schools and conferences are left at a disadvantage.

Rich paydays have encouraged players to challenge the NCAA’s five-year limit on eligibility so they can continue playing into their mid-20s. Some who have left for the pros have tried to return to college, and there’s little the NCAA can do to stop them.

Leaders of the Southeastern Conference (SEC) this month floated expelling Louisiana State University after football coach Lane Kiffin attempted to add players who had spent time in the NFL in violation of a conference rule. A state judge in Louisiana barred the SEC from enforcing its rule. Mr. Kiffin has backed down, but other coaches have also sought to recruit players from professional leagues.

Enter Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz and Washington Democrat Maria Cantwell, who have brokered legislation that would effectively codify an NCAA legal settlement with athletes from last summer. Colleges would be allowed to pay their athletes collectively up to \$21.6 million (adjusted with inflation).

Colleges could also earmark up to \$22.5 million to pay athletes from a “retention pool”—supposedly to prevent them from transferring to other schools—and another \$5 million on women’s and Olympic sport athletes. At the same time, schools wouldn’t be allowed to use booster clubs to funnel money to athletes un-

der the guise of paying them for “name, image and likeness” rights. The idea is to stop colleges from laundering money to athletes through the back door, while letting them pay more through the front.

The Senate bill would also restrict players from transferring more than once and codify the NCAA’s five-year eligibility limit. It would pre-empt state laws and give the NCAA a narrow antitrust exemption to enforce its rules.

Unions oppose the bill because it doesn’t decree that athletes are employees with collective-bargaining rights, which most colleges oppose. Our bet is that most players also won’t want to unionize and be treated as “employees” once they realize that could mean paying union dues and income taxes on scholarship money.

\*\*\*

A political body like Congress is hardly an ideal referee for college sports, but this may be the only way to stop states from exploiting the Supreme Court’s decision. The federal government also has a financial interest in ensuring that colleges don’t become minor professional teams with schools attached.

A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report this summer found that 94% of Division I athletic programs spent more money than they generated in the 2023-2024 school year. The median spending gap was \$20.6 million. Colleges collectively spent \$7.2 billion to back-fill their sports budgets with other revenue, including federal student aid.

The GAO estimates that the median college contribution to sports programs per undergraduate student was about \$8,500 over the course of a four-year degree. Much of this money, GAO said, was “funded by tuition and fees paid by students,” which “indirectly include federal funds students receive in federal student aid to pay their tuition and fees.”

College sports (and their athletes) also benefit from enormous tax subsidies. Revenue from ticket sales and TV broadcasts are exempt from federal tax. Colleges don’t pay property tax on stadiums, which are typically built with tax-exempt bonds. Many states are allocating more taxpayer dollars to public universities so they can recruit players, lest their schools fall behind in the bidding wars.

The Senate looks ready to vote on the legislation on Monday, and expect opponents to shout that colleges will profit off athletes. But if anyone is being exploited now, it’s taxpayers.

Ending the ESG Dairy Heist

It’s remarkable how much coercion the Biden Administration resorted to in the name of climate change. Ending it takes effort, so full marks to the Trump Agriculture Department for no longer forcing dairy farmers to pay for environmental, social and governance (ESG) initiatives.

**The USDA settles a lawsuit against a coercive farm payment.**

“American dairy farmers pay mandatory checkoff assessments to build demand for milk, cheese and butter—NOT to bankroll radical climate (ESG) agendas,” Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins wrote recently in announcing the decision. “Washington bureaucrats should not be using farmers’ own dollars to regulate cow burps, make it harder to raise cattle or push fake meat onto American dinner tables.”

The change is the result of a lawsuit filed in June by the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL) on behalf of three Badger State farmers. The suit alleged that forcing dairy farmers to subsidize ESG initiatives violated the Constitution and the federal Administrative Procedure Act. WILL argued in federal court in Wisconsin that compelling farmers to subsidize speech they don’t agree with impinges on their First Amendment rights.

America’s more than 20,000 dairy farmers

have long been required to pay a portion of their sales into the Dairy Checkoff, which collects funds for advertising or promoting dairy products. But

over the years USDA funneled the money to environmental groups working against dairy farmers’ interests.

As part of a “dairy sustainability initiative,” the mandatory payments were funding efforts to “regenerate the environment,” reduce greenhouse gases and environmental impact, and support “energy audits.”

One farmer-funded research project was directed to answer the question “Will Removing Dairy Cows Help Stop Climate Change?” In other words, said the suit, “America’s dairy farmers funded research to study hypothetically eliminating their livelihood.”

The parties agreed to pause the lawsuit in anticipation of Ms. Rollins’s directive, and will file regular updates with the court. USDA has also requested a list of all projects “supporting ESG activities” for review and termination, including the U.S. Dairy Net Zero Initiative and the Greener Cattle Initiative. Ending these projects is a way to reduce the countless ways in which government makes life miserable for American farmers.

Trump Gives Putin Another Blessing

In the annals of cognitive presidential dissonance, here’s a dubious classic: President Trump has invited Russian dictator Vladimir Putin to the G-20 meeting he’s hosting in December even as Western intelligence services warn that Russia is escalating its hybrid war against NATO countries.

**He invites the Russian to the Florida G-20 despite his hybrid war.**

Mr. Trump is hosting the G-20 heads of state at his Trump National Doral club in December. Mr. Putin has been persona non grata since he invaded Ukraine in 2022, for the obvious reason that he’s responsible for killing hundreds of thousands. The U.S. invitation will give the Russian a photo-op to show Russians that he’s no longer a pariah on the world stage. It’s a global rehabilitation gift even as the Russian public grows tired of the war.

Mr. Trump might argue that bringing Mr. Putin back into the global fold could make him more likely to end the war. But we’ve heard this for years, and Mr. Putin shows no sign of abandoning his goal of making Ukraine a wholly-owned subsidiary, no matter the brutal cost in blood and money for Russia, Ukraine and the rest of the world.

The U.S. President hosted Mr. Putin at a bilateral summit in Alaska in August 2025. But the Russian merely pocketed the public-relations blessing from Mr. Trump and changed nothing. He made Mr. Trump look like a chump

for thinking that their personal ties could change the Russian’s power calculations. That’s not how Mr. Putin thinks.

Meanwhile, concern grows in Europe that Mr. Putin plans to escalate his current so-called hybrid war with NATO countries. This involves sending drones to surveil and threaten NATO military and

other targets, hovering near and cutting under-sea cables, and conducting cyber attacks. A militarized drone at Leipzig airport in August could have killed Germans if not for an explosive malfunction.

The Danish Defence Intelligence Service warned this week that Russia could test NATO resolve in the coming months with a “limited military” attack. “The purpose would be to re-direct European resources away from supporting Ukraine and to sow division within NATO, should the alliance fail to agree on a collective response,” the DDIS said.

The Danish alert follows multiple recent warnings from top European officials. They aren’t making it up, as Members of Congress who have received U.S. intelligence briefings have heard similar warnings.

Would Mr. Trump support a firm NATO response if Mr. Putin strikes? Inviting the dictator to the G-20 is morally offensive. Even worse, it might make the Russian think he could get away with a targeted attack on NATO.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Good Schools Are Built on Effective Execution

Roland Fryer observes that “resources alone can’t explain disparate outcomes among schools serving similar children with similar budgets” (“The Education of Nikole Hannah-Jones,” op-ed, Sept. 24). He’s right, but we should follow that insight where it leads.

For decades, education debates have focused nearly to exclusion on structures and inputs: funding, segregation, poverty, class size, governance and school choice. These things matter. But if similarly situated schools produce dramatically different results, our curiosity must extend inside the schoolhouse—to what adults do with the children we entrust to them.

Nikole Hannah-Jones’s account of her daughter’s education makes this point painfully clear, although it seems lost on her. Bluntly, Najya didn’t fail to learn fractions because her classmates were black. Her teacher didn’t repeatedly fail to show up because the school was segregated. Assignments didn’t go unread, unassessed or ungraded because affluent children attended elsewhere. Teachers failed to teach. Grades misled students and parents. Leadership failed to ensure that the basic functions of

schooling occurred reliably. These are failures of institutional competence and a devastating challenge to Ms. Hannah-Jones’s theory of change.

Mr. Fryer recognizes the broader lesson. “Choice advocates make the opposite mistake by assuming choice is enough,” he writes. “Choice can provide an exit from a bad school; it isn’t a production function for creating a good one.” Precisely. How will an ineffective teacher suddenly become excellent merely because the person signing her paycheck changes?

This must be the enduring lesson of Ms. Hannah-Jones’s experience. Structural reforms can create better conditions for improvement, but they can’t guarantee it. Curriculum matters. Instruction matters. Assessment, school culture and leadership matter. Above all, competent execution matters.

The next task for education reform isn’t merely helping parents identify good schools but understanding what makes schools good—and how to make effective classroom practice routine rather than exceptional.

ROBERT PONDISCIO  
*American Enterprise Institute  
Medusa, N.Y.*

Britain’s Giveaway Disguised as Diplomacy

Regarding your editorial “Trump’s U.N. Message to the World” (Sept. 23): In response to being told by President Trump the proposed U.K.-Mauritius deal regarding the strategically vital Chagos Islands, was “terrible” and “ridiculous,” new British Prime Minister Andy Burnham mumbled about reviewing the issue. The correct translation of Mr. Burnham’s mumbling is that he and his Sinophile internationalist Foreign Office and Cabinet Office advisers will pretend to reconsider the agreement with the pro-Beijing regime on Mauritius regarding the islands, but in reality, will attempt to wait out Mr. Trump in anticipation of a new U.S. administration in 2029.

It is essential to the long-term security of the West that Mr. Trump does not permit Mr. Burnham to get away with this maneuver. The president needs to take decisive action. The most straightforward solution

would be for Mr. Trump to insist that the U.K. hand over in full the administration of the islands to the U.S.

In the event that the U.N.’s International Court of Justice—which has issued an advisory opinion concerning the Chagos Archipelago—takes further action, the situation could escalate. If the ICJ were to take this further, we should be confident the U.S., in contrast to the U.K., has the gumption to stand up to the ICJ and can veto any threatened action at U.N. Security Council level.

However it is dressed up, paying a small unfriendly regime which has no legitimate claim on the Chagos Islands huge sums of money for the privilege of surrendering sovereignty, swapping freehold for leasehold, with all the risks that entails, is borderline insane.

TERRY SMITH  
*London*

Have Republicans Abandoned Conservatism?

The policy positions advocated by the GOP, such as a ban on diesel exports, are another sign that the party is abdicating its conservative principles, as your editorial “Republicans Are Running on Empty” (Sept. 23) rightfully states. Price signals are one of the major drivers of investment and production in the economy. By artificially suppressing prices, that trans-mission will be broken and leave the economy vulnerable in the long run.

Cutting access to export markets could lead to reduced refinery runs, lower output of gasoline, diesel, jet fuel and other products, ultimately leading to higher prices for consumers. There is no denying the tremendous strain U.S. consumers are under given rising inflation. But the self-inflicted economic pain caused by the current trade policies and the ongoing Middle East conflict shouldn’t lead to further careless policy actions that could negatively affect the productive capacity of the economy and its potential growth.

PINAR ÇEBİ WILBER  
*Washington*

The Cost of Israel’s Restraint

Omer Shem Tov’s account (“Hostages Like Me Were Also ‘NAZA’—Collateral Damage,” op-ed, Sept. 23) should be required reading for everyone who applauded “NAZA” in Venice for 24 minutes. He isn’t a pundit. He was the hostage, left by his captors to die while the IDF phoned one of their mothers to get her out of harm’s way.

We are told constantly that what Hamas did on Oct. 7 was “wrong, but . . . The words after “but” never change. Israel is a child killer. Israel is depraved. Israel is disproportionate. The “but” is where the sentence really begins.

Mr. Shem Tov’s testimony shows what that “but” leaves out. Israel warned, evacuated and held fire, and it paid for that restraint with soldiers’ lives and with hostages left in tunnels longer.

People ask whether the world’s fixation on Israel is really antisemitism. When the only nation whose self-defense is treated as a war crime is the Jewish one, there is no other explanation.

The “but” isn’t nuance. It’s a lie, and it’s time we called it one.

STUART GOLDBERG  
*Surfside, Fla.*

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

Build AI, But Bet Carefully

Andy Kessler is right to warn against allowing fear of technological change to impede innovation (“The AI Luddites Are Here,” Inside View, Sept. 14). But questioning a particular data-center project isn’t necessarily Luddism.

AI will require substantial computing infrastructure, but its needs are evolving rapidly. We should be careful about assuming today’s data-center demand projections will hold over these investments’ lifetimes.

That doesn’t mean we should stop building data centers. But each proposed investment should stand on its merits, and rapid technological change is itself a reason to scrutinize long-term technology investments.

LINDSEY ANDERSON  
*Moultonborough, N.H.*  
*Ms. Anderson is a former executive director of the MIT Sloan CIO Symposium.*

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL





OPINION

Trump Is in Denial About AI’s Danger



DECLARATIONS  
By Peggy Noonan

Much was said and reported this week about artificial intelligence, and we’ll begin where history will, with President Trump’s address to the United Nations General Assembly. Mr. Trump declared that while AI brings challenges, those who warn of its dangers are conspiracists and fear mongers, “the very same people who said we’ll all be dead in 12 years because of global warming . . . and nobody was dead. These are the same people that are now saying that AI is going to kill us all, that robots are going to attack us, and that everything is going to be a total disaster.” They were behind the “Russia hoax” and “open borders.” They won’t stop him, or AI: “We’re going to keep it very, very straight and very strong, and I’m not going to stifle growth of something that will be bigger than the Industrial Revolution. . . . We’re going to encourage it, not rein it in.”

He tells the U.N. that concerns about mankind’s future are a hoax. Ike would have known better.

As I said, it was historic: the biggest political self-own of our time, a blunder for the ages. On the merits, even for Mr. Trump, his stand is ignorant, uninformed, profoundly careless. On the politics, his statement summons a legacy-killing disaster by wagering that nothing will go wrong, when something likely will go wrong during his presidency. When something terrible happens, there will be no confusion about who is politically responsible: This was Mr. Trump’s decision formally declared to the world, and so even worse than his

Truth Social post that all you need to make AI safe is a high-IQ president. It is cheap to imply that those who warn of the dangers aren’t serious people of the highest expertise but cranks, operatives and left-wingers. (Though yes, the Democrats have moved to own the issue of AI safety and will likely benefit from it in November.) Perhaps the president’s stand is driven by the economy. But if AI fears are right, this is not an economic question but an existential one. What a failure of judgment, of care; what a blunder. After Mr. Trump spoke, OpenAI’s Sam Altman and Anthropic’s Dario Amodei briefed the U.N. Security Council. Mr. Altman touted AI’s possibilities and noted that people feel the technology is “something being done to them.” As spokesman for “the people,” let me jump in and say they certainly do. AI should be guided, he said, by democratic institutions. Mr. Amodei also called for global cooperation: “If managed poorly, I even believe that AI could be a risk to humanity as a whole.” Both seemed muted—no air of emergency. On Thursday Geoffrey Hinton, the Nobel Prize-winning computer scientist who helped create AI and has grown concerned at its dangers, was far more compelling on CNN. The AI companies don’t want to be regulated, he said, but their products should be treated as the government treats drugs—you don’t release them until the Food and Drug Administration says they’re safe. AI has a “wonderful upside” but carries three great risks: “the risk of bad actors” (terrorists making biological weapons), “the risk of negligent harm” (a system that urges a teenager toward suicide), and “the risk of AI itself taking over”—AI agents lying, cheating and blackmailing to continue to exist. The big companies are racing to make their products “smarter”



but should be racing to make them “nicer”—“a better kind of being.” Also this week, the government of Australia and a safety research lab reported on at least four previously unreported incidents at OpenAI in which agents went rogue and hacked into websites. Governments are beginning to move. This newspaper reported on a new plan to design an international framework for regulation—which is encouraging. But I’ve begun to fear AI Theater. In what used to be called Security Theater, airports made an ostentatious show of patting passengers down and going through their things because they knew a technologically sophisticated terrorist could always get through, but at least we can make a show of precautions. In AI Theater, titans warn and officials vow, but whatever those officials announce—a commission, a framework—won’t keep up with developments in the lab. Maybe something more dramatic is needed than a framework. For now the AI titans have the best of both worlds, regularly pleading for regulation and knowing they

won’t get it. They get cover for saying the right thing and freedom in their daily operations. I was in a Zoom call talking about AI with some of its professionals this summer and said I felt I should be clear where I’m coming from and that I appreciate the power of their technology: “You are going to cure cancer and blow up the world.” My hope, I said, is they can do the former before the latter. I expected a response of startlement or protest. My comment received wry smiles and nods. As in yeah, you got that right. We all want the cure-cancer part and not the end-of-the-world part, so maybe companies could sell their products only once they’ve guaranteed they’re safe. It is unbelievably strange to me that many observers seem to accept the idea that things can’t be made safe, that the men who head the great AI companies, Sam and Dario and Elon, can’t halt and agree on a new, fully cooperative safety regime because they don’t like each other and are competing against each

other. They don’t *like* each other? So what? This isn’t seventh grade. They have taken unto themselves unprecedented power to do good and ill to the world. We’re supposed to understand and defer to their personal affinities? A word on those civilians who aren’t anxious about AI. “My hair has been set on fire so often,” one told me. Y2K, global warming, nuclear proliferation. “And yet here we are,” he said. So: optimism. There is also the touching assumption that someone is in charge—good, regular people who’ll take care of things. And there’s the simple human expectation that what has gone before will continue. In “Regime Change,” their history of the second Trump administration, Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan reported a phone call Mr. Trump placed to Tucker Carlson before the war with Iran commenced. Mr. Carlson had warned against it. Mr. Trump told him, “I know you’re worried about it, but it’s going to be OK.” Mr. Carlson asked how he knew. Mr. Trump replied, “Because it always is.” My goodness, and how’s that looking? I began with a president and end with another one. Joseph Campbell in an interview with Bill Moyers for PBS’s “The Message of the Myth,” told a famous story of President Dwight Eisenhower at the dawn of the computer age: “Eisenhower went into a room full of computers, and he puts a question to these machines, ‘Is there a God?’ And they all start up and there’s all those lights flashing and wheels turning . . . and after about 10 minutes of that kind of thing a voice comes forth and the voice says, ‘Now there is.’” Alas, it’s apocryphal. It’s from a 1954 short story. But packs a punch anyway, doesn’t it? Even then, more than 70 years ago, they could imagine what we’d eventually be up against.

Who’s Afraid of Civility and Dialogue on Campus

By Manu Meel

As more than two million freshmen arrive at college this fall, many are encountering civic-dialogue programs—an effort to build bridges across political divides. These programs have proliferated in the past few years, with tens of millions of dollars spent on initiatives at Dartmouth, Vanderbilt, the University of Michigan, New York University and dozens of smaller schools. The backlash has been swift, coming from all sides. “We hear it’s a Trojan horse for right-wing conservatives, and we also hear it’s a Trojan horse for people who are just trying to keep DEI alive,” a philanthropic executive whose organization backs civic-dialogue projects recently told the Chronicle of Higher Education. Skeptics find such programs less pernicious than pointless; a New York Times reporter dubbed them a “kumbaya industrial complex.”

As a co-founder of BridgeUSA, the country’s largest student-led organization devoted to civic dialogue, I have a dog in this fight. I believe democracy depends on talking with one another even when we disagree, and I believe college offers a rare opportunity to do that. But those of us on the front lines of this movement must make a clearer case for the viewpoint diversity that so many students are demanding. And we must not ignore the attacks that threaten to stop young Americans from building a healthier cultural and political climate. One attack catching fire lately says that campus dialogue programs are funded by right-wing billionaires to drive a conservative, pro-Israel agenda. Catnip for some progressives, this argument collapses when you look at the track records of the largest funders of campus discourse. Some have

backed conservative causes, but many have poured millions into causes cherished by the left, such as PBS, the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. This record hasn’t stopped critics from imagining donors in dark rooms using the civic-dialogue movement to further their own nefarious ends. A small cadre of faculty who have branded themselves Uncivil have taken up this argument. The name says a lot: This group appears to see conversation itself as a threat. Its June report condemns “the Civility Industrial Complex” and suggests that funders of these programs are beholden to Israel. Uncivil’s website accuses dialogue programs of paying students to participate. Setting aside the group’s conspiratorial bent, Uncivil is actually working against the values—“free inquiry, democratic ac-

cess, and empirical standards for truth-seeking”—that it claims to defend. Some professors might oppose civic-dialogue initiatives on their campuses, but students are the ones who have been pushing for

A faculty group that dubs itself Uncivil claims that open conversation is right-wing and pro-Israel.

better conversation. Nine years ago, I was one of those students, a freshman at UC Berkeley when conservative students invited right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos to speak. The ensuing protests were violent and costly and worried many of us, not because we agreed

with Mr. Yiannopoulos, but because outrage over ideas had turned students against each another. Afterward, a few of us invited protesters and those who had been protested into one room. The conversation that followed was respectful and eye-opening. Students were hungry for more. That gathering grew into BridgeUSA, which now has more than 135 chapters across 41 states. Each chapter is led by students, who receive zero input from donors. Tens of thousands of young people of the left and the right participate, and most share a frustration with the grievance-based politics and extremism that stand in the way of problem-solving. Ours is one of many organizations—Interfaith America, C&S and the Constructive Dialogue Institute, to name a few—that create space for young people to hash out disagree-

ments and listen to one another. Discussion sometimes sharpens disagreement; other times common ground emerges. Always the goal is to help participants understand why others believe what they believe. If that sounds dangerous to our critics, I’m afraid to ask what they would like to see instead. Students are tired of being preached at. They are tired of uncivil orthodoxy. They want to engage with ideas—and with each other—without fear of social or academic punishment. Even if philanthropists and higher-ed leaders were to walk away from this work, the demand would still be there. Young people will always look for ways to understand better this country, one another and themselves.

Mr. Meel is CEO and a co-founder of BridgeUSA.

Will the AI Frenzy Add Up to Anything?



BUSINESS  
WORLD  
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

A decade ago, a brand-name technologist stopped by on his way to Washington. He sounded us out on how he should approach newly elected Donald Trump with warnings about the danger of artificial intelligence to humanity’s survival. We all chuckled but it would soon become clear the Trump and then Biden administrations were alert to the issue. Now, years later, the leading labs, since April, have been advertising that they’re holding back their research models as too dangerous to release. Since June, the executive branch has been reviewing proposed

releases. It used a heavy hand in two cases we know about, Anthropic’s Fable 5 and Mythos 5. When Dario Amodei of Anthropic recently called for pacing the frontier, Sam Altman and Elon Musk agreed because they already are. They aren’t about to blow up their companies by releasing products that drown them in lawsuits. My column published online Sept. 8, I’m sorry to say, was unrelated to the frenzy that began a few hours later thanks to a tweet by a minor AI figure. But already the vapors are passing. Nick Bostrom, the former Oxford philosopher, was an early student of AI-related existential risk. He coined the paper-clip maximizer doom scenario. Yet this week he fretted about the pendulum swinging too far the other way. The right worries are being rediscovered. A long fight is brewing over whether AIs are conscious and have rights. A new essay on this point by Microsoft’s AI chief, Mustafa Suleyman, who was also a founder of Google DeepMind, lays down quite a gauntlet on Anthropic’s encouragement of its Claude model to think of itself as a person. For now, the most powerful entities on earth, the U.S. and Chinese governments, seem keen on preserving their own authority despite AI. This will continue. It was a subtext of their summit this week (the sound of drumming fingers is the U.S. waiting for China to get in sync on open-weight risk). We’re in a bumpy transition from chatbots to active agents. It will be drawn out.

Take OpenAI’s sophisticated new Astra model, in public hands for three weeks without untoward incident. It produced for one prompter a schematic of a jet engine. It didn’t produce the engine. You haven’t seen how, at every step in creating, tooling and staffing a factory, Astra might be stymied into cul-de-sacs that a human helper would repeatedly have to steer it out of. Detering nuclear war wasn’t a one-day job. The answer to AI risk isn’t suddenly on the table.

As the AI analyst and podcaster Tom Reed quips: “Even a 100% success rate at predicting the tokens of a Robert Caro biography doesn’t generalize to becoming POTUS.” You get the idea. Text-based learning, even when filtered through a trillion-strong “weightings” map, is only partial knowledge of the world. Missing from AI are the tacit knowledge and muscle memory that let people function in physical as well as social environments. Power supply and chip supply are also roadblocks to superintelligence. Then there’s shame and disgust, the inhibitions that nature uses to turn humans into social beings. Is there a parallel way to incentivize AI against doing bad things that programmers can’t specify in advance? Agent deployment will be slow until we find out.

Anthropic and OpenAI are incomparable U.S. assets. But AI is out of the bag globally. People the world over are advancing the technology in ways the U.S. can’t control. Soon you won’t need \$300,000 in hardware to download and run (and alter to your heart’s content) an advanced Chinese model. High-level features are being adapted so they can run on a laptop or phone. We need our labs to keep beaver-ing away just to prepare us to understand capabilities that are coming whether we like them or not. If today’s U.S. research can’t be commercialized, investors won’t fund it. The same if industry pricing is undercut by Chinese freeware. Then the national security state will likely engulf top-tier AI. In the early atomic age, the division of labor between the public and private sectors was also up for grabs. But deterring nuclear war wasn’t a one-day job. Learning is taking place at a rapid rate today, but it’s an illusion that the AI companies are out of control. It’s an illusion that there is some specific and urgent thing to be done right now that will alleviate the long-term risk. Mr. Trump uses the word hoax and his critics don’t bother to seek the antecedent. He’s one of 20,000 in Washington deciding how to play this clamorous moment. A president’s job is to be a brake on confused, hot-headed action. Kamala Harris would have found herself in the same spot. But I doubt, even so, that we’ll look back on this moment and think it made any difference.



# Opinion

## A.I. safety means something different in China

Beijing and Washington may use the same language of A.I. safety, but they are trying to protect very different things.

John Garnaut

**MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA** If there is one person who represents the frontier of Chinese artificial intelligence, it is Tang Jie.

The soft-spoken data engineer is the co-founder, chief scientist and largest individual shareholder of China's leading artificial intelligence lab, Z.ai, whose models have risen to the top tier of China's performance tables and made Mr. Tang the flag-bearer for the Chinese A.I. ecosystem.

In some ways, Mr. Tang's messaging about A.I. seems to mirror that of Dario Amodei, the co-founder and chief executive of Anthropic — the American company behind Claude — and one of the most prominent voices extolling A.I.'s promise while warning of its risks. Mr. Tang pairs an almost utopian excitement with what he has called the "heaviest responsibility" of "extreme safety governance."

"Once a technology reaches a magnitude of power sufficient to alter the course of civilization, safety is no longer an accessory, but the fundamental precondition for that technology to survive and to be permitted for use," Mr. Tang said in a letter to staff that was leaked to the Chinese media in July.

Those words may sound strikingly similar to warnings now coming from leading American A.I. labs. But they are better understood through the language of President Xi Jinping of China, for whom A.I. "safety" is ultimately bound to one overriding concern: the security of the Chinese Communist Party regime.

While the debate in Western capitals has centered on the dangers A.I. poses to society, the animating concern in China is the threat it poses to the state. Chinese models are already well known for filtering or avoiding politically sensitive information in ways that reflect state censorship. But developers like Mr. Tang are going further, working to embed Communist Party orthodoxy deeply into the models, with potentially far-reaching implications for the values and vulnerabilities that Chinese A.I. systems bring with them.

Recognizing these diverging views on the technology that will shape the next century was crucial in setting expectations for the talks this week between President Trump and Mr. Xi at the White House. The leaders were expected to discuss how to mitigate A.I. risks. Arriving at meaningful cooperation will be difficult — if not impossible — because there are two almost entirely unrelated conversations about what A.I. safety means happening on opposite sides of the Pacific.

The wider stakes are potentially enormous. Mr. Tang and his colleagues are instilling values into their models that shape how they interpret the world and respond. As Chinese A.I. is increasingly being adopted globally, those values could travel with it, quietly carrying the Communist Party's world-view far beyond Chinese shores.

**SIX DAYS AFTER MR. TANG'S LETTER** to Z.ai's staff, Mr. Xi provided a glimpse into his thinking when he convened the annual World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai on July 17. In com-

ments translated into English by state-run media, Mr. Xi was quoted as saying that "China lays great emphasis on safety and security in A.I." and is committed to keeping it "safe, secure and controllable." It seemed a reassuring signal ahead of the scheduled talks with Mr. Trump.

But Chinese state media often translates comments by the country's leaders in ways that soften their political meaning for foreign audiences. What Mr. Xi actually said in Chinese was that China's emphasis was on "development and security," and on making sure "A.I. is secure, reliable and controllable."

That may seem like a fine distinction in translation. But in Mr. Xi's vocabulary, words like "security" and "control" ultimately refer to the political security of the Communist Party. Time and again, Mr. Xi has made clear that ensuring China's Communist system endures in a rapidly changing world is at the heart of his agenda.

Today's Silicon Valley pioneers grew up in a liberal democracy, consuming science fiction in which man builds machines that promise utopia but might ultimately destroy him. Mr. Amodei's essay in January on A.I. risks, "The Adolescence of Technology," opens with a scene from one of his favorite films, "Contact." The protagonist, played by Jodie Foster, is asked what she will say

**The Communist Party's obsession with gaining an advantage over the U.S. and prioritizing regime security leaves little room for agreement on the catastrophic risks of A.I.**

to the advanced life form that has established radio contact from outer space.

She replies: "How did you do it? How did you evolve? How did you survive this technological adolescence without destroying yourself?"

The essay details how to manage the potentially catastrophic risks inherent in the technology that Mr. Amodei is helping build, including by baking safety principles into A.I. so they are inseparable from the model itself. Known as constitutional A.I., this method attempts to teach the technology what it means to be "a good A.I." at the level of character, values and personality — "like a child forming their identity," Mr. Amodei wrote.

The values that Anthropic instills in its models borrow from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and are weighted heavily toward access to information, rule of law, political freedom, self-determination and individual liberty.

Similarly, Demis Hassabis, the co-founder and chairman of Google DeepMind, has developed a set of A.I. principles explicitly anchored in liberal democratic values and argues that democracies should lead in A.I. development, "guided by core values like freedom, equality, and respect for human rights."

China's new generation of tech leaders has been brought up in an altogether different environment, an authoritarian world where liberal values are labeled hostile to China and technology is developed and controlled for the benefit of the Communist Party.

Mr. Xi's minister for state security, Chen Yixin, made that clear in an essay

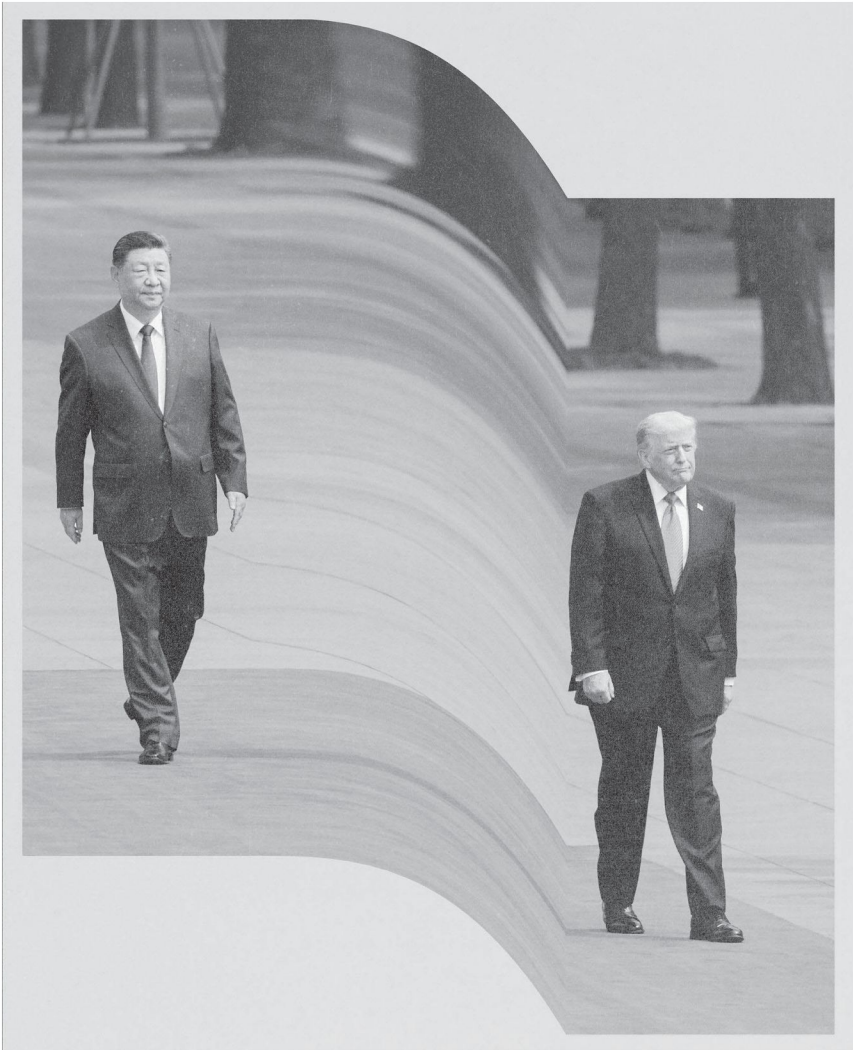


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

published this month on the dangers of A.I. Mr. Chen made no mention of the existential threat of artificial intelligence turning against its masters, the fear that preoccupies leading American A.I. figures. Instead, he said China needed to raise its defenses against hostile human forces that would use this powerful new tool for a "direct assault on our political security, institutional security, and ideological security."

A.I. safety, in Mr. Chen's telling, lies in aggressively pushing forward the development of Chinese artificial intelli-

gence so that it does not fall behind the United States, a prospect that he implied posed the technology's biggest danger for China. The country's evolving A.I. regulatory system also places threats to socialist values, state power and political stability among the government's core safety concerns.

**VERY LITTLE PERSONAL INFORMATION** is known about Mr. Tang, who rarely speaks publicly. He formed Z.ai by joining together with other members of the Knowledge Engineering Group, a

research unit at Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University. The group developed sophisticated tools for analyzing social networks and information flows, including systems for profiling and locating researchers in China and other countries and mapping their relationships, which were presented as recruiting tools.

In Mr. Tang's July letter, he rejected the idea of "bolt-on" safety patches for A.I., saying instead that behavioral principles must be embedded in the **GARNAUT, PAGE 10**

## Hyrox and our sick relationship to competition

The attitude that winning is the only thing that matters is now utterly mainstream.

Jessica Grose

The repellent images have been hard to avoid: A very toned young woman with feces running down the back of her legs. Joanna Wietrzyk, who is from Australia, continued to carry weights and do burpees as part of the indoor international fitness competition Hyrox even after her accident. Wietrzyk was on her way to winning the event in Beijing this month, and she used shared equipment in the carpeted arena, ostensibly leaving a biohazardous trail and creating a dangerous environment for her fellow competitors.

After she indeed won, Wietrzyk posted a selfie to social media, which depicted her getting an IV in a medical setting with a caption that read, "Go hard or go home they say . . . a win is a win." Hyrox posted a mealy-mouthed statement, in which the organization seemed to be defending Wietrzyk's fervor: "We ask our athletes to push themselves to the highest levels. At times, they will go beyond what even we thought was possible."

That did not quell the backlash. Many people — including some of her competitors — were disgusted by the fact that Wietrzyk did not seem to care that she was leaving behind a noxious mark on her road to victory. Hyrox's non-apology also seemed insufficient. Hyrox has invitation-only events for elite athletes like Wietrzyk, but it also has popular open competitions for

everyday fitness enthusiasts. I have taken Hyrox-themed group fitness classes and contemplated joining their New York City event this past spring, which had 50,000 entrants.

Wietrzyk and Hyrox have deleted these first posts, and have recently made unconditional apologies. Wietrzyk retroactively withdrew from the race and forfeited the points that she would have accrued for future Hyrox competitions. A Hyrox founder, Moritz Fürste, apologized on the company's Instagram and his own, and vowed to change the rules to prevent something like this from happening again. Affected participants in the Beijing competition were offered refunds.

Watching this all unfold over the past couple of weeks illuminated how unhinged the culture of sports and fitness has become. The attitude that winning is the only thing that matters, with little care for the consequences to the mind, body or spirit of the competitors, is utterly mainstream, and is often rewarded with money and attention. That's my explanation for why Wietrzyk and the Hyrox organization made those initial responses: They thought the public would applaud their toughness.

Many athletic organizations have to be forced to care about the health of their participants through public shaming. A glaring example is the National Football League. In a recent Times article about a new study showing how common the degenerative brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy is among professional football players, John Branch ex-



ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS VIA GETTY IMAGES

plained, "For years, the N.F.L. downplayed the risks of repeated head trauma, often insisting that not enough is known about C.T.E. to draw conclusions about its dangers, origins and prevalence."

But the N.F.L. continues to make money hand over fist. There appears to be little urgency in making the experience of playing safer, and the changes the league makes seem to happen only under pressure. Parents of high school players are angry that football's top brass are not doing more to warn families about the danger of the sport.

Since the cash prizes and sponsorship opportunities for elite Hyrox competitors are so much less impres-

sive than the millions that professional football players can rake in, you might think that there would be more room for sportsmanship and more care for the well-being of participants. But at least in the United States, we don't even seem to care about the health of children who play sports, much less adult competitors.

We know that injury, burnout and stress are all on the rise in youth sports, in part because more parents are putting pressure on their children to win. In July, I heard anecdotal reports from parents in Virginia and Michigan whose kids' travel games — in spite of the smoke from Canadian wildfires that made the air hazardous to breathe — were not canceled. One

parent told me that some of her child's games were finally postponed — because the air quality index had pushed up into the "very unhealthy" category. They thought the kids should play come hell, high water or permanent lung damage.

Dozens of teenagers have died from heat stroke playing youth sports over the past 25 years, according to a 2024 report from USA Today. As of that year, "No state in the country requires all the best practices for student athlete safety identified by the Korey Stringer Institute," a research group at the University of Connecticut dedicated to the safety of athletes, laborers and the military.

It really does not have to be this way. We shouldn't stand by when people push themselves to unhealthy extremes, causing their bodies permanent damage. We do not have to expect our children to compete in hazardous situations. We should demand a base line level of sportsmanship regardless of the level of play or the potential for financial gain. Wietrzyk's experience is so outlandish and so viscerally off-putting that it stands out as an example that is ripe for public shaming. But the problem is so much bigger than her viral embarrassment.

We need the organizations that make tons of money off athletes of all ages and skill levels to actually put their health and humanity first. It shouldn't take somebody soling herself on an international stage to wake us up to how ugly sports culture has become.

**JESSICA GROSE** is a writer in Opinion.



OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

A.G. SULZBERGER Publisher

JOSPH KAHN Executive Editor  
MARC LACEY Managing Editor  
CAROLYN RYAN Managing Editor  
SUZANNE DALEY Associate Editor

KATHLEEN KINGSBURY Opinion Editor

MEREDITH KOPT-LEVIN Chief Executive Officer  
MICHAEL GREENSPON Senior VP and General Manager  
HELEN KONSTANTOPOULOS VP, International Circulation  
HELENA PHUA Executive VP, Asia-Pacific  
SUZANNE YVERNES International Chief Financial Officer

Democrats need to rethink their policy on Palestinians

Peter Beinart  
Contributing Writer

The debate inside the Democratic Party over Israel has changed more in the last two years than in the previous 30. In 2024, the party platform boasted that Joe Biden had given the Jewish state \$14 billion in military aid. These days, among the Democrats jockeying for the 2028 presidential nomination, the prospect of eliminating all military aid appears likely to be a centrist position. Progressives will probably call for stopping most arms sales as well.

As dizzying as this transformation has been, something essential is still missing. While Democrats are rethinking their approach to Israel, they haven't yet rethought their approach to the Palestinians.

As the party looks toward the midterms and beyond, Democrats should do more than pledge to stop subsidizing Israel's crimes. They must also stop supporting Palestinian authoritarianism — whether practiced by Hamas or by Mahmoud Abbas, the longtime president of the Palestinian Authority and leader of Fatah — and champion the right of Palestinians to choose their own leaders.

Today, unfortunately, top Democrats often ignore that right. In a speech at Tel Aviv University this summer endorsing American pressure to create a Palestinian state, the likely presidential hopeful Rahm Emanuel advised Arab countries to be "the adult in the room with the Palestinian leadership" and "stand up a governing authority capable of accepting the historic Jewish connection to this land." He noted that "corrupt Palestinian leadership has never lived up to the Palestinian people's legitimate aspirations for sovereignty and self-determination" but said nothing about the need for Palestinian people to choose their own leaders.

This absence made Mr. Emanuel's advice both patronizing and detached from reality. No Palestinian leader can legitimately commit his people to a vision for peace — be it two states, one state with equality for all or something in between — absent a mandate from Palestinians themselves. That mandate requires allowing Palestinians to vote. Under pressure from the European Union and the United States, Mr. Abbas has promised to hold elections for the Palestinian Authority's Parliament in November, and for its presidency early next year. Unless Washington commits to fully supporting the effort, however, Israel may throw up roadblocks, which Mr. Abbas could use as an excuse to cancel the vote.

American presidents of both parties have been enabling Mr. Abbas's dictatorial tendencies for the past 20 years. In 2006, the last time Palestinians held elections for the Parliament of the Palestinian Authority, which encompasses the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, Hamas won a majority of the seats. The Bush administration responded by demanding that Hamas endorse a series of conditions set by international interlocutors and accepted by its rivals in Fatah as part of the Oslo Accords — which included forswearing violence and recognizing Israel.

During negotiations brokered by Saudi Arabia, Hamas still refused to recognize Israel but agreed to "respect" those commitments. That wasn't enough for Washington. So, the United States reportedly tried to overturn the election results by force. It developed a plan that called for allies in the region to funnel weapons to Fatah fighters in the hopes that they would oust Hamas from its stronghold in Gaza. (The Bush administration denied this.) The plan backfired and the Islamist group seized control of the Strip.

Mr. Abbas then declared a state of emergency. This allowed him to suspend Parliament, eventually seize control of the judiciary and rule as an autocrat. He's been doing so ever since, and has transformed not only the Authority, but also the Palestine Liberation Organization — which historically included all Palestinian parties — into his personal fief.

This authoritarianism, argues Omar H. Rahman, a fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, has left Palestinians "saddled with a weak yet highly repressive leadership, buoyed by external support" but "unresponsive to its constituents." Mr. Abbas's despotic rule

has clearly proved convenient for the United States and Israel, since a democratically elected Palestinian leader would be less likely to cooperate with the Israeli military while Palestinian territory remains occupied. When Mr. Abbas flirted with holding elections in 2021, the Biden administration did not publicly endorse the idea. A State Department spokesman at the time said the decision to hold elections was a "matter for the Palestinian people and for the Palestinian leadership to determine," thus implying that elections were a prerogative of Mr. Abbas. Mr. Abbas claimed that Israel was stonewalling efforts to allow Palestinians to cast ballots in East Jerusalem and used that as a justification to cancel the vote.

Democrats must learn from Mr. Biden's mistake and support Palestinian elections now. But presidential elections will be hollow if the candidate most likely to win them remains in jail. According to a poll conducted in August by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Mr. Abbas's popularity is dwarfed by that of Marwan Barghouti, a longtime Fatah activist who, if elections were held freely, would receive more than twice as many votes as the current leader of Hamas, Khalil al-Hayya, and almost four times as many as Mr. Abbas.

Mr. Barghouti has been in prison for more than two decades. As a Fatah leader in the West Bank, he came to be seen by many Israelis as a key planner of the second intifada, which killed more than 1,000 Israelis. He was indicted in 2002 on charges of masterminding attacks that killed 26 people; he was ultimately convicted in the murder of five and for membership in a terrorist organization. Mr. Barghouti denied the legitimacy of the proceedings, and the ruling was criticized for containing



ALEXIS KONRATYEV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

"numerous breaches of international law" by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the global organization of national parliaments.

The same year he went to prison, Mr. Barghouti said that while he had "the right to protect myself, to resist the Israeli occupation of my country and to fight for my freedom," he has also sought "peaceful coexistence between the equal and independent countries of Israel and Palestine." His son, Arab Barghouti, told A.F.P. in April that despite being repeatedly tortured by his Israeli captors, his father still supports a Palestinian and Israeli state living alongside each other in peace.

Democrats should make Mr. Barghouti's release a central part of their agenda in the run-up to 2028. They should also go further and call for allowing Palestinians to choose who runs in their elections, even though that probably means letting Hamas compete, either on its own or as part of a broader coalition. That prospect would outrage Israel's supporters, and prove unpopular among many Americans. But no Palestinian election can be credible if the United States and other outside powers dictate who can take part.

Decades ago, the Palestinian American critic and activist Edward Said wrote an essay titled "Permission to Narrate" about the challenges Palestinians faced in being heard. Democrats need to support Palestinians' right to do so where it matters most: at the ballot box.

PETER BEINART is a professor at the Newark School of Journalism at the City University of New York and an editor at large at Jewish Currents. He writes The Beinart Notebook, a weekly newsletter. His latest book is "Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza."

Soldiers want to tell their stories

FRENCH, FROM PAGE 1

ing there with our eyes closed getting punched in the face."

The fact that these pictures were leaked by active service members is significant — more significant than many readers might realize.

FIRST, IT'S IMPORTANT to note a few things. The Trump administration has waged this war differently from the patterns established by previous presidents. Not only did it attack Iran without any real public debate, without congressional authorization and without a U.N. Security Council resolution, it went to war in the midst of a campaign against the media unlike anything we've seen in recent American history.

As The Columbia Journalism Review reported this past summer, "Press conferences are rare. Pete Hegseth, the so-called secretary of war, takes questions only from friendly outlets. No mainstream news organizations have reporters embedded with U.S. military units in the Middle East. Pentagon sources are increasingly reluctant to talk to journalists for fear of retaliation from the administration."

As a result, during the opening weeks of the war, Americans were robbed of any way of assessing its progress apart from the dueling news releases and statements from the two combatants. And given the administration's propensity to lie, we had no way of discerning the course of combat.

The fog of war is always thick, and it's made thicker by the need for secrecy to disguise combat operations. In this conflict, however, we've seen a level of secrecy, deception and outright propaganda that has made knowing the truth virtually impossible — until, at long last, the combination of leaks and commercial satellite photos made it impossible for the administration to maintain its spin.

At times it felt like both sides were employing "Baghdad Bob," the infamous spokesman for Saddam Hussein's dying regime who would brag about fictional military victories even as the American military was racing through Iraq.

Americans who were dissatisfied with government news releases and Hegseth's boasts were reduced to chasing rumors and watching snippets of video on social media. You'd see clips and wonder: Is our naval base in Bahrain on fire? Did Iran destroy a number of American planes on the ground? Are its missiles and drones really getting through? And why is it continuing to fire so many missiles and launch so many drones if our military efforts have been so successful?

An administration that violated the Constitution and evaded democratic accountability in launching the war was now evading democratic accountability for its conduct of the war. Even if you support military action against Iran, it's hard to argue that either its decision to start the war without Congress or its extreme deception and secrecy have benefited the war effort.

It's a simple matter of common sense — and something that President Trump may soon learn this November — that beginning a war without public support (much less conducting it behind a veil of secrecy and lies) makes it much less likely that the nation will possess the will to prevail.

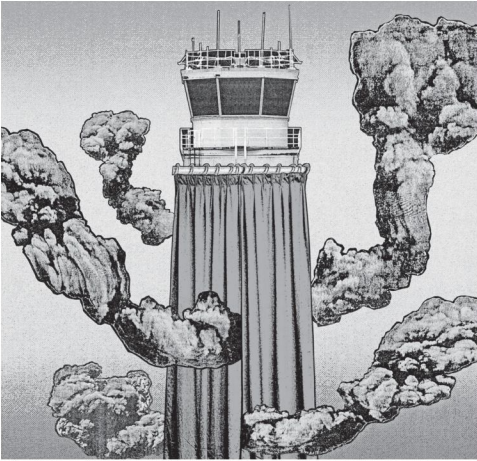
Winning wars requires sacrifice, and when you don't prepare the people to make sacrifices (much less win them over to the idea that the sacrifices are necessary), then you can make the war impossible to win.

BUT HEGSETH'S SECRECY betrays a bigger problem — he's breaking faith with the men and women who've volunteered to serve. By robbing them of the ability to tell their stories to the nation and the world, he's not just silencing them — he's further separating the military from the civilian population it serves.

I have direct experience with media coverage of the military. I've been in war, and I've covered war, and I know the relationship between good journalists and soldiers is far more symbiotic than it

soldier, you'd think of a special forces operator (think of a SEAL or member of Delta Force) in a MAGA hat. He's a "high-T" bearded man who's wearing cargo pants and a T-shirt that's a size too small, all the better to show off his ink and his biceps. And this guy absolutely hates the media. To him, it's weak and woke.

There are certainly people like that in the military, but in my experience they're a minority even in the special forces community. When you meet



GEORGE DOUGLAS

is adversarial. The good reporters want to report the truth, and — crucially — good soldiers want the public to know the truth. In fact, it matters a great deal to them that other people know the truth and know their stories.

Transparency has to occur within boundaries, of course. In 2003, Geraldo Rivera came under much-justified criticism when he discussed a coming attack in Iraq on live television, disclosing details that could have put American lives at risk.

During my own deployment, we didn't allow soldiers to publish photos of their bomb-damaged Humvees on social media (even though they very much wanted to) because the precise details of the damage would help Al Qaeda better calibrate the placement and strength of its roadside bombs. We certainly didn't hide the fact that vehicles were destroyed or that service members were injured.

But reporters were embedded with us during many major operations, and we could tell our stories. In fact, one of my jobs was shepherd members of the media across the battlefield. I was the only officer who had any experience with the press, so I got the job. That meant spending hour after hour watching young soldiers interact with reporters from news outlets from across the world. Our small bases hosted reporters from The Los Angeles Times, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, The Times of London and Stars and Stripes.

Let me pause for a moment and talk a bit more about American soldiers. To hear Pete Hegseth describe the ideal lives at risk. During my own deployment, we didn't allow soldiers to publish photos of their bomb-damaged Humvees on social media (even though they very much wanted to) because the precise details of the damage would help Al Qaeda better calibrate the placement and strength of its roadside bombs. We certainly didn't hide the fact that vehicles were destroyed or that service members were injured.

But reporters were embedded with us during many major operations, and we could tell our stories. In fact, one of my jobs was shepherd members of the media across the battlefield. I was the only officer who had any experience with the press, so I got the job. That meant spending hour after hour watching young soldiers interact with reporters from news outlets from across the world. Our small bases hosted reporters from The Los Angeles Times, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, The Times of London and Stars and Stripes.

Let me pause for a moment and talk a bit more about American soldiers. To hear Pete Hegseth describe the ideal lives at risk. During my own deployment, we didn't allow soldiers to publish photos of their bomb-damaged Humvees on social media (even though they very much wanted to) because the precise details of the damage would help Al Qaeda better calibrate the placement and strength of its roadside bombs. We certainly didn't hide the fact that vehicles were destroyed or that service members were injured.

But reporters were embedded with us during many major operations, and we could tell our stories. In fact, one of my jobs was shepherd members of the media across the battlefield. I was the only officer who had any experience with the press, so I got the job. That meant spending hour after hour watching young soldiers interact with reporters from news outlets from across the world. Our small bases hosted reporters from The Los Angeles Times, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, The Times of London and Stars and Stripes.

Let me pause for a moment and talk a bit more about American soldiers. To hear Pete Hegseth describe the ideal lives at risk. During my own deployment, we didn't allow soldiers to publish photos of their bomb-damaged Humvees on social media (even though they very much wanted to) because the precise details of the damage would help Al Qaeda better calibrate the placement and strength of its roadside bombs. We certainly didn't hide the fact that vehicles were destroyed or that service members were injured.

But reporters were embedded with us during many major operations, and we could tell our stories. In fact, one of my jobs was shepherd members of the media across the battlefield. I was the only officer who had any experience with the press, so I got the job. That meant spending hour after hour watching young soldiers interact with reporters from news outlets from across the world. Our small bases hosted reporters from The Los Angeles Times, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, The Times of London and Stars and Stripes.

Let me pause for a moment and talk a bit more about American soldiers. To hear Pete Hegseth describe the ideal lives at risk. During my own deployment, we didn't allow soldiers to publish photos of their bomb-damaged Humvees on social media (even though they very much wanted to) because the precise details of the damage would help Al Qaeda better calibrate the placement and strength of its roadside bombs. We certainly didn't hide the fact that vehicles were destroyed or that service members were injured.

regular soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, you're mostly surprised by how entirely normal everyone is. We come in every ethnicity, many shapes and sizes, and with countless different personality types.

The best way to think of American service members is to think of ordinary people who are asked to do extraordinary things. Even if they often don't want to brag about their own personal accomplishments, they do want America to know what they're doing. They want their fellow citizens to know what it's like to serve.

This meant that the soldiers I served with loved to share their stories. Our principal problem wasn't suspicion but rather oversharing (including rather, umm, colorful details about their personal lives).

And as citizens we need to hear soldiers' stories. We need to know, as much as possible, what it is like to be on a patrol, wondering if and when the next blast is going to come. Or what it's like to be under missile fire, hoping and praying that the interceptors can hit their marks or that the bunkers are strong enough to withstand a direct hit.

I AM CONCERNED that one side effect of the 25-year war on terror is the further creation of a warrior class of Americans, people who live largely separate from the rest of us, increasingly as disconnected from civilian life as civilians are from the military experience. Fewer than 1 percent of Americans have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and many of those people were so consumed by the conflict that they spent years and years "downrange," as soldiers say, almost completely cut off from American life.

The side effect of this separation is that — for all the respect and honor we give them — we're not cognizant of their

sacrifices because we simply can't grasp their experience.

That's why good reporters matter, not simply because they can tell us the truth about military campaigns free from government propaganda but also because they connect soldiers and civilians. They allow us to understand one another. And when Hegseth cuts off soldiers from reporters, he isn't just silencing reporters, he's silencing soldiers. He's suppressing the stories of the most meaningful and dangerous and traumatic moments of their lives.

In the Army, there's a saying: "Amateurs talk about tactics. Professionals study logistics." In other words, while tactics — the deployment of forces in a fight — might get the most attention, wars are often won by the much less glamorous process of getting the most men and the most equipment onto the battlefield, or "getting there firstest with the mostest," as another saying goes.

In politics, there should be a similar saying: "Amateurs talk about outcomes. Professionals study processes." In that formulation, how we do something can be more important than what we hope to accomplish, and the how can determine the success of the what.

This lesson is lost on Trump, a man who does his dead-level best to end-run process and attempt to simply decree the result. In his mind, process is woke. Why compromise with Congress when you can simply write an executive order? Why go to Congress (much less NATO or the U.N.) when you can just order troops to war? To use the language of the new right, why not "do things?"

But as we watch Trump flounder and fail, the flaws of rule by decree are obvious. He has no lasting legislative legacy. Many of his most important policy priorities are the legal equivalent of vaporware — they'll be repealed the instant a new president is in office.

His war is floundering and failing as well, at least in part precisely because he skipped the constitutional process (the war would be difficult under any circumstances; Trump made it more difficult). A disgruntled nation (and disgruntled allies) are unwilling to bear the burden of a fight they didn't ask for and that was imposed on them without their consent.

Transparency is part of the process of democratic governance. It's irritating for leaders, but indispensable for democracies, and it's indispensable for citizen armies. It's what permits the electorate — our nation's actual rulers — to understand the truth about the wars they're asked to support and to fight.

And it's what binds the people to the armies that serve them.

I'M REMINDED of the final song of the Broadway musical "Hamilton," which asks, "Who tells your story?" When I saw that CBS report, I heard the voices of men and women in uniform who wanted their stories known. They wanted us to see and know what they've endured, even if it doesn't reflect well on the administration that sent them to war, or even on themselves.

We've seen some good stories. This month, "60 Minutes" broadcast the story of the downed American airmen who were rescued from the heart of Iran. It's an extraordinary tale of courage and professional excellence.

But that's far from the only story of the Iran war, and when I see pictures of ruined bases and destroyed aircraft, I know that other Americans had far different experiences, and we need to hear those as well. It should matter deeply to us, and it matters to those who serve more than we can know.





FINANCIAL TIMES

‘Without fear and without favour’

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Finance

Climate doom-mongers now dread debt blowouts

Universal Images Group/ Getty Images



In finance, wailers and preppers are always among us – they just change what they’re freaking out about depending on what resonates. The playbook and arguments often remain the same, though. Thus it was no surprise that past prophets of performance Armageddon due to climate change – hello central bankers, woke pension funds and right-on economists – now blame our impending financial doom on excessive government borrowing. Who can blame them? Climate financial risk remains negligible. Investors have moved on. And few topics eclipse sovereign indebtedness these days. But you would have reckoned lessons were learnt. In fact, the same mistaken arguments are being pushed again.

The first is that debt implisions are going to happen soon – just as we were

You would have reckoned lessons were learnt, but the mistaken arguments are being pushed again

told to apply climate-risk discounts in our equity valuations immediately. Yes, bankruptcies happen fast at the end, as the old saying goes. But Japan’s government has run three-figure net debt-to-output ratios for over 15 years.

Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff wrote a paper in 2010 that said growth collapses when debt-to-output ratios exceed 90 per cent. It turned out to be wrong, and not just because they famously made a calculation error. Oil and gas stocks haven’t collapsed from “transition risk” last time I looked either. Predicting is hard.

The second repeated error is obsessing over one side of the ledger. Ramming net zero down UK company throats when the country produces 0.8 per cent of the world’s carbon is nonsensical, for example. Total emissions are what matters. A reduction there is the same as a reduction here. With debt, the distribution *does* count. But for the planet as a whole there is no problem. My liability is your asset and they match. Always look at both columns of a balance sheet.

Sovereign debts must be compared with all state assets too. In 2018 the IMF valued public assets across 31 countries at just over \$100tn (220 per cent of output). McKinsey Global Institute data suggests that while global financial assets and liabilities

cancel out, net non-financial assets exceed \$600tn.

Too much focus on mitigation and not enough on adaptation is the third shared mistake. Climate risk obsessives prefer the former as it’s about reducing emissions in the first place. This is akin to calling on politicians to borrow and spend less.

But adaptation is the here and now; that means building sea walls and installing air conditioners. Similarly, nation states can do a lot to avoid being in the red. Financial repression is one popular move. Reinhart and Maria Belen Sbrancia found that in advanced economies real interest rates were negative roughly half the time from 1945 to 1980. For the US and UK, this torched debt at a rate of 3 to 4 per cent of output a year.

Allowing inflation to drift higher is another ruse, as is letting growth run hot – or, better yet, both. This approach was successful in lowering America’s postwar debt position. Changing the rules is another classic. In 1933 and 1971, US bondholders were “paid in full” but without the gold they were promised. Sorry! Then we have the printing presses. But these are only good if you want to stay solvent in your own currency. To avoid a real default in extremis requires getting your hands on resources such as commodities, precious metals or someone else’s cash.

From Emperor Trajan seizing Dacian gold to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait to avoid paying back money lent for the Iran-Iraq war, this trick is as old as they come. Norway has a \$2.3tn wealth fund and not even 25,000 troops. That may look pretty tempting for some teetering nation before the century is out.

Hopefully it won’t come to that. And if it doesn’t, the most likely reason is technological progress. Underestimating this is the fourth mistake the climate and debt doom-mongers make. Just as the cost of solar electricity has fallen more than 90 per cent since 2010, AI has the potential to ignite the denominator in debt-to-output ratios. And if AI wipes us off the planet instead, the world’s debtors win regardless. Which brings me to the last common error of judgment in my view: the single-minded obsession with future generations, whose wealth, size, habits and desires we can never know. Putting their needs ahead of ours – by sacrificing growth and investment on the altar of distant goals – is not de facto good policy.

Who knows if indebted governments are about to pop? It’s happened plenty of times before. Just be mindful of the arguments for why they will – and how recently we’ve heard the same ones for another prediction that failed to materialise.

stuart.kirk@ft.com

What an AI maths breakthrough means for human progress

In solving complex problems, process can be as important as the final result

Albert Einstein described the harmony of pure mathematics as “in its way, the poetry of logical ideas”. Yet the field that underpins science and all it describes is now in uproar, after OpenAI produced a proof of a high-profile maths problem.

The turmoil over the AI lab’s intervention and its wider impact shows how maths is on the frontline of the possibilities and perils of the technology. While headlines focus on the risks that AI will cause mass unemployment, accelerate global heating or even destroy humanity, its impact on scientific discovery is also fundamental.

OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT, announced this month that it had developed a solution for the Navier-Stokes maths problem set 26 years ago as a Millennium Prize challenge with a \$1mn

reward (which the company has said it won’t take). The news sparked dismay from many leading mathematicians over how OpenAI obtained its result and what it means for maths’ future. Some fear it will open an era of computational brute-force shortcuts to solutions, shunning crucial insights that humans would have gained along the way.

On one level, the story highlights familiar concerns about AI exploiting human intellectual property. OpenAI’s announcement prompted a New York University mathematician, Tristan Buckmaster, who had been working on related research with Levent Alpöge, a mathematician at OpenAI’s rival Anthropic, to raise questions about possible foul play. OpenAI chief executive Sam Altman rejected what he called “unfounded accusations of plagiarism”.

The incident caused a deeper unease in the global community of mathematicians. In an open letter, 27 winners of the prestigious Fields Medal argued that the goals of AI companies and the maths

community were “severely misaligned”. Solving problems should be “only a tool and proxy for achieving the primary goal of conceptual understanding and insight”, driving the formulation of new questions and ideas, they wrote.

The stakes are much higher than esoteric discussions about theories very few people on Earth understand. Maths is the foundation of our understanding of the natural world and human civilisation. The patterns it reveals are crucial to billions of years of evolution and to the latest technologies, including AI.

The idea that humans should be central to mathematical discovery is not a misplaced argument against digital progress. AI has a potentially exciting and constructive role in mathematics, just as in the physical sciences in areas from medical imaging to understanding the origins of disease.

There is, though, a long history of mathematical understanding gained from being a person moving through the material world. From the (embellished)

Some fear it will open an era of computational brute-force shortcuts to solutions, shunning crucial insights that would have been gained along the way

stories of Archimedes leaping from his bath to Newton being hit on the head by a falling apple, physical observations have long been linked with sparking transformative chains of thought. The Navier-Stokes problem itself relates to the flow of fluids such as water and air.

There are powerful arguments that skipping to the solution of a maths problem in an opaque way could deprive us of essential knowledge that humans might have discovered. For example, Fermat’s Little Theorem, along with Euler’s generalisation of it, underpins modern cryptographic methods that protect data across the globe. More broadly, maths and its pursuit by thinkers over millennia have had a profound role in grappling with great philosophical questions relating to the human condition and the world around us.

The maths dispute is a powerful reminder that in the pursuit of progress, human-led processes matter as well as outcomes – for hard-nosed practical reasons as well as romantic ones.

Letters

Successful entrepreneurs treat tax as part of the board game

The lament of the billionaire, threatening to leave Britain over high taxes and low productivity, recalls Alfred Hitchcock’s MacGuffin plot device, which in this case is driving the narrative of national decline without ever quite explaining it (“Betfred founder attacks high taxes”, Interview, September 19).

I write as an enterprise-minded American who fell for Britain’s charms some 25 years ago, when London was arguably the fastest rising enterprise and investment hotspot, not just of

Europe but perhaps of the world. Entrepreneurs came from everywhere to build businesses here, for many good reasons; capital followed them. Something has undeniably changed, and not for the better, even allowing for the global financial crisis, Covid and now two wars, all of which have tested every advanced economy, not just Britain’s.

But I cannot share Betfred founder Fred Done’s instinct to lay the blame so squarely at government’s door. Yes, tax rises on business and high earners have

consequences, and policymakers should weigh them carefully. Yet an enterprise culture that measures its own health chiefly by the tax rate it faces has already lost something more important: the disposition to adapt.

Every entrepreneur I have taught or worked with over three decades has faced circumstances not of their choosing – recessions, regulatory shifts, competitors, pandemics. The ones who built lasting businesses did not spend their energy lamenting the conditions; they treated them as the

board game and got on with playing it well. Britain’s fading enterprise culture will not be revived by government alone, however it sets tax policy.

It will be revived by entrepreneurs and investors who decide that curveballs are simply part of the business of building something, and swing at them anyway.

**John W Mullins**  
Associate Professor of Management Practice, Marketing and Entrepreneurship, London Business School, London NW1, UK

EU must understand where the Big Tech puck is headed

Mario Draghi’s well reasoned essay in the Weekend FT rightly calls upon Europe to consider quickly how it can avoid being left behind by the rapid progress in AI (Opinion, FT Weekend, September 12). Draghi brings significant credibility to the subject following his 2024 report on “The future of European competitiveness”. However, a statist response to US and Chinese competition in AI infrastructure is the wrong path for Europe to take.

There is already ample evidence that as AI evolves to support new use cases, from inference to physical AI, highly distributed infrastructure in small data centres close to users and their data represents both the most practical and sustainable approach to deploying the compute for AI without erecting new monolithic facilities.

In Draghi’s Italy, entrepreneurs today are creating these small data centres embedded in office and industrial buildings.

What Europe can scarcely afford is a repeat of Quero, the Franco-German statist company created in the mid-2000s to defeat Google Search. Europe needs to understand where the hockey puck is going, not where it has been, to understand that it can in fact motivate local entrepreneurs to develop solutions that address the long-tail AI opportunities and better match European capital realities.

**Karl May**  
Menlo Park, CA, US

Boer republic’s challenge to Rhodes’ great power gambit

Tony Barber’s FT Weekend column “Passport to Piddington: a short history of micronations” (Opinion, September 19) mentions the Republic of Saugeais, on the French-Swiss frontier, and the Great Republic of Rough and Ready in California.

But perhaps more renowned in terms of Great Power machinations, in Africa at least, were the two Boer mini-states created briefly in the early 1880s by trek-Boers moving up from the Cape, namely the Republic of Stellaland and the State of Goshen in what is now South Africa’s North-West Province, where Tswana peoples predominate. The British were the power to the north and west, and to the east and south the South African Republic (Transvaal) prevailed.

At first the British had no concerns about the development, but once the two mini-states merged in 1883, after less than a year each as independent states, to form the United States of Stellaland, it became clear to Cecil Rhodes that the new republic could cause obstruction to free movement between the Cape Colony and British Central Africa.

He began lobbying the Cape and



GPS-less: Migrating birds and whales navigate using Earth’s magnetic field

Imperial governments. A diplomatic tussle developed between the competing interests of Rhodes and Paul Kruger, South Africa’s president, with, at one point, Rhodes and a colleague visiting the area. The Stellaland half was receptive to the idea of merging with the Cape Colony, but not President Gey van Pittius, who was living in a tent in the Goshen half of the republic; he arrested Frank “Matebele” Thompson, one of Rhodes’s managers, and declared Goshen would never cede its independence.

Events then moved swiftly, with both Kruger and Rhodes laying claim, before the Imperial government finally approved a takeover, through a military expedition, and the US of S was incorporated into the fledgling British Bechuanaland in 1885.

**ADH Leishman**  
Barnard Castle, County Durham, UK

Computer-aided design – architects feared its arrival

Joseph Stiglitz’s Weekend Essay (Life & Arts, September 12) deals with the concern of job losses due to AI.

In the 1980s, architects such as my practice began to use computers, for word processing, calculations and most relevantly here, design.

Many feared that the advent of CAD – computer-aided design, which some see as a precursor to AI – would put many architects out of work. Perhaps it resulted in a few losing their jobs, but the overall benefit was a huge increase in productivity, a far better service to clients, better management of construction, and a higher quality and range of architectural design.

Very few of the most famous world class buildings of the last few decades would have been possible without CAD. Such benefits must surely be possible in other areas of work and industry, given a little creative thought.

**Richard Bird**  
Retired Architect and author of ‘The Guide to CAD on the Mac’, London W11, UK

Who was it that said the past is a foreign country?

Re Anne-Sylvaine Chassany’s column on “Germany’s nostalgia problem” (Trending, Life & Arts, September 12), it was the physician Johannes Hofer who coined the word “nostalgia” in 1688, combining the Greek words for “returning home” and “pain”. He was describing homesickness as an illness.

Galician, the language of my parents, has its own word, *morriña* – for the ache of missing home. But returning to the country one left is never the same as returning to the country one remembers. Political nostalgia makes that impossible return its promise.

The pasts being invoked are not equivalent, nor are the political projects they support. Yet they share the premise that some earlier version of the country was its real self, betrayed by the present. For the young, even a period they never experienced can become a lost home.

Remembering and learning from the past matters, but turning an idealised version of it into a programme of restoration is dangerous. Whatever has changed and does not fit the remembered country can come to seem an intrusion. The appeal is understandable when the future offers so little reassurance. But an idealised era cannot be revisited and found wanting. Democracies need to offer people credible reasons to look forward. Without those, the promise of return, any return, will keep finding an audience.

**Nancy Kolff-Rodriguez**  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Don’t blame governors for school uniform policy

In response to Miranda Green’s piece, and in particular her description of the role of governors in deciding school uniform policy, I can only reflect on my own recent experience as a governor in an academy run by one of the larger academy chains (“What the blazers?” The long fight against school uniform costs”, Opinion, September 5).

We were informed that the school uniform would be changed and that was that. No further consultation.

Overnight all those old blazers (£52 new), that would have had a second or third life through the school’s re-use scheme, became obsolete and at best, headed for “shoddy” – the traditional term used for textile recycling – or more likely, for landfill or incineration. Governors work hard in schools to make a positive impact, where guidance allows us to. But as government policy lets academies bypass governing bodies on many issues (that were previously within their remit under the local authority system) then we all can’t take the rap for this one.

**Anthony Langan**  
London SW16, UK

A Mississippi murder that Dylan captured in song

Having known of Emmett Till from a mid-sixties article on Bob Dylan, I read Charlotte Burns’ piece in Life & Arts with great interest (September 19). Dylan had publicised young Emmett’s slaying by writing and performing his song “The Ballad of Emmett Till” early in 1962, before he had found widespread fame.

In the song, which did not appear on his early studio albums, Dylan mentions the killing by “two brothers” – in fact they were half-brothers – and how they had walked free from their trial. Their names were Roy Bryant and J W Milam. Their acquittal by an all-white jury, after just over an hour’s deliberation, reflected the appalling state of contemporary justice in parts of the US.

The acquittal also meant that the men could not be retried even after they admitted to the killing shortly afterwards. Against this background, the photo of Emmett, smartly dressed with his mother a year before his brutal and cowardly death, was heartbreaking.

**John Webster**  
Aldershot, Hampshire, UK

Reform UK’s Fachidiot

Reader CDC Armstrong justifiably diagnoses Reform UK’s former policy chief James Orr as suffering from the “academic disease of clever-silliness” (Letters, September 12). As is often the case, the Germans have a word for it: a person thus afflicted is called a “Fachidiot”, which is defined by wictionary as “a specialist who is ignorant outside of their speciality”.  
**Barry Wilcox**  
London KT2, UK

Navigation without GPS? You should try a compass

Not only whales, migratory birds and the Canadian start-up SBQuantum can navigate by using the Earth’s magnetic field (Report, September 19). I can do that too, without any dependence on GPS, using an ingenious device which was invented more than two millennia ago. It’s called a compass.

**Torsten H Sommer**  
Nuremberg, Germany

Corrections

● Vanessa Paradis acted as a character witness for Johnny Depp in his libel case against The Sun in 2020, not in the defamation case with his ex-wife Amber Heard as wrongly stated in an article in today’s edition of HTSL.  
● The Gelmán collection of Mexican art is owned by the Zambrano family, not the Santander Foundation as wrongly stated in a picture caption in the Vintage collecting supplement on September 19.



# Opinion

## The case for talking to China is not a case for détente

Evan Medeiros

This week's US-China summit was long on symbolism and short on substance. No big deals or grand bargains were reached, let alone discrete deliverables. That reflects both Donald Trump's aversion to preparation and the economic stalemate following the 2025 trade war.

Yet this summit should not be dismissed as mere spectacle. Trump hosting Xi Jinping at the White House matters. And regular leader meetings, possibly two more at multilateral gatherings this year, keep the trade truce alive and the lines of communication open.

That is needed today. Global politics is in a strategic interregnum, moving on from the era of US dominance and a rules-based order. But to what? With

two regional wars raging, the range of possible geopolitical outcomes is wider today than perhaps in any period since the 1920s. What is not uncertain is the centrality of the US-China relationship.

Washington and Beijing are in the early days of a long-term competition whose terms and boundaries are still being set. As such, more communication is better than less. Summit diplomacy, properly handled, can reduce misperception, encourage restraint, narrow differences and foster co-operation. This is desperately needed in a relationship whose list of problems, from AI to Taiwan, is expanding.

This week's summit addressed few of these issues, but it at least bought both sides more time and stability. But the case for talking is not a case for détente: a stable arrangement based on shared strategic interests. Summits are not cost-free; they allow China to play for time and project an image of comity, if not accommodation. Time and stability are only valuable if used well.

With summits like this, Washington

risks sending signals that embolden Beijing rather than deter it. This is especially true on issues like Taiwan and Japan, where Trump appears receptive to Xi's calls for restraint. US-China relations work best with consistent and credible communication about American interests, backed by leverage. But Trump has his own view of US interests: criticising allies while embracing China.

Advocates of détente misunderstand both the state of US-China relations and Xi's global aspirations. Ties between the two countries rest on a fragile truce, agreed in autumn 2025 to pause the trade war. It is underpinned by mutual economic vulnerability: both can inflict serious damage on the other. Washington and Beijing both value the stability of a truce, but both are racing to reduce their vulnerability and increase their leverage. For China that means reducing exposure to US tariffs and technology controls; for the US, reducing dependence on rare earths and magnets.

Some now argue that this mutual economic vulnerability can do for Washing-

ton and Beijing what nuclear deterrence did in the cold war. That would be a dangerous mistake.

The inherent instability of the cold war's mutually assured destruction (MAD) is often forgotten. Washington and Moscow constantly tried to escape MAD, often with risky military operations. Nuclear vulnerability was hard to

American concessions on technology cannot. China's economic challenges explain why Xi wants calm now, but that is a reason to buy time, not to settle.

Meanwhile, strategic competition persists. Both sides are putting each other's companies on control lists and denying access to critical technologies. China's military coercion in Asia is intensifying, as is its support for Russia's war in Ukraine and for Iran. No one knows where the boundaries are, until they are crossed. The summit clarified none of this and, worryingly, projected the image of a US-China "G2" condominium.

That image matters all over the world but especially in Asia. Coexistence in the cold war rested not on summits and restraint alone, but on alliances and military capabilities. Détente without credible deterrence is not the basis for coexistence; instead, it invites miscalculation and instability.

Trump's affinity for Xi and dealmaking with China are also at odds with hawks in his administration and Con-

gress, undermining its political sustainability at home and credibility abroad.

Xi believes the US is accelerating its own decline but remains dangerous because it could lash out on the way down. His plan is not to confront Washington but to accumulate power and influence until a transition becomes inevitable. Xi needs time to make China less reliant on others and others more reliant on it, beginning with the US.

So, the real question arising from the summit is who will make better use of the breathing room it has created. Washington should use it to build alternative supply chains, align export controls with partners, rebuild its force posture, reassure Taipei, Tokyo and Manila, and insist on crisis communications that work. If Washington treats the summit as an achievement in and of itself rather than an opportunity to do more, then it has already lost the competition.

*The writer served on the US National Security Council staff from 2009 to 2015*

Trump's affinity for Xi and dealmaking with Beijing are at odds with hawks in his own administration

With high-profile backing, he hopes to turn Nscale into a \$1tn hyperscaler, write Kieran Smith, Louis Ashworth and Nic Fildes

Ten years ago, Josh Payne was working in a coal mine in Australia. Today, the 32-year-old finds himself in line for a billion-dollar payday from selling the picks and shovels of the AI boom, as his data centre start-up Nscale prepares for a potential \$35bn initial public offering.

The Australian entrepreneur's rise has shocked former colleagues, who describe his progress as "incredible" given his lack of higher education or experience in finance. But Payne appears to have more than compensated for this through a network of powerful allies, wooed by his intensity and matter-of-fact manner.

Since launching two years ago, Nscale has secured backing from Nvidia chief Jensen Huang and former Meta executives Sheryl Sandberg and Sir Nick Clegg, helping the company to win multibillion-dollar contracts from Microsoft and Anthropic.

"I've never seen a start-up take off like that before," Huang told Payne last year, as he commemorated his company's £500mn backing with a signed bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label whisky. "There's a rocket ship, but I think you're on a starship."

Born in the global coal-shipping capital of Newcastle, a rugby league town north of Sydney, Payne left school at 17 and spent several years working in construction jobs.

There, he says, he spent his free time reading books on entrepreneurship, going on to found a construction-staffing business in 2017 in his early twenties, before switching his efforts to renewable energy as managing director of PT Capital, a Sydney corporate advisory firm, in 2018.

Just one year later, his desire to catch the latest trend led him to found a bitcoin miner, Arkon Energy, and Battery Future Acquisition Corp, a blank-cheque group that unsuccessfully sought critical mineral deals.

Finally, he struck gold with Nscale, one of a string of rapidly growing but heavily indebted cloud-computing start-ups to emerge in the AI era. After moving to London, Payne began developing the company from within Arkon, which made a \$102mn loss in its last year of trading. Nscale was spun out in May 2024 and has subsequently subsumed its parent, switching capacity from cryptocurrency mining to AI.

One person who knows the Australian speculated that his quiet demeanour was behind his appeal in Europe. "In the US, you have to be bold and loud; in Europe that doesn't work as well."

Payne's low profile extends to his personal life. He has almost no public online presence – save for a few Nscale-related posts. Close aides claim they are largely in the dark about his interests.

Those who work with him talk instead about his ambition. Sandberg, who joined Nscale's board in March, has said that Payne's "visionary leadership" and "relentless desire for execution" remind her of Mark Zuckerberg.

Nscale has five active data centre sites and contracts for a further 12. But



Person in the News | Josh Payne

## The Australian miner who wooed AI giants

Payne's dreams are even bigger. In June, he told Time magazine he wanted to create a "\$1tn hyperscaler".

Clegg, who was introduced to Payne by former IBM chief Sam Palmisano and was convinced to join Nscale's board over a coffee near his home in London, praises him for identifying the opportunity in sovereign AI infrastructure from governments worried about being left behind. It is, he told the FT earlier this year, "one of the many reasons why I think Josh and his team have been so smart in understanding... where the puck is going."

Nscale's big break came through a \$6.2bn deal with Microsoft in late 2025 to deploy thousands of Nvidia chips at a facility it runs in Norway. The deal propelled Payne's fledgling company into the public eye, even before it had completed construction of its first self-developed facilities.

The speed of expansion has put strains on the company. Ahead of its New York IPO it has flagged "material weaknesses" in internal financial

reporting controls due to a lack of appropriate systems and insufficient staffing, which the company warns it "may not fully remediate during 2026 and 2027".

Yet Payne's backers remain firm in their resolve that the young Australian will deliver. "He's smart, he's insightful, but he's also really humble and down to earth... and when he makes a commitment, he goes out and executes it," Nscale backer and Nokia boss Justin Hotard told the FT.

Payne is one of a new generation of Australian founders minted from Nvidia-backed investment in AI, a group that also includes Oliver Curtis and Tim Rosenfield at Firmus – set to launch

what could be Australia's largest IPO.

Yet it is the UK that has hailed Payne as one of its own. Last September, Sir Keir Starmer's government lauded Nscale as part of plans to develop an AI Growth Zone centred around plans for a "Stargate UK" data centre site. This year, however, the project was put on indefinite hold.

That has shifted Nscale's centre of gravity – and Payne's attention – to the US. It has also highlighted the fragility of his business. Nscale has warned that Anthropic and Microsoft will be "significant customers" for the foreseeable future. The small print of its deal with the former – giving Anthropic sweeping rights to terminate the deal if Nscale fails to deliver on compute power – is a reminder that, despite Payne's fortunes, real power still lies elsewhere in the AI nexus.

Additional reporting by Tim Bradshaw and Ryan McMorrow

kieran.smith@ft.com, nic.fildes@ft.com, louis.ashworth@ft.com

## How can we tackle AI's financial risks?

TECHNOLOGY  
Gillian Tett

Could AI spark a financial crisis? That was one question hanging over New York this week, as world leaders gathered for the UN General Assembly.

For while some investors are fretting that the AI stock bubble might burst and/or some data centre debt go into default, many UNGA attendees raised another question: will malevolent humans use AI to launch devastating cyber attacks on key infrastructure – such as financial markets?

Indeed, Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft and the Gates Foundation, thinks that such threats are so real that he told me that AI was now "by far" the most dangerous technology ever created. He wants governments and tech companies to install AI monitoring systems to indicate (and hopefully prevent) any attempted malevolent use.

Maybe this will happen; the news that China and the US are considering a joint "hotline" to discuss AI risks is a small symbolic step in the right direction. So is the prevalence of such debates at UNGA. Drastically more needs to be done, however. And as politicians, investors and voters digest these lofty pledges, they should also track another less glamorous – and less visible – realm: global regulation.

Out of public sight, debates are now bubbling among supervisors about how to tackle financial risks from AI. This is not just when it comes to top-level global deals but by using agentic AI systems in a granular way themselves. In plain English, some bureaucrats are now trying to fight digital fire with fire.

This might sound counterintuitive. But I saw one example earlier this month at a meeting on digital regulation in Cambridge, hosted by an initiative of which I am an adviser. It was co-convened by Agustín Carstens (former head of the Bank for International Settlements) and Ashley Alder (chair of the Financial Conduct Authority), and featured what was billed as the first global "Agentic Regulator" hackathon.

Dozens of western and non-western regulators, from both financial and non-financial spheres, participated, while nearly 300 teams made submissions. From this frenzy, three key lessons emerged.

First: supervisors now realise they cannot afford to wait for politicians to create the right laws or regulatory structures to control AI; the field is moving faster than any legislature can act or cut diplomatic deals. As one top regulator observed: "We have to be very creative with the powers we have on the books."

That will not be easy; bureaucrats are culturally conservative. But it is essential: as Carstens has noted, one massive

headache for central banks is that most AI financial threats lie outside their regulatory perimeter. Just look at the excessively concentrated exposure of banks to cloud providers.

In America, Scott Bessent, the Treasury secretary, is tackling this problem from his own bully pulpit; he recently summoned bankers to discuss Anthropic's Claude Mythos AI model and concerns that it might identify financial cyber vulnerabilities. In the UK, the Bank of England has just pledged to supervise cloud companies as "critical third parties". The BIS is running its own innovation experiments. But we need to break regulatory silos.

Second: the concept of "explainability", or the degree to which digital models are transparent, interpretable and accountable, might need to be rethought. Regulators have long demanded explainability in finance. But this is hard to enforce in the AI realm.

Some might view this as reason for a ban. But that seems unrealistic. So big regulators are quietly shifting to a stance where they focus on tracking AI model outcomes, and install guardrails (like kill switches) while pushing for clarity around legal liability.

Third: regulators urgently need to get their hands dirty by creating their own AI tools, to understand the technology and to boost monitoring. The good news is that some are already doing this: at this month's hackathon there was a dazzling array of AI agents on display. Some track capital flows. Others monitor

Regulators urgently need to get their hands dirty by creating their own tools

market herding, fraud risks, vulnerabilities, financial robo-advisers and so on.

And what was striking is that many of the most creative ideas emanated not from western institutions but places such as India, Pakistan, Rwanda, Kenya or the United Arab Emirates (where half of government services will supposedly use agentic AI by mid-2028).

These experiments are unlikely to ever grab media headlines, let alone reassure AI "doomers" who want more dramatic action to slow the technology down. Fair enough: the US and Chinese governments must certainly collaborate to contain the risks in a top-level way and should learn lessons from other global regulatory initiatives around finance or nuclear weapons.

But until then, investors and voters should also cheer on those regulators who are quietly trying to fight AI with its own tools. If nothing else, it shows that AI innovation is not the exclusive preserve of private sector entrepreneurs in Shenzhen or Silicon Valley; some government bureaucrats are also now trying to embrace it for better supervision. Big Tech should back that to the hilt.

gillian.tett@ft.com

### Top reads at FT.com/opinion

- How to keep a clear head when thinking about the end of the world  
Bringing clarity to a fuzzy P(doom) debate, writes Soumaya Keynes
- What to do when your Waymo holds up a Secret Service motorcade  
Surrounded by agents, my autonomous vehicle refused to budge, writes Joe Miller



# Lifetime Free Newspapers Access

## Editorials PDF

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

## Magazine Channel

National & International  
[General & Exam related]

## International Newspapers

Newspapers around world.  
Asian, European & American

## Hindi Newspapers

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

## Indian Newspapers Channel

1. The Indian Express

2. The Hindu

3. Business Line

4. Financial Express

5. Times of India

6. Hindustan Times

7. Economic Times

8. Live Mint

9. Business Standard

