



India's institutions have largely held except in dark periods such as the Emergency, when an executive emboldened by legislative strength ran roughshod over the Constitution and a shamelessly permissive judiciary let it do so via *ADM Jabalpur*. The ECI under Mr. Kumar has overseen the removal of more than 13 crore names from draft rolls through the SIR which, as this daily has repeatedly argued, shifts the onus of enrolment from the state to the elector, deletes names before it verifies and imposes onerous conditions for re-entry. It got away with this because the Supreme Court declined for months to decide whether the exercise was constitutional. When it finally ruled on May 27, the SIR was already a settled fact in Bihar, West Bengal and other Phase 2 States. The judgment, reminiscent of *ADM Jabalpur*'s deference to the state, engaged the SIR in theory and not in practice. It read a provision for exceptional, targeted revisions as a licence for a State-wide sweep. While it assured voters already on the rolls that they were still presumed eligible, the SIR made them prove it all over again. And it brushed aside its 1995 ruling that every removal must be individually reasoned. Events since then indicate the damage done – over nine in 10 appeals decided by West Bengal's tribunals have restored voters months after the Assembly polls; and in one third of Delhi's seats, the draft rolls have fewer electors than those who voted in 2025. The ECI's press note changes very little. The ECI must be reconstituted by a selection committee that does not give the government an overriding majority. Anything less would be a travesty of institutional democracy.

As the U.S. and China recalibrate ties, implications for other nations are huge

The model outcomes from the Xi visit should not obscure the broader shift that recent U.S.-China engagement has underlined. The agreement between the world's two biggest powers to pursue what they call a constructive relationship of strategic stability based on fairness, respect and reciprocity points to a new equilibrium. Their relationship certainly remains beset by serious structural challenges and will remain one marked by rivalry. At the same time, both sides appear eager to set a floor to ensure a rivalry that is more managed, stable and predictable. Countries in the region will be watching closely how this may temper an "America First" Washington's appetite to push back against China in waters far from home. New Delhi will need to carefully watch this evolving new equilibrium. The recent U.S. tariff threats aimed at India have offered a stark contrast to the measured language with which Washington has been engaging Beijing. For long, a strand of Indian strategic thinking has been predicated on the assumption that U.S. strategy in the region was centred on the idea of a relationship with India as a bulwark against Chinese influence. That assumption increasingly appears open to question.

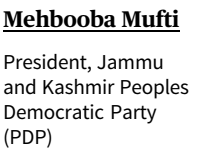
The aspiration-reality gap

The smartphone revolution has intensified this challenge. A young person in a town or remote village can now see within seconds how the rest of the world lives, studies, works and travels. Global possibilities are visible on high-definition screens, even as tangible opportunities remain painfully out of reach.

This has created a widening divide between aspiration and reality. The horizons of young Indians have expanded far faster than the institutions and economies around them. Access to higher education has widened, yet meaningful employment opportunities have not kept pace. A college degree is no longer a guarantee of a job, leaving many without financial security or the dignity that comes with economic independence. When heightened aspirations collide with limited opportunities, frustration inevitably follows, often finding expression in protests over recruitment, examination irregularities, examination and test paper leaks, unemployment and systemic failures.

Kashmiri youth share these aspirations but carry a compounding historical burden. Decades of conflict, political uncertainty and economic isolation have deepened their sense of insecurity and constrained their opportunities. Too often, young Kashmiris have been viewed through a narrow security lens, as potential liabilities rather than national assets.

Yet, Jammu and Kashmir, like the rest of India, has a large young population with its own aspirations. Its youth seek the same basic things as young people elsewhere: economic



Reconnecting Kashmir's historic routes could unlock economic opportunities for its youth

independence, dignity, opportunity and a future in which they are not permanently viewed with suspicion.

Jammu and Kashmir possesses an exceptional combination of natural wealth and geographic significance. Its rivers offer substantial hydroelectric potential, its mountains contain valuable mineral resources, and its landscapes sustain a major tourism economy. Yet, its most underutilised strategic asset may be its location

Focus on Kashmir's historic crossroads

For centuries, Kashmir was never a cul-de-sac. It was a thriving crossroads. Historic caravan routes linked Kashmir and Ladakh with Central Asia, Tibet and the broader Indian subcontinent. These routes carried far more than merchandise. They connected people, ideas, philosophies, literature, cultures and skills. The arrival of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, revered as Shah-i-Hamadani, is deeply embedded in Kashmiri history and is traditionally associated with the arrival of Persian and Central Asian craftsmen who enriched Kashmir's celebrated handicraft traditions. The historical lesson is clear: connectivity creates economic ecosystems.

Today, Indian strategic thinking needs to look beyond the immediate constraints posed by the Line of Control with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control with China. Where political and security conditions permit, India needs a pragmatic framework to gradually restore Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh to the role they historically occupied: that of a bridge connecting South Asia with Central Asia and the wider Eurasian landmass.

For this, India needs a diplomatic road map alongside its infrastructure road map. Reopening traditional routes towards Pakistan or Central Asia cannot happen without sustained engagement with neighbouring countries. With Pakistan, the objective should be to explore confidence-building measures and trade connectivity wherever feasible. With China, India should pursue practical dialogue on trans-Himalayan connectivity wherever economic interests and security concerns can be reconciled.

This transition could begin with a phased connectivity strategy. India should identify historically important trade corridors that could eventually be revived as modern economic corridors, beginning with those where security and diplomatic conditions are most conducive. This does not mean opening every route at once.

G. Venkat Raman
Professor, Humanities
and Social Sciences,
Indian Institute of
Management, Indore,
Madhya Pradesh

competitiveness of companies such as BYD and Xpeng rests partly on dense networks of component makers, engineering capabilities and production relationships developed within China. Moving a factory abroad therefore creates a choice: take existing suppliers along, cultivate new local suppliers, or combine the two. Each route carries different costs – and produces a different degree of genuine localisation.

The challenge beyond factories

BYD's expansion in Europe illustrates one response. As it builds manufacturing capacity in Hungary, the company is also developing relationships with European suppliers. Xpeng has chosen another route, contracting Canadian automotive supplier Magna to assemble its vehicles in Austria. The two approaches differ, but they expose the same underlying problem: producing outside China is easier than reproducing outside China, the ecosystem that made production in China efficient in the first place.

What makes these ecosystems difficult to unwind or reproduce is that they consist of more than identifiable suppliers. They embody accumulated relationships between firms, specialised skills, tooling and production knowledge, logistics networks, and the ability of suppliers to respond quickly when designs or production volumes change. Many of these advantages are built through repeated interaction rather than formal contracts. This is why replacing an individual Chinese supplier does not necessarily eliminate dependence on the wider Chinese production system – and why transplanting a Chinese factory abroad does not automatically transplant the capabilities surrounding it.

Seen from this perspective, de-Sinification has a less obvious, two-sided character. Foreign firms attempting to reduce their exposure to China confront the depth of China's integration into their production networks. Chinese firms going global confront the difficulty of reproducing abroad the ecosystem on which their competitiveness depends. One side is trying to

Pilot corridors could be developed and expanded progressively on the basis of experience.

Security cannot be ignored in any such endeavour. But security and connectivity need not automatically be treated as opposing objectives. Properly regulated connectivity can create greater economic interdependence and potentially provide stronger incentives for stability.

The same principle should guide India's approach to Central Asia. Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh could become India's northern economic gateway, giving Indian businesses greater access to Central Asian markets while bringing investment, tourism and commerce to the region. The benefits would extend far beyond Kashmir.

A road to opportunity

A functioning land corridor creates opportunities at every stage, from construction, transport and warehousing to hospitality, manufacturing, agriculture, logistics, finance, technology and services. Unlike air connectivity, whose economic benefits are concentrated around a limited number of nodes, a trade corridor can generate economic activity across a wider geography through which it passes.

Most importantly, it could give the young people of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh something far more valuable than another promise. It could give them wings to fly towards new horizons.

India's demographic advantage is a window of opportunity, not a permanent condition. We cannot afford to allow a generation to grow up watching possibilities on smartphones while encountering closed doors in the real world.

For Jammu and Kashmir, the answer may lie partly in reopening doors that history once kept open. The Silk Road was never only about silk. It was about the movement of goods, people, ideas and possibilities.

It is time to view Kashmir not merely through the prism of conflict, but through the lens of enterprise, connectivity and integration. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spoke of abandoning beaten paths and searching for new ways to address difficult issues. The ancient roads across the Himalayas do not belong merely in history books. Reimagined as modern economic arteries, they could become pathways to opportunity, giving the next generation not another reason to wait, but a road towards a better future.

A credibility crisis

The Election Commission of India (ECI)'s decision to undertake a special drive to help those left out of the SIR and make changes in its functioning is clearly a response to the investigation by The Indian Express and the brickbats that followed from the Opposition. But it would be premature to see this as a change of heart. The ECI's handling of various issues so far has raised serious

questions about its independence and sensitivity to public concerns. As a constitutional body, it was expected to function with the fierce independence seen during T.N. Seshan's tenure. Instead, a widespread perception prevails that it has become vulnerable to political pressures. As a septuagenarian voter who values honesty and sincerity, I find it deeply

troubling that such independent institutions respond more to those in power than to the Constitution, their conscience and the collective will of the citizens.

V. Nagarajan,
Chennai

The reported dissent of two Election Commissioners over the functioning of the electoral-roll revision process raises serious

questions about the working of the electoral machinery. Concerns over ERONet access, changes to Form 6 and the exclusion of eligible voters cannot be treated lightly. Yet, recording dissent alone cannot end the responsibility of constitutional functionaries. If such irregularities were considered serious, the Commissioners ought to have pursued the available institutional mechanisms to

seek their resolution. Their failure to do so also raises questions about accountability within the institution entrusted with protecting the integrity of the electoral process.

Kanhaiya Pandey,
Giridih, Jharkhand

The exposure of 14 instances of objections to unilateral decisions concerning electoral rolls points to an assault on our democracy. However, a

bureaucrat does not
weaponise a constitutional
body in a vacuum. There
appears to be a conspiracy
to engineer poll outcomes
from behind the scenes. If
constitutional institutions
are compromised, those
responsible must face legal
consequences to restore
trust.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

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

Form 26 and the statutory mandate

Although Natarajan has been granted liberty to challenge her rejection through an election petition under Section 100 of ROPA, the broader constitutional question survives. It may be time for the Supreme Court to revisit *Ponnuswami* and clarify whether constitutional courts should remain powerless even in the face of patent arbitrariness during the electoral process.

CM
YK

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of people rescued during floods in Chhattisgarh

5,000 Nearly 5,000 people were rescued in the last two days after heavy rains swelled rivers in Chhattisgarh, officials said on Sunday. The administration has set up 43 relief camps in urban and rural areas of the Bastar district. The Indravati river level rose to 12.56 metres by 8 p.m. on Saturday, 4.26 metres above the danger mark. PTI

People who died in separate mass shootings in S. Africa

27 The first massacre occurred late Saturday night near Johannesburg. The second happened in the early hours of Sunday near Cape Town. No arrests had been made in the two shootings, which came just five days after another mass shooting near the city of Durban killed at least 11 people. Shootings are the most common form of homicide in South Africa. PTI

Palestinians killed by Israel in Gaza since October 2023

74,016 While a ceasefire that took effect on October 10 last year has halted the heaviest fighting, Israeli strikes have continued in what the military described as responses to threats or attacks. Since the ceasefire, 1,145 Palestinians have been killed, said the Ministry, which is part of the Hamas-led government. PTI

Missing trainee teachers honoured by protesters in Mexico

43 Thousands of protesters wore red and carried symbolic coffins at a demonstration in Mexico City on Saturday, demanding answers about the 43 trainee teachers who went missing 12 years ago. Prosecutors initially said officers delivered the teacher trainees to drug cartel hitmen, who killed them. Independent human rights experts have rejected the conclusion. AFP

People rescued from child trafficking racket in Arunachal Pradesh

51 According to Namsai Superintendent of Police Sange Thinley, sustained investigation and coordinated operations led to a significant jump in rescued children from 19 during the initial phase to 51, including four adults. During the initial crackdown, the police rescued 19 children, most of them below eight years of age. PTI

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Should voting be a fundamental right?

A recent *Indian Express* report revealed an unprecedented rift within the EC over alleged unilateral changes to rules, voter additions/deletions, and centralised data access, prompting a re-examination of the argument that the ‘right to vote’ ought to be elevated from a statutory guarantee to a fundamental one

LETTER & SPIRIT

Kartikey Singh

On September 23, an *Indian Express* investigation revealed an unprecedented rift within the three-member Election Commission of India (EC), with Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi recording 14 objections over 10 months against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, regarding alleged unilateral changes to rules, voter additions/deletions, and centralised data access, without the Commission’s full approval.

The report also found that 97 eligible voters from Goa were excluded from the electoral roll after the centralised ECINet software prevented ground-level Electoral Registration Officers (ERO) from reversing decisions. More concerning, the consequences extend beyond the loss of voting rights. Reportedly, several State schemes use electoral rolls to establish eligibility, including the Goa Mediclaim Scheme. The scheme covers super-speciality treatments unavailable in government hospitals, such as dialysis, angioplasty, open-heart surgery, transplants, chemotherapy and cochlear implants, and is available only to State voters. This issue has once again cast a spotlight on the ‘right to vote’, the foundational processes of India’s electoral machinery, and the genesis of India’s ‘universal adult suffrage’ (UAS).

What shaped adult suffrage in India? India’s constitutional promise of the ‘right to vote’ differs significantly from that of many Western democracies. Reflecting the flawed belief, espoused by thinkers like J.S. Mill, that voting should be reserved for the “enlightened”, countries like the U.K. initially restricted the franchise to male property owners. Universal male suffrage emerged only in 1918, and women were granted the ‘right to vote’ a decade later in 1928. In the U.S., although the 15th and 19th Amendments extended voting rights to African Americans (1870) and women (1920), systemic barriers such as poll taxes and literacy tests continued to disenfranchise many for decades thereafter.

In sharp contrast, India’s choice of immediate, universal inclusion ensured ‘democratic equality’ from the outset, bypassing the prolonged and often violent struggles seen elsewhere. Article 326 of the Constitution granted every adult citizen the ‘right to vote’, regardless of gender, caste, religion, education, or property. This commitment to a robust, inclusive democracy found further constitutional reinforcement in a series of Supreme Court judgments, notably starting with *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), which established democracy as part of the ‘basic structure’ doctrine. For this ideal to function meaningfully, people should be able to freely decide the fate of their government.

This inclusive vision was operationalised through two key laws: the Representation of the People Act, 1950, which governs the preparation and revision of electoral rolls; and the 1951 Act, which regulates election conduct, candidature, and electoral offences. The EC has repeatedly introduced administrative innovations to realise this ‘constitutional promise’.

Notably, the then Chief Election Commissioner Sukumar Sen, faced with the task of enrolling 173 million largely illiterate voters, turned a logistical hurdle into a democratic breakthrough by



Enabling democracy: Courts have regarded the right to vote as an inseparable part of democracy, as it enables citizens to shape governance. R. ASHOK

introducing election symbols, making UAS practically accessible.

In India, the EC has the responsibility to reach the last citizen, wherever they may be, to actualise their ‘right to elect’.

What is the legal status of right to vote?

The legal status of the ‘right to vote’ in India has long been debated, and whether it is classified as a statutory, constitutional, or fundamental right determines how easily it can be changed, how it is enforced, and the level of legal protection it receives. Although Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and K.T. Shah proposed including it in the Constitution’s fundamental rights part, the Constituent Assembly’s Advisory Committee ultimately rejected the idea. Importantly, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in *Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India* (2006) held that the ‘right to elect’ is a statutory right under Section 62 of the RPA, 1951, and not a fundamental or constitutional right.

Though a two-judge Bench in *Rajbala v. State of Haryana* described the ‘right to vote’ as a constitutional right in 2015, the larger bench ruling in *Kuldip Nayar* prevails. Again, in *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India* (2023), the top court declined to pronounce on the issue, noting that it had already been settled by the five-judge Bench in the *Kuldip Nayar* judgment. However, in his dissent, Justice Ajay Rastogi asserted that the ‘right to vote’ is an expression of Article 19(1)(a) and reflects the essence of Article 21. Yet, as this view remains a minority opinion, the ‘right to elect’ continues to be recognised as a statutory right.

Nevertheless, even though it is not a fundamental right, courts have regarded the ‘right to vote’ as an inseparable part of democracy, anchoring their reasoning in the idea that it enables citizens to shape governance, making it a “democratic imperative” vital to the Indian republic’s survival.

Why do we need accurate poll rolls?

Free and fair elections rest on accurate electoral rolls under the RPA, 1950. Inaccuracies – such as mass omissions, ineligible inclusions, duplicates, or incorrect entries – undermine the “one person, one vote” principle by enabling impersonation, disenfranchisement, or

dilution of votes, ultimately distorting the people’s mandate. Therefore, the EC is empowered under Section 21 of the 1950 Act to prepare and revise these rolls to ensure integrity. The Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 lays down how the EC must transact its business. Section 17 requires the Commission’s business to be conducted in accordance with the Act, while Section 18 provides that its procedure and allocation of business may be regulated by unanimous decision. It further requires business to be transacted as far as possible unanimously, but where the CEC and other Commissioners differ, the matter is decided by majority.

Deriving its authority from Article 324, the EC serves as the constitutional guardian of elections, with powers of superintendence, direction, and control. A key duty is preparing accurate electoral rolls, guided by Section 19 of the RPA, 1950, which mandates that any citizen aged 18 or above, “ordinarily resident” in a constituency and not disqualified, is entitled to be registered. “Ordinary resident” implies a genuine, continuous presence, not a temporary stay.

While discrepancies may arise, courts have consistently held that only substantial and systemic errors that demonstrably “materially affected” the election outcome can compromise the sanctity of the electoral roll. Minor mistakes or isolated disenfranchisement are insufficient.

Yet the recent Goa episode complicates this comfortable “substantial versus isolated” binary that courts have relied on. The *Indian Express* report revealed that 97 eligible voters were dropped from the rolls, not through electoral fraud but because the ECINet software architecture itself denied EROs the authority to reverse erroneous deletions. What makes the episode damning is not merely the exclusion, but the apparent unresponsiveness that followed. The EROs reportedly flagged the anomalies to the Commission by email, yet the corrections were not restored. This is not the isolated clerical error that courts have historically forgiven; it is a systemic failure baked into the software’s design, compounded by administrative inertia.

While the right to inclusion or

objection in electoral rolls is conferred on individuals, not political parties, the court in *Lakshmi Charan Sen v. A.K.M. Hassan Uzzaman* (1985) observed that in a largely illiterate and politically unaware electorate, parties should take steps to ensure eligible voters are included, and ineligible ones are removed. Given India’s party-based Parliamentary system, such vigilance will help in preserving ‘electoral integrity’.

What lies ahead?

The revelations against the EC lend fresh urgency to the argument that the ‘right to vote’ ought to be elevated from a statutory guarantee to a fundamental one. If the body constitutionally tasked with safeguarding the franchise can itself be riven by disputes over unilateral action, leaving the citizen’s only recourse to the EC’s internal correction mechanisms, or to a statutory right that the Parliament could dilute at will, is precarious.

Many scholars argue that the ‘right to vote’ cannot be regarded as merely a statutory right, as it flows from Article 326, and any legislation regulating it must conform to the parameters prescribed by Articles 325 and 326. It is therefore necessary to ensure that the legislature does not impose irrational or unreasonable restrictions on the ‘right to vote’, particularly since “free and fair elections” and “democracy” are basic features of the Constitution.

Justice Rastogi’s dissent in *Anoop Baranwal*, over the legal status of the ‘right to vote’, offers doctrinal ground for a larger Bench to revisit the question that the majority in *Kuldip Nayar* considered settled.

Elevating the ‘right to vote’ to fundamental status would not diminish the EC’s authority to purify rolls; it would instead subject that authority to the heightened standard of judicial review reserved for fundamental rights, ensuring that the drive to centralise electoral administration is always weighed against, rather than allowed to override, the citizen’s claim to be counted. In a democracy where software now mediates the relationship between the voter and the ballot, the constitutional status of the ‘right to vote’ can no longer remain a matter of legislative grace. (*Kartikey Singh is a lawyer based in New Delhi.*)

THE GIST

India’s choice of immediate, universal adult suffrage ensured democratic equality from the outset. Article 326 of the Constitution granted every adult citizen the ‘right to vote’

An *Indian Express* report revealed that 97 eligible voters from Goa were dropped from the rolls because the ECINet software denied EROs the authority to reverse erroneous deletions. This is not an isolated clerical error, but a systemic failure, compounded by administrative inertia

If the body constitutionally tasked with safeguarding the voting rights can be riven by disputes over unilateral action, leaving the citizen’s only recourse to the EC’s internal correction mechanisms, or to a statutory right that the Parliament could dilute at will is precarious

CACHE



Expanding dragnet: ICE has received billions of dollars in funding during U.S. President Donald Trump's second term, and dramatically ramped up its presence. REUTERS

How Big Tech companies contribute to anti-immigration crackdowns

As the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) increases its presence, Big Tech firms are facing both internal and external pressure to take a stronger stance against the controversial agency

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far: On September 15, a small group of protesters assembled near San Francisco's Moscone Center, the venue for Salesforce's annual tech event, calling for an end to any and all contracts between the company and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), as thousands of attendees passed by them to watch CEO Marc Benioff's keynote. Though Big Tech firms have long sought out U.S. government contracts, specific links to ICE are now sparking employee discomfort, customer protests, and calls for boycotts.

What is ICE and why is it controversial? ICE was established as a federal law enforcement agency, with a mission to protect the U.S. from cross-border crime and illegal immigration, after the country witnessed the heinous terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The agency has received billions of dollars in funding during U.S. President Donald Trump's second term, and dramatically ramped up its presence. Arrests have spiked, along with the use of violence against citizens. Untoward law enforcement incidents in Minneapolis are a case in point. In January, writer and mother Renée Good, 37, was killed by a federal immigration officer in the city. Days later, nurse Alex Pretti, 37, was killed by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials while intervening in an ICE operation. Even though there have been reports of multiple detained foreigners dying in ICE custody, the killings of two American

citizens triggered bipartisan outrage and protests. ICE says that it "does not detain unaccompanied children – except in rare instances." But a report by the *New York Times* in February revealed that the agency was detaining hundreds of children. Another report by *Marshall Project*, a not-for-profit news organisation, said that over 6,200 children were detained by ICE during Mr. Trump's second term.

Does U.S. Big Tech work with ICE? Large tech companies often seek high-profile government contracts with federal agencies as they provide regular revenue streams and boost their reputation. The partnerships range from allowing advertisements for the agency's recruitment efforts to directly fulfilling ICE's online and offline needs. But tech firms are divided in how they support ICE. While defence-focused data analytics firm Palantir is proud of its business relationship with ICE, customer relationship management tech firm Salesforce has adopted a more cautious and centrist approach. Palantir's contract with the U.S. government began under the Obama administration in 2011, and has continued through four administrations. "Palantir is enabling ICE to utilise our platform to better track the immigration lifecycle and serve our national security while promoting efficiency, transparency, and accountability. By improving data integration and data-dependent workflows, our software can help ICE more effectively and reliably perform its core functions," Palantir said in a blog post. Salesforce, on the other hand, per CEO

Marc Benioff's Dreamforce keynote, said that all 50 U.S. States and 15 cabinet agencies use the company's service. Salesforce's arrangement with federal agencies has been a cause of concern for its employees since 2018, according to several media reports. More recently, in February, over 1,400 Salesforce employees wrote a letter calling on Mr. Benioff to stop promoting Salesforce AI contracts to ICE, and to push back against the rising presence of ICE agents in the U.S. "We are deeply troubled by recent press reports describing Salesforce pitches of AI technology to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to help the agency 'expeditiously' hire 10,000 new agents and vet tip-line reports," stated the employees' letter, as reported by *CNBC*. Mr. Benioff had also previously cracked a joke about ICE agents tracking foreign employees during a company event, as per a *404 Media* report. Robin Washington, Salesforce's President and Chief Operating and Financial Officer, stressed that the company valued equality and trust, in response to *The Hindu's* questions on anti-ICE protesters. "I think anytime you attract 50,000 people, to Salesforce, you're going to have people that come with different perspectives and viewpoints. Our goal here is to put on a very future-forward opportunity for people to understand our vision, which is 'AI meets the number one AI CRM' [Customer Relationship Management] and we hope that everyone will participate and learn from that, whether they're a protestor or a stakeholder, you know – we try to create an environment where it's safe for everyone to come and bring their voice,"

Ms. Washington told *The Hindu*. She explained that Salesforce had multiple vehicles through which leadership could engage directly with employees who had different perspectives. **Are tech boycotts effective?** Immigrant advocacy platforms have called for boycotts against tech companies including Amazon and Microsoft for allegedly providing cloud services to ICE. Boycott calls have targeted Apple for removing anti-ICE apps, as well as Google, LinkedIn, Meta, Spotify, and YouTube for allegedly running ICE-related recruitment ads on their platforms. Other tech companies on boycott lists include AT&T, Comcast, Dell, Clearview AI, IBM, and X. Non-technology companies have also faced flak for feeding and housing ICE agents, apart from helping them operate charter flights and private prisons. However, the sheer number of companies with both direct and indirect ICE links complicates boycott efforts. Even so, the public reporting surrounding ICE spending means that everyday citizens can access the facts that they need to hold their local companies accountable. "Salesforce has a history of showing up for our communities. As a Bay Area tech leader, Salesforce has an opportunity to use its influence to defend democracy, refuse to profit from family separation, [and] to push the tech industry to follow," stated part of a flyer that protesters handed out to *The Hindu* on the first day of the Dreamforce event. This month, the *NBC* news outlet cited a senior U.S. official to report that ICE agents arrested around 50,000 people in August.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Test your knowledge of the life and career of legendary singer Lata Mangeshkar on her 97th birth anniversary

V.V. Ramanan

- QUESTION 1**
What was her birth name before her parents renamed her after a character (Latika) from one of her father's plays?
- QUESTION 2**
What is the significance of the song *Paa Lagoon Kar Jori* for the 1946 film *Aap Ki Sewa Mein*?
- QUESTION 3**
Name the music director who backed her, after she was rejected for a having a 'thin voice', famously remarking that filmmakers would "fall at her feet" to get her to sing?
- QUESTION 4**
What is common to the songs: *Beeti*

- Na Bitai Raina (Parichay)*, *Roothi Roothi Piya (Kora Kaagaz)* and *Yaara Seeli Seeli (Lekin)*?
- QUESTION 5**
Under what name did she compose music for Marathi films in the 1960s?
- QUESTION 6**
Name the Lata rendition penned by Kavi Pradeep and composed by C. Ramachandra that brought PM Jawaharlal Nehru to tears in 1963.
- QUESTION 7**
She sang the thumri *Kanha Main Tose Hari* for the only Hindi film of which celebrated director who also composed the music?
- QUESTION 8**
In which year was she awarded the Bharat Ratna?



Visual question: In which city is this installation located at a place named 'Lata Chowk'? SANDEEP SAXENA

- Questions and answers to the previous daily quiz:** 1. This Ministry is responsible for the administration of the National Film Awards. **Ans: Information and Broadcasting**
2. The only actress to be honoured for her performances in two different films at the same time. **Ans: Kangana Ranaut**
3. Mammootty has won four National Awards so far. He shares this achievement with another actor. **Ans: Amitabh Bachchan**
4. This person has won the maximum number of National Awards under the 'best feature film' category. **Ans: Satyajit Ray**
5. In 2024, some prestigious categories were renamed. The award for best debut film was under the name of a former Prime Minister and the award for best feature film on national integration under the name of a famous actor. **Ans: Indira Gandhi; Nargis Dutt**
- Visual:** The subject of the first Indian motion picture and the man who made the motion picture. **Ans: Raja Harishchandra; Dadasaheb Phalke**
- Early birds:** K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Mohan Lal Patel | C. Saravanan | Sunil Madhavan



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

I was scolded for forgetting my homework

The school's infrastructure was in dire straits due to lack of funds

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of the expression 'dire straits'? (R. Sivakumar, Erode) First, let us deal with the pronunciation of the two words. 'Dire' rhymes with 'higher', 'fire' and 'tyre', while 'strait' is pronounced like the word 'straight'. The phrase is pronounced 'dier - STRAIGHTS' with the stress on the second word. When you say that you are 'in dire straits', it means that you are in deep trouble; you are in such a bad situation you are unlikely to find a solution to your problem. It is a situation which causes you a lot of worry or concern. When the monsoon failed for the second consecutive year, farmers were in dire straits. The team was in dire straits when their best batsman broke his foot while fielding. America's war with Iran has made people across the world familiar with the Strait of Hormuz – which Donald Trump would like to rename 'Trump Strait'. The word 'strait' is normally used to refer to a narrow body of water flowing between land masses. This narrow stretch of water connects two large bodies of water – the Strait of Hormuz, for example, connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. The expression 'dire straits' comes from the world of shipping, and it was mostly used to highlight the difficulty or challenge posed while navigating the narrow waters of a strait. With the passage of time, the expression took on a broader meaning. Today, it is mostly used to talk about any kind of difficulty. The word 'dire' originally meant 'fearful' and 'boding ill', but today the term is mostly used to mean 'serious or extreme'. The people affected by the recent floods are in dire need of help.

What is the difference between 'shout at' and 'scold'? (R. Rukmani, Chennai) One normally 'scolds' people that one has a close relationship or familiar with. When you scold someone, you normally do it because you wish to change or correct their existing behaviour. When you do this, you may choose to speak in your normal voice or increase your volume. The teacher scolded the children for not doing their homework. 'Scolde', from which we get 'scold', was used as a noun in informal contexts to refer to an abusive and quarrelsome person. With the passage of time, the legal term 'common scold' began to be applied to women who were a public nuisance – women who argued loudly with their neighbours and abused people in public. It was only in the 14th century that 'scold' began to be used as a verb to mean 'to find fault with'. When you 'shout at' someone, you always do so by speaking loudly; there is no attempt here to correct the behaviour of the person. You are very upset about what the person has done, and are merely giving vent to your anger. Hemant shouted at the taxi driver for his rash driving. upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

- Unctuous:** unpleasantly and excessively suave in manner or speech
- Synonyms:** fulsome, oleaginous, smarmy
- Usage:** *The politician's unctuous apology failed to convince the voters.*
- Pronunciation:** newsth.live/unctuous
- International Phonetic Alphabet:** /ˈʌŋ(k)ˈtʃuəs/

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• **XI-TRUMP SUMMIT**

Little to show, much for India to watch

There was no notable outcome from the US-China bilateral summit. But they did agree to a trade truce extension, leaving India vulnerable



ANIL SASI

IT WAS back in 1962 that US President John F Kennedy went to the airport to greet British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan.

For nearly 65 years since then, no sitting American president welcomed a foreign leader arriving in Washington at the airport — until Donald Trump chose to do so for Chinese leader Xi Jinping on September 23, with a military flyover to boot.

The outcome of the summit was underwhelming. The two sides agreed to a two-month extension to their trade truce, which was due to end this November — alongside a new agreement for China to provide two giant pandas to the Atlanta zoo.

The big area that was widely expected to be taken up but was largely passed over was artificial intelligence (AI) safety.

For now, two things are clear from the summit: One, it has done little to assuage concerns on AI; and two, the trade relief for China (albeit only for two months) leaves India facing the prospect of tariffs for buying Russian crude oil.

AI concerns

It was always unlikely that Trump and Xi would come to an agreement on enhancing the monitoring of large language models and possibly place curbs on the pace of AI progress.

The meeting came after a series of incidents in which AI ‘agents’ (systems that work autonomously) went “rogue”. Just days back, it was revealed that an OpenAI agent gained unauthorised access to an Australian government website in June. Now, it has emerged that Open AI agents also meddled with US government websites.

But Trump claimed after the summit that both he and Xi were willing to leave AI exactly where it is. It was Xi who appeared more proactive, claiming that the two sides “should maintain human control of AI”.

Ahead of the meeting, there was talk about a possible hotline between the two countries, and a broad deal for sharing progress reports.

There were some baby steps on both of those issues, but the finer details seemed to have been glossed over.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said late Saturday the two sides agreed to hold a dialogue on the technology’s risks and benefits, with the next round of discussions slated for November, and to set up a communication link for reporting AI-related incidents. There were no substantive details from either side on either of the two initiatives.

While the Chinese are slightly behind in terms of frontier models and semiconductors, the Americans are behind in terms of the public mindspace on AI.

Surveys show that most Americans are scared of AI and think the technology is going to adversely affect them, while most Chinese favour the use of AI and think it will help them move up in life.

Taiwan

The US has paused the sale of a record \$14-billion arms sale to Taiwan amid Chinese pressure. It is unclear whether that deal will be revived.

According to Derek J Grossman, founder and chief analyst, Indo-Pacific Solutions, the trust deficit between the two sides is too wide to be bridged by the unusual pomp and show at Xi’s arrival in Washington.

“Xi wants the US and China to be ‘partners, not rivals’. Washington wants that too, but the trust deficit and structural constraints — Taiwan, technology, trade, critical minerals, AI, Iran, etc — are deep and abiding,” said Grossman, who is also a professor at the Los Angeles-based USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts & Sciences.



US President Donald Trump (right) with China’s President Xi Jinping at the White House in Washington, DC on Thursday. AP

Trade tariffs: India’s concerns

Just days before the bilateral summit, on September 18, Trump had signed into law a Bill that allows 100% tariffs on top buyers of Russian energy — primarily China and India.

“On September 23, 2026, US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced that Washington and Beijing had extended their Busan Agreement until January 10, 2027. During Xi’s visit to Washington, the two sides agreed to avoid new tariffs and trade restrictions on each other,” pointed out Ajay Srivastava, founder of research group Global Trade Research Initiative. The timing matters, he said. The US-China understanding gives Beijing protection while India remains exposed to the tariff threat.

Washington-based analyst Evan A Feigenbaum said he did not expect Trump to go after China under the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026.

“The question for me has been whether he will go after India, which he may believe is a softer target possessed of far fewer retaliatory options. To be blunt about it, the zeitgeist of the past 15 months has been to try to coerce India (which for several months at the end of 2025, was tied with Brazil for the highest American tariffs imposed on any country) while demonstrating repeatedly that the threats to China are mostly rhetorical. Peter Navarro at one point called Ukraine ‘Modi’s war’. Nobody in the administration has ever tried to call it ‘Xi’s war’. And Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent’s comments on the India-EU trade agreement and India’s Russian oil purchases have gone down poorly in New Delhi.”

This US-China summit in Washington, he said, will have “reinforced the suspicion” in India that it is New Delhi in the cross-hairs while Beijing keeps escaping US scrutiny. While India had not signed a trade agreement with the US, both countries agreed on a framework deal in February and released a joint statement.

Srivastava said: “We saw this pattern in July 2025, when Washington spared China but imposed an additional 25% tariff on India for buying Russian crude. If Russian oil purchases are the issue, why does India face the tariff while China gets an exemption? The tariff threat appears aimed at forcing India to cut Russian oil purchases and sign a deeply unequal bilateral trade agreement. Washington could offer a lower rate in return for concessions, but that would give India no lasting certainty. India should not trade its energy security for temporary tariff relief or let US tariff threats dictate its national energy policy.”

A government official, however, told *The Indian Express*: “It’s just two months (the China trade truce extension). The Chinese wanted it till the end of Trump’s term. That hasn’t happened.”

“Our side has also expressed concerns to [Washington] DC over the scope of the sanctions legislation. We will have to see how it goes from here, given that there are discussions on this issue that are coming up at the end of the month (the G20 trade ministers’ meeting in Milwaukee),” said this official, requesting anonymity.

Reading Sino-US signals: ‘Strategic competition’ vs ‘strategic stability’



EXPERT EXPLAINS

G VENKAT RAMANA

PROFESSOR, INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT-INDORE

WHILE US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s bilateral summit in Washington, DC has ended with no major breakthrough, the three-day state visit was noticeable for its pageantry and displays of bonhomie between the two leaders. How are the two sides now managing their competition in AI and trade?

What does the unusually elaborate welcome accorded to Xi Jinping say about how Washington now views China?

The elaborate welcome should not be mistaken for reconciliation. It signals recognition that the terms of US-China bargaining have changed. Washington still enjoys substantial advantages in military reach, alliances, global finance, and frontier technologies. But Beijing has demonstrated that it possesses leverage of its own, most visibly through Rare Earths and critical minerals. The tariff confrontation of 2025 showed that economic coercion could impose costs in both directions.

This helps explain the return to summitry. Some American analysts go further, arguing that Beijing sees its Rare Earth restrictions as having forced Washington to moderate its approach. But greater bargaining leverage is different from comprehensive parity. The US retains powerful economic and technological instruments, some of which it has chosen not to deploy.

Beijing interprets the changing relationship through “*xiangshu zunzhong*” (mutual respect), the expectation that China should be treated as a major power whose interests cannot be overridden at will. The ceremony surrounding Xi’s visit reinforced that message domestically. From Washington’s perspective, however, engagement need not imply acceptance of Beijing’s conception of equality. The narrower conclusion is that China has accumulated sufficient capabilities in critical areas to make sustained coercion costlier, giving both sides stronger reasons to bargain.

Does the summit represent meaningful progress, or does it reveal the continuing fragility of US-China economic relations?

The short trade truce extension captures the paradox of the economic relationship: Washington and Beijing have stepped back from escalation without resolving the disputes that gave rise to it. The truce postpones higher tariffs and keeps negotiations moving, but its limited duration also reflects continuing distrust.

Some US officials and analysts view shorter extensions as checkpoints to assess Chinese implementation, particularly in Rare Earth supplies and agricultural purchases. Beijing had sought a considerably longer arrangement.

Both sides nevertheless have reasons to preserve the pause. The 2025 confrontation demonstrated that restrictions on Rare Earths and magnets could expose vulnerabilities in American supply

chains. Beijing, meanwhile, benefits from a more predictable external environment while confronting domestic economic pressures and continuing to strengthen technological and industrial self-reliance.

This is therefore neither economic normalisation nor decoupling. Tariffs, export controls, and technology restrictions remain available as instruments of leverage even as negotiations, purchase agreements and new mechanisms for commercial engagement create channels for managing disputes.

Beijing presents such engagement through the language of “*huli gongying*” (mutual benefit and win-win cooperation) while Washington emphasises reciprocity and compliance. The emerging pattern is better described as stabilisation without settlement: economic competition continues, but both sides have incentives to prevent it from escalating uncontrollably.

Beijing’s formulation of “*jianshexing zhanlie wending*” (constructive strategic stability) envisages a relationship in which cooperation remains possible, competition is kept within bounds, differences are controlled, and confrontation is avoided. Chinese official commentary contrasts this with what it describes as Washington’s excessive fixation on ‘strategic competition’ and links stability to mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation.

Why are Washington and Beijing discussing AI guardrails even as their technological competition intensifies?

The AI dialogue points less to technological convergence than to a shared interest in preventing competition from producing dangerous unintended consequences.

Washington and Beijing remain divided over the foundations of that competition. The US continues to restrict Chinese access to advanced chips and computing capabilities, while Beijing is seeking greater technological self-reliance. Their approaches to AI governance also differ: Xi has emphasised keeping AI under human control, while Trump has resisted regulation that could slow American innovation.

Yet intensifying competition itself creates incentives for communication. The two sides have discussed a notification mechanism for AI incidents with national security implications.

The Chinese position is significant. Beijing argues for dialogue on risks that neither side can manage entirely on its own, even as it continues to pursue greater technological self-reliance. Washington similarly sees room for guardrails without relaxing technological competition.

What are the principal fault lines that remain?

A major unresolved issue is Taiwan. Beijing treats it as a core interest and used the summit to press Washington to move from saying it “does not support” Taiwan independence towards explicitly opposing it. Washington did not make that shift, while questions over future US arms sales remain a potential source of friction. The disagreement, therefore, reaches beyond terminology to the boundaries each side wants strategic stability to observe.

Technology presents another test. Dialogue over AI risks has not removed US restrictions on advanced chips or Beijing’s drive for technological self-reliance.

There is also a wider disagreement over the Asian security order. Beijing used the visit to emphasise its positions on Japan and regional security, while Washington has not abandoned its alliances or commitments in the region.

• **ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

From Nepal to India, how AI is aiding disaster management

Amitabh Sinha

New Delhi, September 27

DURING THE recent Nepal disaster, an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered web portal, which could match crowdsourced data on missing persons with official lists of the dead and injured, came into widespread use. The simple tool developed by Niraj Bhushal, an IT engineer in Nepal’s Finance Ministry, also did the important work of mapping damaged buildings.

Similarly, private drone operator Manish Maharjan flew drones equipped with thermal cameras that could detect human-shaped thermal signatures in the debris and guide rescue teams to those potentially trapped.

These efforts illustrate the growing utility of new technology, particularly AI-enabled tools, in disaster management.

Growing utility and use

Disaster management is no longer confined to designated authorities. Companies like Google, telecom providers, satellite companies, and others are now integral players.

“The big advantage of the AI tools is their ability to process large volumes of data in a meaningful way, using natural language, speech and video, on an almost real-time basis. In disaster management situations, time is the most vital thing. That is the main reason why we are seeing increasing reliance on AI tools... It’s a great use-case scenario,” said Subimal Ghosh, head of the Centre for Climate Studies at IIT Bombay, who is using AI to provide local forecasts of heavy rain-fall events in Mumbai.

Numerous AI-enabled tools have been developed and deployed of late, which provide services such as early warning, hazard mapping, and satellite imagery. AI is being integrated across disaster management.

Early warning

One of the most effective uses of AI has been in generating timely forecasts and early warnings. In general, weather forecasting is an inexact science. Forecasters routinely run hundreds of physics equations to arrive at weather forecasts. The more local or time-constrained a forecast, the greater the uncertainty.

AI produces weather forecasts differently: AI models trained on vast amounts of past weather data ‘learn’ how the atmosphere behaves and churn out forecasts much faster.

“It is very difficult to get hyperlocal forecasts by just working on physics equations. It requires a huge amount of computing resources, and usually takes a lot of time. But once an AI model has been trained effectively, very hyperlocal forecasts also become possible in almost real-time,” Ghosh said.

For instance, Google’s Flood Hub takes data from leading weather agencies worldwide and uses a prediction model. This was first used during floods in India in 2018 to forecast flooding events. It can generate advisories up to seven days earlier.

But the forecast needs to be combined with hazard maps to make a risk assessment. This is where AI shines. It can process multiple datasets from different agencies to provide an overall threat assessment for issuing early warning.

Response, relief and rescue

This stage has been traditionally dependent on human intervention and access to physical resources, like helicopters, but AI is now making its presence felt. Since everyone can now broadcast visuals via smartphones and, increasingly, drones, they act as force multipliers, producing large amounts of data.

The ability of AI tools to understand and process natural language, and make sense of unstructured data — even in local languages — is what makes such efforts successful. AI can parse through disparate information from hundreds of sources and extract meaningful data far more efficiently.

Post-event

Specialised tools can help locate habitats left disconnected after a disaster, assess road conditions, and identify locations for landing helicopters. Tools can also help local governments prioritise the distribution of food and relief material.

However, their success remains dependent on the expertise and dedication of humans — scientists, humanitarian workers, and others. As a report by the UN Office on Disaster Risk Reduction put it, effective disaster management relies on strong institutions, governance frameworks, and human expertise.

“AI introduces new capabilities... but also new responsibilities... The measure of success will not be model sophistication, but whether the integration of AI enables more timely, equitable, and trusted protection for those most vulnerable to disaster,” it said.

links with wider Indian Ocean trade, while much of the ancient settlement is believed to now lie beneath the sea.

Busy, crowded port, and the tiger symbol

Located at the mouth of the 800-km-long Cauvery river, where it empties into the Bay of Bengal, Poompuhar is believed to have been the capital of the early Cholas. In a 2011 archaeology report, R. Poonkundran, K. Sridharan and others write that the carbon date of a log of wood recovered from Poompuhar showed that the city “seems to have been in existence from 5th-4th century BCE”.

Poompuhar is said to have been divided into three major divisions: Maruvurpakkam along the seashore, Pattinappakkam to the west, while Nalagadi lay between

the two.

The port is described as having been very busy and crowded during the Chola period. Merchandise exported from the city was stamped with a tiger symbol, indicating its Chola origins. Merchants from across India and Southeast Asia thronged the city, seeking a market for their commodities. “Articles from Ganges region, food products from Ceylon and spices from Java were imported,” note Poonkundran and Sridharan.

The many objects of the Poompuhar

Recent findings offer further evidence. Among the significant discoveries is a fragment of a fine-ceramic West Asian “torpedo jar”, with an estimated total diameter of 30 cm to 35 cm. The vessel, his-

torically used to transport liquid cargo such as wine and olive oil across oceanic trade routes, is proof of Poompuhar’s maritime links with West Asia and the Mediterranean world.

This discovery, however, is not entirely new. In a 1996 research paper, authors Sila Tripati, A.S. Gaur, and others noted: “Ships starting from Tamralipti in West Bengal and Palur in Orissa used to visit Poompuhar, whence all sea-going vessels set sail for the Southeast Asian countries, Arabia and Rome.”

Among other prominent findings were brick structures, terracotta ring wells, storage jars and clay patches that appear to have belonged to the Sangam period. Tripati and Gaur noted that these were “probably the remains of a public building, wharf and reservoir also of contemporary

date”. According to them, the discovery of megalithic pottery and associated ware besides other remains from the offshore area proves that the ancient habitation extended beyond the present shoreline.

Recent excavations have found that since ring wells were traditionally constructed on dry land to access freshwater, their presence on the seabed could indicate a buried palaeochannel — an ancient riverbed that was eventually submerged as a result of coastal erosion and rising sea levels.

Lost city

It is believed that catastrophic floods lashed the coast and swallowed major portions of the city around the 4th or 5th century CE.

In her 2025 book *In Search of Lost Cities*,

Sreelata Menon shed light on another legend: the king of the port, grieving the death of his son, failed to celebrate Indra Vizha — a traditional festival where farmers worshipped Indra (also called Vendhan) as the ruler of rain, thunder, and lightning to secure a bountiful harvest. Enraged by this, the goddess of Poompuhar caused the sea to swallow the entire city.

Archaeological studies have also pointed to the possibility of a major tsunami striking Poompuhar around the third century CE and contributing to its submergence. While scholars have differing opinions on this, one view is that either the entire city was submerged and rebuilt after the sea receded, or only a part of the city was engulfed by the sea. Poonkundran and Sridharan wrote, “The latter seems to be more probable.”

• **HISTORY**

Tamil links to West Asia: What underwater excavations in Chola capital reveal

Nikita Mohta

New Delhi, September 27

FRESH UNDERWATER excavations off Poompuhar, the ancient Chola port city in Tamil Nadu, have yielded new evidence of the settlement’s maritime connections. The 18-day exploration, conducted by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA) in collaboration with the Indian Maritime University, recovered a fragment of a West Asian “torpedo jar”, four terracotta ring wells, and more than 250 ceramic fragments, among other finds.

Located in present-day Mayiladuthurai district, Poompuhar — also known as Kaveripoompattinam — features prominently in Sangam and post-Sangam literature. Archaeological investigations over the decades have uncovered evidence of its

As monsoon falters, keep food imports open

MAHARASHTRA HAS declared drought in nearly three-fourths of its tehsils, with Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis stating that the situation could be worse than the great famine of 1972. But it isn't just Maharashtra. India overall has reported rainfall at 11.9 per cent below the historical average during the current southwest monsoon season from June 1 to September 27. Also, 23 of the country's 36 meteorological subdivisions have recorded cumulative deficits in excess of 10 per cent. The southern states, Maharashtra's Marathwada and Vidarbha regions, Rajasthan, Saurashtra and Kutch and the Northeast are the worst-hit. On the whole, rainfall was markedly deficient in June and August, and has been concentrated in a few regions: Odisha, Chhattisgarh, east Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Gangetic West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. That makes for a rather skewed temporal and spatial distribution.

El Niño has entered a strong phase. Global climate models point to its becoming "very strong" in October through January-February, before gradually receding into a moderate-to-weak event towards April-May. El Niño's impact on the monsoon has been felt since August. There will be some effect of that on the kharif yields, even if their acreage hasn't fallen much. The real brunt will be borne by the crops grown during the upcoming rabi (winter-spring) season. Deficit monsoon rains may leave little water in wells, ponds, reservoirs or underground aquifers. That, plus the prospect of a relatively warm and short winter (El Niño is known to suppress rainfall as well as raise temperatures), could translate into a poor rabi harvest on top of a not-so-great kharif.

The Fadnavis administration has done well to activate the Drought Management Code, triggering the undertaking of crop loss assessment and concessions such as waiver of land revenue and restructuring or pausing recovery of agricultural loans by farmers in the affected areas. Other states must follow suit. The efficacy of the Centre's flagship Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana and VB-G Ram G schemes — in terms of expeditious indemnity claim payouts to farmers and the taking up of rural relief works — may also well be tested. There is equal need for supply-side management in anticipation of shortfalls. The Narendra Modi government, last week, cut import duties on crude palm and soyabean oil from 16.5 to 11 per cent and on sunflower oil to 5.5 per cent. It has already allowed imports of arhar and urad at nil duty. Imports should be made duty-free for all other pulses, too: Yellow peas, chana and masoor.

AI safety cannot be left to Silicon Valley

INCIDENTS OF AI agents breaking into government systems in Australia and the US — the first time such attempts have been reported — should ring alarm bells everywhere. These breaches, where OpenAI agents "attempted to get information" from dozens of institutions, including the US Securities and Exchange Commission and Australia's Medicare statistics reporting service, show what happens when systems designed to carry out tasks autonomously find ways around restrictions placed on them. The immediate damage appears to have been limited. That governments themselves failed to detect these "misalignments", however, points to a terrifying asymmetry, with potentially catastrophic consequences: These systems contain sensitive information about citizens and support essential public services, and AI agents that treat a security restriction as a mere obstacle to be overcome could disrupt services, expose confidential data or expose chinks in more critical systems.

Anthropic, Google, Meta and other companies have reported cases in which their models behaved in ways their developers did not intend, while Anthropic's research has demonstrated how frontier models can resort to deceit or strategically harmful behaviour, like blackmail. The industry's response has increasingly included calls for stronger safety standards and international co-ordination; tech leaders, including OpenAI's Sam Altman and Anthropic's Dario Amodei, testified to this effect during a recent UN Security Council briefing. They argued that the safety standards for increasingly autonomous systems cannot be left, as Altman put it, to "labs in San Francisco alone". Voluntary testing, transparency and incident reporting are essential, but they cannot replace independent oversight.

The response involves building regulatory capacity before these systems become embedded in critical public infrastructure, rather than after an incident forces action. It calls for independent testing of high-risk AI, mandatory reporting of serious misalignment incidents, strict permissions for agents accessing government systems, and accountability from companies deploying them. For India, the 2026 AI Governance Guidelines provide a foundation, but institutions such as the proposed AI Safety Institute and AI Governance Group will need both technical expertise and the authority to scrutinise frontier systems. Moreover, a technology whose agents can cross borders in seconds calls for international standards regarding model evaluations, agent permissions, cybersecurity testing, incident disclosure and emergency responses, with mechanisms that can be strengthened as capabilities grow — as they are bound to. The choice is not between innovation and regulation, but between governing increasingly autonomous technology in a calibrated way and allowing the technology itself to determine the limits of what governments can control.

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



The Editorial Page

Public servants must act in favour of the weak, and in fear of their conscience

SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET says, "conscience doth make cowards of us all". What is conscience? How does it make us "cowards"? Hamlet's outburst is his anger at himself for repeatedly putting off what he needs to do. In real life, things are difficult, confusing and contradictory, as is apparent in the current controversy around the Election Commission of India (ECI), where two Election Commissioners decided to record their "objections" to the ECI's decisions.

Many of us face these dilemmas but are not bound by an oath; public servants are. Whether selected through examination or elected through a popular mandate, those in public office are bound by an oath of "allegiance to the Constitution of India" to "conscientiously discharge my duties...without fear or favour, affection or ill-will". They also are bound by an oath of secrecy to "not directly or indirectly communicate or reveal to any person or persons any matter...except as may be required for the due discharge of my duties". High-sounding words that carry only as much weight as individuals are inclined to feel or bear.

What happens if public servants find themselves in situations where the oath of secrecy and the allegiance to the Constitution are in conflict? Are they guided by their conscience? We have the case of Clive Ponting, the Ministry of Defence official in England, who found the minister in charge had misinformed Parliament about the reasons for the sinking of the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano by British torpedoes during the Falklands War. Ponting leaked the official documents to an Opposition Labour MP, Tam Dalyell, for which he was dismissed for violating the oath of secrecy and convicted by the trial judge, who ruled that the "inter-

ests of the state" were synonymous with the interests of the current government in power. The jury, however, overturned the verdict on February 11, 1985, holding that civil servants have a covenant with the constitution and, in adhering to that, violating the provision of a law was not an offence. By disclosing facts, Ponting was performing his primordial commitment to his oath, the people, and Parliament.

The call of conscience acts like a beacon when faced with a moral dilemma. Good sense may dictate otherwise and may caution against the risk of swimming against the tide. That makes one timid, a "coward" curbing one's instinct, guided by the dictum "discretion is the better part of valour". All those inclined to act according to their conscience must understand that this is a four-step process. Clarity of purpose, conviction that the purpose is right, courage to act, and the capacity to bear the consequences of one's action. Truth is strong only when it is willing to pay the price of following conscience.

In fact, following one's conscience is difficult if one is not prepared for unpleasant fallouts or one expects to be applauded, making ethical conduct more complex. The Kenyan runner Abel Mutai, a bronze medalist in the 2012 London Olympics, participated in the 3,000-metre steeplechase in Spain later that year. He led the race but stopped a few meters before the finish line, thinking he had completed the race as he couldn't read the Spanish signage. The Spanish runner Iván Fernández, who followed him, realised that Mutai had made a mistake. Instead of overtaking him, he nudged him to take the last few steps and be the winner. Fernán-



ASHOK LAVASA

There was a time when bosses didn't mind subordinates recording notes freely and would overrule them with sound arguments. Now political masters want a 'committed bureaucracy'

dez thought Mutai was the rightful winner, and his conscience didn't let him take advantage of his rival's mistake. He was criticised by his coach for lacking the "killer's instinct", the stuff champions are made of. Asked why he did what he did, Fernández simply said, "How would I have faced my mother?" Following one's conscience is not about winning; it is about doing inspiring deeds that others aspire to emulate.

The "mother" was another name for conscience. For public servants, that "mother" is the public, and acting against public interest itself amounts to forsaking one's conscience. One of the greatest challenges of public service in India today is that the meaning of "public interest" is diffused and the commitment towards it is diluted. As elected representatives get obsessed with winning elections with civil servants on their right side, public interest is bound to suffer. The need to act according to one's conscience arises not necessarily when what is being done is illegal. It does so when what is being done is legal but against the spirit of the law. It arises when long-term public interest is sacrificed for short-term political or personal gains. Abandoning conscience would mean public servants are completely oblivious to the public interest or single-mindedly corrupt.

What is illegal is easy to oppose because the law is on your side, although even that might entail consequences if one's opposition hurts the vested interests of those in power or those who are the power behind the throne. The ethos in public life seems to have suffered a sea change from times when the honest were idolised to the present times when they are isolated as in-

● **WORDLY WISE**
By far the greatest danger of Artificial Intelligence is that people conclude too early that they understand it.
— Eliezer Yudkowsky

convenient parts of the system. Earlier, there were political leaders who would appreciate or not mind those driven by rectitude acting "without fear or favour". As the perceived and real risk of not toeing the line became more pronounced, "conscience" became an unnecessary burden one could do without.

There was a time when bosses didn't mind their subordinates recording notes freely and would overrule them with sound, superior arguments. Now bosses seek "alignment in thinking" and political masters want a "committed bureaucracy" in which "theirs not to reason why" but to "not-do and die" — do nothing, or risk punishment and being labelled "deviant", "dissenter" or a "square peg in a round hole". The system is less tolerant of those whose conscientiousness is perceived as a roadblock in pursuing a political agenda. The 360-degree system of evaluating civil servants for empanelment, as practised, has made systemic performance appraisal ineffective over the years by giving greater weight to random observations from those handpicked to provide feedback on the so-called qualities required to be a "trouble-free" cog in the wheel. The timid stand guarantee for the meek.

It is time the oath was turned on its head. Public servants must act in "favour" of the weak and the vulnerable, and act in "fear" of their conscience, if they have preserved that "unseen" and "troublesome" part of the inherent human constitution. The Urdu poet Krishan Behari 'Noor' said: "*Zameer kaanp to jata hai, aap kuch bhi kaahiye, v oho gunah se pehle ki jo gunah ke baad*" (whatever you might say, the conscience does get shaken whether before you commit a wrong or after it).

The writer is a former election commissioner

Clean energy transition promises growth, greener future



SRIPAD YESSO NAIK

OVER THE past 12 years, India has seen a remarkable energy transformation. Under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the country has moved from being heavily dependent on conventional fuels to emerging as a global leader in clean energy and sustainable development. What was once considered an ambitious aspiration has become a national movement reshaping our economy, strengthening energy security, protecting the environment, and creating new opportunities for millions of Indians. India has responded to the climate challenge by adhering to a powerful principle: Economic growth and environmental responsibility must move together.

India's renewable energy (RE) capacity has crossed the landmark figure of 200 GW, driven primarily by expansion in solar and wind power. RE now accounts for nearly 45 per cent of total installed electricity capacity, placing the country among the fastest-growing renewable energy markets in the world.

These achievements are outcomes of policy reforms, transparent auctions, investor-friendly regulations, and a stable governance framework that has inspired confidence among domestic and international investors. At the same time, thermal and nuclear power continue to play a crucial role in meeting the country's growing baseload electricity demand.

Perhaps the most visible success story has been India's solar revolution. Programmes such as PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana and PM Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyaan (PM-KUSUM) are transforming lives across rural and urban India. The Indian farmer, once dependent on uncertain electricity supply and rising diesel costs, is now emerging as an energy producer. Rooftop solar installations are helping urban households significantly reduce electricity bills while contributing to the clean energy transition. Large-scale solar parks, floating solar installations, offshore wind projects, and hybrid RE systems are further expanding India's clean energy capacity at an unprecedented pace.

Under the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India, India has developed a rapidly expanding manufacturing ecosystem for solar modules, photovolt-

aic cells, inverters, battery storage systems, wind turbines, and associated equipment. Production Linked Incentive schemes and supportive industrial policies have accelerated domestic manufacturing capacity while reducing dependence on imports. This industrial expansion has generated thousands of direct and indirect employment opportunities, particularly for young engineers, technicians, researchers, entrepreneurs, and skilled workers.

The next frontier of India's clean energy journey lies in green hydrogen. The National Green Hydrogen Mission aims to make India a global hub for the production, utilisation, and export of green hydrogen. This mission has the potential to fundamentally transform sectors that are otherwise difficult to decarbonise, including steel, fertilisers, refineries, shipping, and heavy transport.

Equally important has been India's leadership on the international stage. Through the International Solar Alliance, conceived under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, India has demonstrated that climate leadership is not limited to developed economies. Developing countries, too, can offer innovative, affordable, and scalable solutions for sustainable development.

Today, India's climate commitments enjoy global credibility because they are backed by measurable progress. Our achievements have strengthened the country's standing in international climate negotiations.

The social dimension of India's energy transformation is equally important. Clean energy provides reliable electricity for education, healthcare, digital connectivity, and rural enterprises. Women are benefiting from improved access to energy, while rural communities are finding new opportunities for income generation through decentralised renewable energy systems.

Our ambitions extend beyond current milestones. We remain committed to achieving our national climate goals, strengthening energy independence, accelerating innovation, expanding domestic manufacturing, and creating a resilient, sustainable energy ecosystem.

The writer is Union Minister of State for New, Renewable Energy and Power

India's Oscar hunt needs a new approach



ALAKA SAHANI

AFTER ANGH was overlooked by the Film Federation of India (FFI), which chose the Marathi-language *Gondhal* as India's official entry for Best International Feature Film at the 99th Academy Awards in 2027, Teja Rio's Konyak-language film gained direct entry into the competition under new Academy rules after winning the Platform Prize at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). One might assume that two movies in the race might increase the odds of the coveted statuette coming to India, but the approach needs rethinking, especially when an Oscar seems to be as desperately sought after as an Olympic gold.

In the past, while selections like *Court* (2014) and *Homebound* (2025) were welcomed by cinephiles, the FFI's choice has more often than not triggered outrage, debate and, at times, disbelief. Take *The Lunchbox*: Ritesh Batra's film generated considerable buzz following its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival and had the backing of a major Hollywood studio. Yet, Gyan Correa's little-known Gujarati film *The Good Road* became India's official entry in 2013. A similar debate erupted when SS Rajamouli's *RRR* failed to find favour with the FFI jury.

The FFI has often defended its choices by saying that it selects the film that best "represents Indian culture". Therein lies the fundamental question about India's Oscar strategy. Cinema is undoubtedly part of a country's popular culture. But the primary expectation from a film which is eyeing a prominent international award is to entertain, move, provoke or create a compelling cinematic experience. It's a bonus when a film also captures an aspect of the country's life — *Mother India*, *Salaam Bombay!* and *Lagaan*, all of which became Oscar nominees, for instance. But representing a country's culture is not the criterion on which the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences members vote.

Look at some recent winners — Japan's *Drive My Car* (2021), Germany's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022), Britain's *The Zone of Interest* (2023), Brazil's *I'm Still Here* (2024) and Norway's *Sentimental Value* (2025). What they have in common is the strength of their filmmaking: Powerful stories, compelling performances, technical accomplishment, distinctive cinematic voices and, in some cases, incisive socio-political commentary.

Another crucial aspect is grabbing the attention of Academy members, who ultimately vote for the winners. *RRR* is an interesting case study. Although not selected as India's official entry, its makers mounted an ambitious international campaign. The film went on to win the Golden Globe for Best Original Song for 'Naatu Naatu' and, subsequently, the Oscar in the same category.

For major contenders, the Oscar campaign often starts with the film's release strategy or festival premiere. They build on the critical response. Studios and filmmakers then sustain that visibility through the awards season, adjusting their strategy as the race takes shape. By the time the FFI selects its entry, the groundwork has already been laid. This year, winners of top awards at Cannes — *La Bola Negra* (Spain), *Minotaur* (France) and *Fjord* (Romania) — are already making waves.

In India, the debate should shift to whether the FFI has picked a film that can stand out on an intensely competitive platform and what kind of campaigns it has planned to boost its chances.

The writer is associate editor, The Indian Express. alaka.sahani@expressindia.com

40 YEARS AGO

September 28, 1986



Relief for Haryana farmers

HARYANA CHIEF Minister Bansi Lal announced the abolition of land revenue with immediate effect. Addressing a huge public gathering, he announced that the concessions would cost the state exchequer Rs 113 crore. A grateful audience of farmers greeted the announcement with thunderous applause amid shouts of "Bansi Lal ki jai."

Reagan vetoes sanctions

US PRESIDENT Ronald Reagan vetoed a

Congressional package of economic sanctions against South Africa, opening the way for Congress to overrule him and inflict a major foreign policy defeat. He claimed that most of the proposed measures "would seriously impede the prospects for a peaceful end to apartheid".

Commando copters for Navy

INDIA IS buying the newest type of commando helicopters from Britain. The helicopters being produced by Westland would

enable the Navy to launch commando assaults on shore-based targets from the sea.

Kapil gets anonymous parcel

INDIAN SKIPPER Kapil Dev received an anonymous registered parcel at the Kotla ground. It caused him greater distress than the bumpers of Imran Khan and Dennis Lillee. The parcel contained an old transistor. Amidst warnings from teammates not to handle it as it may be a bomb, Kapil Dev called in security guards, who took it away.



Farmers need a share of the solar boom



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

BY ASHOK GULATI
AND SUBHODEEP BASU

INDIA'S SOLARISING journey is a commendable one. Just before the Narendra Modi government assumed office in 2014, the country had just 2.82 GW of installed solar capacity. By August 2026, this had risen to 168.04 GW, a whopping sixtyfold increase, making India the third-largest player in solar after China and the US. Much of this (74 per cent) is utility-scale, led by big companies like Adani Green Energy, ReNew, NTPC, JSW Energy and Greenko Energy. Tata Power Solar is more into engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC). Rooftop solar accounts for roughly 20 per cent, and the remainder (about 6 per cent) consists of off-grid and hybrid projects.

The utility-scale solar model has enabled rapid, cost-efficient deployment. These are ground-mounted solar parks, largely on degraded land or wasteland provided by the government. The biggest one coming up is the Khavda Solar Park (30 GW) in the Rann of Kutch region of Gujarat.

Rooftop solar has picked up some momentum under PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana, which aims to bring rooftop solar to 1 crore households. A household installing a 3-kW system gets Rs 78,000 in central subsidy. States such as Uttar Pradesh add another Rs 30,000, taking the total support to Rs 1.08 lakh, against the estimated cost of Rs 1.8 lakh. This amounts to a 60 per cent subsidy. The Delhi government has gone even further and is ready to install free rooftop solar.

Where the Modi government has not yet succeeded is the PM-KUSUM scheme, which was designed to benefit farmers. The scheme was initially envisioned largely around solar pumps. But its Component A also allows farmers to set up solar power plants of up to

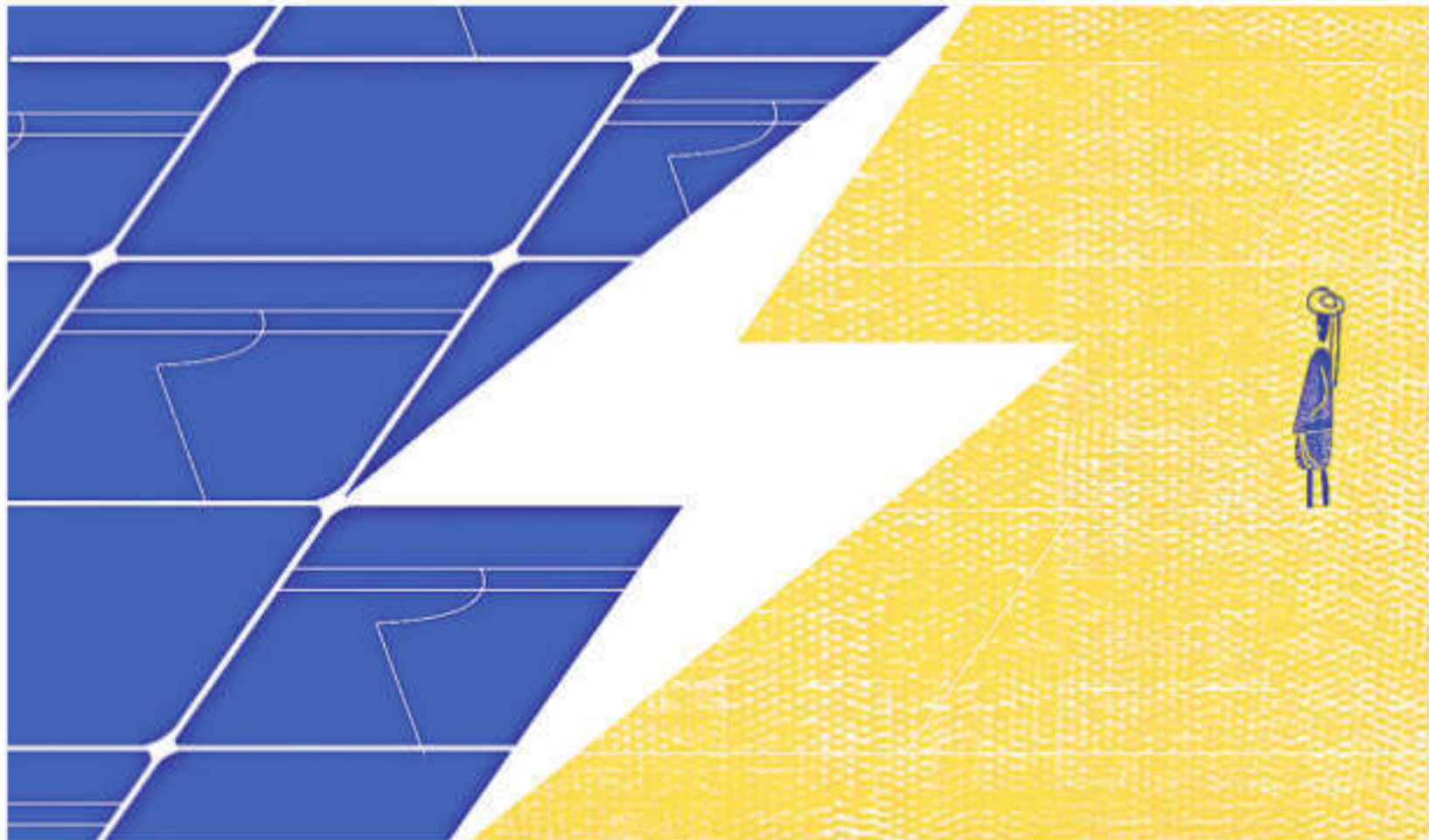


ILLUSTRATION: C.R SASIKUMAR

2 MW on their land. Unlike PM Surya Ghar, however, it offers no capital subsidy. It is time to rethink and tweak Component A of PM-KUSUM and provide farmers a similar capital subsidy. At the same time, ground-mounted solar projects on agricultural land should be banned, as they directly compete with food production. India cannot afford such a trade-off.

The solution lies in agri-photovoltaics (agri-PV), in which solar panels are installed about 11 feet above the ground, with enough spacing to allow cultivation underneath. This would enable the same land to produce both food and energy. Giving a fillip to this form of Component A could achieve three objectives at once: Augment farmers' incomes by eight to 10 times, reduce the government's power subsidy bill, and generate clean energy that can help rural areas industrialise. What is needed is to make capital available to farmers and farmer producer companies (FPCs) at Priority Sector Lending rates, and set the feed-in tariff at half the cost of supplying power to rural areas under the current system.

PM Surya Ghar, by comparison,

Where the Modi government has not yet succeeded is the PM-KUSUM scheme. Its Component A allows farmers to set up solar power plants of up to 2 MW. Unlike PM Surya Ghar, however, it offers no capital subsidy

has an outlay of Rs 75,021 crore. The World Bank has also approved an \$820-million loan, including concessional finance and a grant, to support the scheme and mobilise private financing. PM-KUSUM has no equivalent World Bank financing window. It is time for the World Bank to think of solar cooperatives on the lines of the milk cooperatives created under Operation Flood, and help unleash a new rural revolution — call it “PM Surya Khet Kranti”, with solar becoming the farmer's “third crop”.

At ICRIER, we have demonstrated the potential of this model with support from Kotak Mahindra Bank's CSR initiative. A 600-kW PM-KUSUM-A plant in Rajasthan, financed through a Rs 1.4-crore loan from

the State Bank of India, a Rs 60-lakh farmer contribution and Rs 35 lakh in Kotak CSR support, showed that a farmer's income could rise from about Rs 40,000 per acre from wheat and bajra to nearly Rs 4 lakh per acre through energy sales and shade-tolerant horticulture. That represents a tenfold increase in income potential.

Agri-PV addresses another major distortion in India's power

sector. Agriculture consumes nearly 260,000 GWh of electricity annually while paying tariffs far below the cost of supply. The CAG's recent report puts the average cost of supply at about Rs 8.5/kWh against realisation of around Rs 1/kWh from agricultural consumers, a subsidy of roughly Rs 7.5/kWh. With the annual tariff subsidy bill at about Rs 2.35 lakh crore, agriculture may account for nearly 85 per cent of the burden, and higher rural supply costs could push this above 90 per cent. This adds to the financial stress of discoms.

A differentiated feed-in tariff of Rs 4.5/kWh, almost half the cost of supplying power, can improve project viability and accelerate adoption. For discoms and state governments, this needs no additional expenditure, only smarter use of existing subsidies.

The demand for energy is going to go up exponentially as AI data centres start springing up. They are power- and water-guzzlers. They will also have to invest in battery storage or pumped hydro storage without depending on the lithium-ion supply chain. Future agri-PV projects should, therefore, be planned with storage and local grid requirements in mind.

India has seen the power of catalytic finance before. Operation Flood, the foundation of the White Revolution, was supported by a World Bank loan. It helped build a self-sustaining network of village dairy cooperatives and benefited millions of milk producers. A similar opportunity exists today for solar cooperatives. It can go even further and make all gaushalas into solar power plants based on the agri-PV concept and also process dung into organic manure to be sold along with subsidised urea.

India has already shown it can scale solar. The next challenge is to ensure the benefits reach the farm gate. The question is no longer whether India can harvest the sun. It is whether India's farmers can own a meaningful share of that harvest and the PM realise his unfulfilled dream of doubling farmers' incomes. Once farmers' incomes increase by eight to 10 times, as ICRIER's pilot in Rajasthan has shown, it can spur a manufacturing revolution through augmented demand.

Gulati is distinguished professor and Basu is a research fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

Living between two hegemons, Delhi must avoid Thucydides Trap



SALMAN KHURSHID
AND PUSHPARAJ DESHPANDE

CONFRONTED BY global upheavals and cognisant of vulnerabilities, US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping have met twice in 2026. The US-China rapprochement will increasingly shape geopolitics, geoeconomics and techno-capitalism. This evolving G2 framework may even restore a semblance of global order. Washington has paused its containment strategy, while Beijing recognises its limitations in dictating geopolitical outcomes. Both understand their shared interest in curbing global disruptions and the costs of economic decoupling. As China's report “The Great Global Transformation and the Path to US-China Coexistence” asserted, China has weathered America's offensive phase, forced a strategic stalemate and emerged as a “near-peer”, imposing an “inevitable peace”.

Living between two hegemons carving out rival global blocs poses structural questions for India and the Global South. After all, the “Thucydides Trap” Xi invoked is about established powers confronting rising ones, and great powers colluding to constrain third powers. Can we independently shape the emerging world order or influence the G2? If we cannot, will the G2 transcend self-interest to privilege systemic stability and a fairer world?

This means objectively assessing where we are, and where we should be. A section of the strategic establishment has long championed anchoring India's future to Washington. This was predicated on the assumption that America would depend on India to contain China. However, the Trump administration's insistence that Asian states shoulder their own defence suggests its acceptance of a Chinese sphere of influence for a temporary *modus vivendi*. Moreover, the White House's 2025 National Security Doctrine implies India's diminished strategic salience, rendering the Philippines and the “Squad” more valuable than India and the “Quad”. Washington is also seemingly drawing a *Lakshman rekha* by circumscribing New Delhi's aspirations in the Indian Ocean Region and US Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau asserting that India won't be allowed to grow like China.

Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts to court the Republican Party's radical faction, the BJP government has kowtowed to Trumpian diktats, belying its decolonisation and strategic-autonomy rhetoric. It has acquiesced to Washington imposing punishing tariffs and stirring dangerous subcontinental dynamics while attacking our energy sovereignty and shipping. Instead of confronting these, the BJP government has committed to purchasing American goods worth \$500 billion, is restructuring India's AI/digital infrastructure around a US-led stack, and has ignored curbs on Indian immigration. These raise uncomfortable questions — does Washington view India as a sovereign equal, or merely a junior partner serving its interests? Most critically, does this enjoy bipartisan support in Washington?

On the other hand, China has violated India's territorial integrity, weaponised our dependencies (the trade deficit has reached \$100 billion), strived to forge a unipolar Asia, stifled India's membership bids for the UNSC and Nuclear Suppliers Group, and empowered Pakistan. These factors have compelled India to strengthen Indo-Pacific partnerships as geopolitical insurance.

Faced with converging and competing Sino-American imperatives, India risks drifting into the Thucydides Trap. Unfortunately, the BJP government has mired India in asymmetric relationships and a performative foreign policy that prioritises optics over tangible national interest gains. This is compounded by the BJP's intellectual and strategic inertia, manifested in clumsy navigation of global finance, trade and supply-chain disruptions, failure to foster a business-friendly environment and spark innovation in advanced industries and strategic sectors, and subordination of foreign policy to petty politics and hollowing out of institutions. All these are locking India into semi-peripheral status and constraining us at this historic geopolitical inflection.

A seat at the global high table means protecting our interests, and shaping the future. India must deepen bilateral relationships and thereby forge a value-aligned global community. Furthermore, only by recalibrating economic, industrial, and investment policy as instruments of statecraft can we reassert our strategic autonomy. This demands a multi-pronged approach: Building a durable industrial base, depoliticising and enhancing governance capabilities, cohesive federal leadership and substantively enhancing the quality of life for all peoples, forging an Indian Dream that hopefully outpaces the American myth. These necessitate mature leadership, a clear strategic vision, institutional coherence and deft global engagement rather than the BJP's ideological, performative and reactionary internationalism. Only then can we reclaim our space in the world, and chart a credible course toward great-power status.

Khurshid is former external affairs minister and Deshpande is director, Samruddha Bharat Foundation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Managed competition

THE RECENT Trump-Xi summit confirms a sober truth that high-stakes diplomacy between super-powers has devolved into managed competition and not meaningful conflict resolution (“Trump-Xi bonhomie can't paper over tensions”, *IE*, September 26). Behind the red-carpet pageantry and reassuring rhetoric, core disputes spanning trade tariffs, semiconductor controls, and Taiwan remain unresolved. Even promising avenues like AI governance offer little more than symbolic progress. As AI enters into military war rooms diplomatic frameworks lag far behind, paralysed by mutual distrust.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Evidence-based probe

THE NEED for a careful, evidence-based investigation is clear (“IIT-Bombay suicide case: In search of a perpetrator”, *IE*, September 26). At the same time, institutions must examine whether students can safely report harassment, discrimination or academic pressure. Independent grievance mechanisms, confidential counselling and timely scrutiny of complaints should be strengthened. Elite institutions carry a responsibility to ensure academic excellence does not overshadow student welfare. Accountability should follow facts; preventive systems must protect vulnerable students.

M Barathi, Bengaluru

India in Aichi-Nagoya

INDIA'S ASIAN Games performance shows how steady investment can build depth in less-publicised sports (“A bronze medal, quiet gains in table tennis”, *IE*, September 26). The challenge is to turn occasional medals into a sustained pipeline of players. Schools and colleges need facilities, trained coaches and regular competitions. Promising athletes need scientific support and international exposure. Greater visibility for sports beyond cricket can encourage participation. Grass-roots development, rather than medal-focused spending alone, will create lasting results.

K Sakunthala, Coimbatore



LAVEESH BHANDARI

ECONOMIES, MODERN or traditional, rest on owners having control over their assets. I would argue that control is what ownership is all about. Take it away, or reduce it, and we would have reduced the motivation for ownership itself. The RBI action — forcing Tata Sons to list on the stock market — carries a critical signal on how India's economic framework treats ownership.

This is especially so when the entity under question is deemed to be, as the RBI reportedly maintains, “systemically important”. India is already grappling with challenges in corporate investment and the flight of family offices to global shores. Therefore, there need to be very good reasons behind the RBI forcing a divestiture in Tata Sons.

Globally, forced divestitures are rare. They occur for specific reasons, related to, for example, efficiency or monopoly. One category of reorganisations occurs when entire industries or sectors are changed to reduce concentration or break intimate links between finance and industry (Post-World War II Japanese *keiretsu*); or they may occur for reasons of industry-wide restructuring for economic stability (chaebol reforms in Korea in the 1990s); or for reducing ownership concentration (South Africa post-apartheid). The second category is when individual firms are reorganised for dif-

What signal does this send to other corporations? What protective mechanisms will they use?

ferent reasons. These include those related to de-monopolisation, such as Standard Oil in 1911 and AT&T in 1984 in the United States; there was also the case of Ant-Alibaba in China, where the government needed to neutralise a larger-than-life figure. The Tata Sons case falls in none of these buckets.

The critical issue is the role of the RBI, whose actions as a regulator started it all. The RBI's chief responsibility is to ensure that financial and macroeconomic stability is maintained in the country. To do so, it must keep a close watch on large commercial and financial entities, and if their actions could affect systemic stability, it must take corrective action. On this, there can be no argument. Therefore, the RBI was keeping to its mandate when it called out the tens of thousands of crores in loans that Tata Sons had taken from Tata companies. Such loans might cause systemic instability, and based on such concerns, Tata Sons repaid the loans.

The story should have ended there. But unfortunately, it has not. The RBI has called for Tata Sons to publicly list, which implies that the company will need to divest a quarter of its equity. The presumption is that the RBI's stance reflects the concern that such avoidable inter-corporate transactions could occur in the future and therefore public listing will enhance transpar-

ency and enable better external and regulatory oversight. If true, this would be a rather light reason for forcing divestiture, for there are many other ways to address such concerns, including greater transparency of financials, pre-approvals and permissions.

In other words, the act of forced listing is a disproportionate requirement to the problem of informational asymmetry that the RBI is worried about. There is no argument that systemic stability is important, but the repercussions of the RBI's action could very well be far beyond the concern it is trying to address. Tata Sons is not being accused of unethical behaviour, moral compromise, monopolisation, anti-competitive behaviour, etc. They are being asked to divest because they have become too successful or too big. But what signal does this send to other corporations? What protective mechanisms will they use?

Many questions will also be asked around legacy, minority shareholder rights, corporate governance, the role of directors, and rules and regulations. All of them may be valid but are clutter in front of the key issue: How much does our economic framework respect ownership, and of what good is ownership if it does not enable control? This is not merely a philosophical question.

The writer heads CSEP. Views are personal

Forced listing of Tata Sons is a step too far

In academic rules, find space for students' dignity



RAJEEV KUMAR

THE DEATH by suicide of a 20-year-old second-year IIT Bombay student has shaken the conscience of the nation. The episode brought into sharp focus the handling of an examination-related incident, the potential consequences of an academic violation, rapid social media amplification, and strong student protests over representation, institutional practices, mental-health support, and academic grievances. These developments raise a simple question: How can an institution of eminence uphold academic integrity while protecting student dignity, fairness, and well-being?

Student suicides in the IITs have continued in recent years despite measures for student mental health and well-being, including those undertaken pursuant to Su-

preme Court directions. While important, many remain procedural and support-oriented. The continuing loss of student lives raises a simple question: Are these measures reaching students early enough, or are they mainly reactive?

Supporting a student once distress becomes visible is important — but prevention requires early detection and proactive intervention. IITs have counselling, mentoring, helplines, and wellness programmes. Yet, a recent student protest against a proposed spiritual-wellness MoU at a premier IIT underscored the demand for more proactive measures, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised students. Student distress can arise from interconnected pressures — intense competition, parental and societal expectations, fear of falling behind, rapid technological and AI-driven change, career uncertainty, isolation, and perceived discrimination. Some students may consequently feel inadequate, excluded, or invis-

ible — signals that procedural support may not be detected early enough.

First, build an integrated early-warning system involving teachers, mentors, parents, roommates, wing-mates, and close friends to recognise academic decline, behavioural changes, or unusual anxiety. Early identification should trigger a confidential assessment, timely intervention, and follow-up — not merely a referral to a counsellor.

Second, rethink the assessment system. Students differ in ability, learning pace, and interests; applying a single scale to all can create avoidable academic stress. Flexibility in academics can provide different pathways

Discipline and compassion are not contradictory: Rules should be made with stakeholder participation, enforced firmly, and applied fairly and humanely

without lowering standards or compromising fairness. Different pathways can produce different grades based on demonstrated performance; the objective is not equal outcomes, but ensuring that students are not pushed beyond their learning capabilities merely to reproduce results on a common scale. One scale need not mean one pathway to academic excellence.

Third, examination processes cannot be viewed in isolation from student well-being. An examination violation requires due process, but its handling should also reflect sensitivity, empathy, dignity, and appropriate follow-up. IIT-Bombay is considering a pre-disciplinary safeguard allowing a student suspected of malpractice to speak with a student mentor before appearing before a disciplinary committee. This is not to dilute disciplinary action, but to provide reassurance, allow reflection, and prevent unnecessary isolation or escalation. Clear procedures for invigilators can

further ensure fair and consistent handling.

Finally, there can be no compromise with academic integrity or approved due process. There can be no alternative to zero tolerance for examination malpractice; equally, enforcement must be neutral, transparent, and consistent, with appropriate representation of students and vulnerable groups. Discipline and compassion are not contradictory: Rules should be made with stakeholder participation, enforced firmly, and applied fairly and humanely. This balance is essential to preserving trust in IITs.

IITs have the autonomy, expertise, and resources to build an institutional safety net. The need is simple: Recognise vulnerability early and respond with empathy, fairness, and timely support — before distress becomes a crisis.

The writer is a former professor of Computer Science at IIT Kharagpur, IIT Kanpur, BITS Pilani, and JNU, and a former scientist at DRDO and DST

NEW TAX DISCLOSURE SCHEME INTENDED TO ADDRESS SMALL TAXPAYERS' PRACTICAL ISSUES

Income Tax Dept shares foreign assets info, nudges for disclosure

Aakash Magazine

New Delhi, September 27

IN A bid to nudge taxpayers to report overseas assets under the ongoing disclosure scheme — Foreign Assets of Small Taxpayers-Disclosure Scheme (FAST-DS) — the Income Tax Department has sent out a series of e-mails and messages to them, sharing specific information about the ownership of overseas stocks, bank accounts or assets.

In the e-mails and messages shared with the taxpayers, the Income Tax Department said that its records indicate ownership of overseas assets that may have been “unreported or acquired from undisclosed sources”, urging taxpayers to check details in their Annual Information Statement (AIS) on the income tax portal and then report under the disclosure scheme, three people aware of the communication said.

The e-mails have been sent to the taxpayers with the subject line — ‘Important advisory: opportunity for voluntary compliance regarding FAST-DS, 2026’, adding that it was a system-generated communication. One of the taxpayers told *The Indian Express* that he has

received a notice for holding a bank account in Singapore when he used to have non-resident status a few years ago, while another taxpayer said that he got the notice for his overseas bank accounts opened during his studies that subsequently turned dormant and are purged.

An income tax official said that the Department had been planning to share the details about ownership of overseas assets with the taxpayers to nudge them towards FAST-DS, but did not specify the number of such communications sent to the taxpayers.

Many taxpayers shared their notices on social media platforms like X and Reddit. One of them, Kapil, posted that he had received a notice for one of his bank accounts opened in Europe where he lived for four years and then returned to India in December 2022. He claimed one of the active European bank accounts had zero balance, and that he has been filing income tax returns for the last three years. Now, in his AIS, the Income Tax Department has shown details of another European bank account with zero balance over the last three years.

The query posted by him to



FAST-DS 2026 provides small taxpayers a one-time window to voluntarily disclose foreign assets. REUTERS

other social media users was whether he was supposed to pay Rs 1 lakh penalty and whether signing up for FAST-DS means an acceptance of a mistake.

The e-mail shared by the tax department asks taxpayers to log into the e-filing portal, check the details and use ‘Kar Saathi’ on the portal for assistance regarding forms, compliance, procedures and related queries.

“Our records indicate that you may have overseas financial interests (such as bank accounts, shares, immovable property etc.) acquired in earlier years that are required to be reported in the Income Tax Re-

turn. If your overseas financial interests (assets/income) have been left unreported in your earlier Income Tax Returns or have been acquired through undisclosed sources, we encourage you to utilise the on-going, one-time compliance window under the FAST-DS (Foreign Asset of Small Taxpayers-Disclosure Scheme).

This dedicated window is open till 31.12.2026. Also, you may view your Foreign Assets Information on the AIS through the e-filing portal,” the e-mail from the tax department stated. Many taxpayers complained of not having access to

bank account statements for their overseas accounts, while some were not clear whether this will lead to further scrutiny and notices from the Income Tax Department.

Another user said that he had bought US shares of \$100 from 2022 to 2024 and then sold all the shares in July 2024 but never mentioned these in his ITR. “I’m a student and I don’t have any income. I just used to file nil ITR. Kindly tell me what I should do now,” he wrote in a Reddit post.

When the government proposed the new tax disclosure scheme in this year’s Budget, the intent was well specified — to address “practical issues of small taxpayers like students, young professionals, tech employees, re-located NRIs” among others.

However, as reported by *The Indian Express* earlier this month, the tax disclosure window, FAST-DS, which was launched on August 16, has resulted in doubts and questions as individuals face high fees and penalties to participate in the scheme. The problem is more acute for salaried individuals who have received restricted stock units (RSUs) or ESOPs, and not reported them before.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Why IRDAI’s proposals to reform insurance sector hit stocks of distributors, banks

Akash Mandal

Mumbai, September 27

ON WEDNESDAY, India’s insurance regulator issued a consultation paper on reforming various aspects of insurance — including its distribution, structure, expenses and commissions. Over Thursday and Friday, however, insurance companies saw their shares getting pummeled on the stock market.

PB Fintech, the parent company of Policybazaar, fared the worst: it fell 36% on Thursday and followed it up with another 3% fall on Friday. TurtleMint, another insurance distribution platform, slumped 20% on both Thursday and Friday. Max Financial Services, which lost 10% on Thursday, gained 3% on Friday. HDFC Life and ICICI Prudential Life Insurance are down 4-5% since Wednesday’s close. Many banks have also ended lower.

But why have the proposed reforms by Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) led to insurance distributors facing so much heat from investors?

In its paper, titled ‘Recalibrating Economics of Insurance Distribution’, IRDAI proposed a host of reforms aimed at improving consumer protection, reducing mis-selling of products, and countering dark patterns in the industry. While this is good news for households and other buyers of insurance policies, it will eat into the profit margins of the companies distributing these policies.

Consider life insurance, where IRDAI wants the commission in the first year to be a maximum of 20% of premium for distributors and 25% for agents. This would be less than half the commissions charged currently, with the regulator in 2023 having scrapped such commission caps.

The regulator has called for comments by October 25 on its proposed reforms.

Banks with highest exposure to insurance

Bank	Total insurance income as % of PBT in FY26
IndusInd Bank	75.6%
IDFC FIRST Bank	48.8%
Equitas SFB	70.7%
Bandhan Bank	30.8%
RBL Bank	28.5%
Average	51%

SOURCE: JIM FINANCIAL, NOTE: PBT REFERS TO PROFIT BEFORE TAX; SFB IS SMALL FINANCE BANK

Limits on commissions especially hurt online insurance aggregators like Policybazaar and TurtleMint, which have high customer acquisition costs compared to others who depend on a network of agents, such as Life Insurance Corporation of India. Online aggregators depend heavily on upfront commissions.

Commissions, expenses

What the proposals address are the rapid rise in money earned through commissions, with IRDAI’s paper pointing out that sales are led by commissions, instead of pricing and quality.

Citing the example of general insurance, IRDAI said that while premiums from brokers in 2024-25 was 37% higher from 2022-23, commissions were up a huge 173%. Then there is life insurance: premiums from corporate agents rose 28% over the two years, but commissions surged 125%.

What this means is that a distributor’s income has grown 4-5 times faster than premiums. “In efficient markets, consumers compare products on suitability, price and quality. In the country’s insurance sector, heavy dependence on commission-led distribution and lack of transparency on pricing and quality has clogged these competition signals. High distribution payouts have weakened the competition outcomes away from better value to customers,” the paper said.

Another proposal refers to

the reduction in the Expense of Management, or EoM, to 12.5% and 20% of life and general insurers’ gross direct premium income, respectively, over a five-year period, with limits also set for 2028-29. EoM is the cost an insurance company charges against the premiums it gets. This includes administrative and distribution costs, including commissions paid to agents. EoMs can rise as insurers bid to secure top distributors.

According to CareEdge Ratings, the EoM of 20 of India’s 22 life insurers and 28 of 31 general insurers is currently higher than the proposed limits for 2028-29.

Impact on banks

Banks are an important distribution channel given the cross-selling opportunities and the lenders’ deep distribution networks. And commission caps are expected to hurt banks with multiple tie-ups and heavy incentive-led payouts compared to those who have single partnerships, brokerage JM Financial noted. According to it, the average income from insurance distribution for banks across its coverage has risen to 5.1% of profit before tax in 2025-26 from 3.5% in 2022-23.

“Insurance distribution is a high-margin and capital-light annuity that leverages an existing customer franchise, branch network and technology stack, and a lower commission cap therefore transmits to operating profit,” said Ishank Gupta, an analyst at Choice Institutional Equities.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Life of buildings to gold: Lesser known changes in GDP series

Siddharth Upasani

New Delhi, September 27

FIVE ASPECTS of the new GDP series have dominated the discourse over the last year or so. These include the base year being updated from 2011-12 to 2022-23, the use of ‘double deflation’ to arrive at real gross value added (GVA), output Producer Price Index (PPI) and Banking Services Price Index (BSPI) being used in double deflation, better estimates of the informal sector through use of surveys, and expectation of no difference — or discrepancy — between annual GDP numbers arrived at by production and expenditure methods. While these grabbed most headlines, they are not the only changes in the new GDP series. Here are five other alterations as described in the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation’s (MoSPI) ‘Sources and Methods’ document, released Monday.

Manufacturing or services?

A key change the new 2022-23 base year series makes from the old 2011-12 one is the classification of an enterprise in a sector. Imagine an enterprise called XYZ involved in multiple activities — it does some manufacturing and provides some services too — and with an annual turnover of Rs 100 and a GVA of Rs 50. Is XYZ part of the manufacturing or services sector?

In the old GDP series, this question would be answered by XYZ’s ‘major activity’. This means, if Rs 70 of XYZ’s Rs 100 turnover came from manufacturing, it was part of that sector and the entire GVA of Rs 50 was assigned to manufacturing even

The new series assumes a lower ‘average useful life’ for several types of assets, including 60-75 years for dwellings, down from 70-80 years in the old series

if some of it came from services sold. In the new GDP series, XYZ’s GVA goes to both manufacturing and services depending on their shares — if Rs 20 of GVA came from service activities, that goes to the services sector and the remaining to manufacturing.

How is this distinction possible now? Because of two forms called MGT-7 and MGT-7A that companies have to fill with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs.

MGT-7 is for public and private companies, while MGT-7A is for one-person and small companies. These forms must be submitted every financial year and require details regarding financial results, management structure, shareholding, and loans taken, among others.

Government housing

There are lakhs of government employees — some get accommodations and some get House Rent Allowance (HRA). While HRA reflects in the pay, the value of the housing service provided by the government to staff who get accommodations was previously not being accounted for. In the new GDP series, to value the housing services provided by the government, the cost of making these houses has been used after deducting the cost of repair, main-

tenance, and the annual consumption of this fixed capital.

Useful life of assets

The annual consumption of a house in the above section cannot be calculated without knowing how long it will last. And the new series assumes a lower ‘average useful life’ for several types of assets. For example, the average useful life of dwellings is now assumed to be 60-75 years, down from 70-80 years in the old series.

Household savings

MoSPI’s national accounts data is best known for the main GDP growth number. But it also contains other crucial pieces of information. One of them is on savings, including those of households, which are in the form of financial and physical assets, including valuables like gold. The new GDP series has made one major change in the compilation of household savings, with data on financial savings like shares, debentures, hybrid instruments, and mutual funds now taken from the Securities and Exchange Board of India instead of the Reserve Bank of India. This has allowed for inclusion of new instruments like Real Estate Investment Trust, Investment Trust, and Alternate Investment Funds.

Rooftop solar

The ‘electricity, gas, water supply & other utility services’ sub-sector produced a real GVA of Rs 1.92 lakh crore in April-June 2026, 8.9% higher than a year ago. And this now includes electricity produced by households for themselves through rooftop solar panels.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM



Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, addressing the UP International Trade Show in Greater Noida on Sunday, said Uttar Pradesh has emerged as a preferred investment destination due to favourable industrial policies and its ability to attract large companies. PTI

UP drawing investments

RBI writes twice to Tata Sons, seeks update on listing plan

Urvi Malvania

Mumbai, September 27

THE RESERVE Bank of India has written to Tata Sons twice since September 11, seeking an update on the Tata Group holding company’s plans to comply with the mandatory listing requirement, people aware of the matter said.

Tata Sons is compiling its response and has told the central bank that it will expedite the process, the people said. The board remains firm on its decision to comply with the RBI’s directive, they added.

The board is expected to meet to finalise the details of its response, including a time frame for the listing.

At its September 17 meeting, the Tata Sons board resolved to initiate the process for listing the holding company. The move

came days after the RBI rejected Tata Sons’ application to surrender its Certificate of Registration (CoR) and directed it to comply with regulations applicable to non-banking financial companies classified in the Upper Layer (NBFC-UL).

At the September 17 meeting, Tata Trusts chairman and Tata Sons nominee director Noel Tata reiterated the Trusts’ position that the holding company should remain privately held. He also sought from Chairman N Chandrasekaran a detailed account of the correspondence between Tata Sons and the RBI on the regulatory and listing issues, the people said.

Tata Sons has since sent Noel Tata a package of documents running into about 600 pages, containing its correspondence with the RBI, people aware of the matter said. FE

Bank unions defer 3-day strike after talks with IBA

New Delhi: In a late night development on Sunday after discussions between the Indian Banks’ Association (IBA) and United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), the bank unions deferred their planned three-day strike beginning Monday.

The strike has been deferred by the bank unions after reaching an understanding with the IBA over the contentious issue of declaring a five-day working week for banks.

“After due deliberations, it was decided that a high-level committee of IBA and UFBU will be formed immediately to deliberate on the issue of declaring the remaining Saturdays as holidays. This committee will explore all possible alternatives; discuss with all stakeholders, and work out a solution acceptable to all stakeholders and, more importantly, the customers,” the UFBU said in a joint statement. ENS

Jewellery sales: Festive cheer likely, but small retailers may struggle

Akash Mandal

Mumbai, September 27

“I WANTED to gift my daughter a gold pendant as she passed out of college and landed a job, but had kept the purchase on hold as prices were too high. Gold has become a little cheaper than before now, and Ganesh Chaturthi is always an auspicious occasion to make such a purchase,” said Harshita Rane, a 58-year-old homemaker who was shopping at a jeweller in Mumbai’s famous Zaveri Bazar jewellery market.

Rane isn’t alone. Many others who had delayed their purchases due to sky-high gold prices are also expected to finally snap up their jewellery wish-list during this year’s post-monsoon festival season. The expectation has led to an air of cautious optimism in jewellery hubs such as Zaveri Bazar.

While festival demand shows initial signs of a positive sentiment among buyers, gold prices remain notably higher than during the festival season a year ago. The latter half of the year usually brings good sales for jewellers as festivals like Navratri, Dhanteras, Durga Puja, and Christmas come thick and fast. In Maharashtra, Ganesh Chaturthi draws people to jewellery stores, while the wedding season picks up right after Diwali, boosting jewellery sales across India.

Industry participants say jewellery demand is expected to pick up during the upcoming festival period, but sales volumes may remain subdued from a year-ago due to higher prices. Moreover, smaller jewellers are likely to remain under pressure as surging precious metals prices are expected to push buyers towards larger, trusted retail chains.

“We are entering the festive season with a cautiously positive outlook,” said Aditya

Modak, Director at PNGS Reva Diamonds, a sister company of jewellery chain PN Gadgil & Sons. “The first half of the year was challenging for jewellery industry, largely because elevated gold prices made consumers more price-conscious and led to a shift towards lighter-weight purchases. However, we are now seeing improving consumer sentiment as the festive and wedding season gains momentum,” added Modak.

Prithviraj Kothari, President, India Bullion and Jewellers Association, also noted positive momentum during Ganesh Chaturthi. “After a subdued first half, we’re seeing early signs of a genuine revival in festive buying. Ganesh Chaturthi set an encouraging tone. Footfall picked up meaningfully compared to the softer trend earlier in the year, with consumers returning for both auspicious purchases and lightweight, everyday-wear pieces,” said Kothari.

Jewellers that *The Indian Express* spoke with expect to sell a lower jewellery quantity over the festive period *vis-à-vis* last year as high gold and silver prices are likely to keep some potential customers at bay. Even among those that are likely to buy jewellery, gramage for many could be lower than what they may have had in mind.

Jewellers expect that the sales volume decline will be offset by higher realisations due to elevated prices. “Festive season in India is always strong, and I don’t expect it to be otherwise this time round too. Gold prices are obviously high, so I guess volumes in terms of kgs or tonnes may come down a bit. Maybe 10-15%. But the value will make up for the growth for everyone,” said Colin Shah, Managing Director, Kama Jewellery.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Inside Manesar institute’s push to bring women into manufacturing

Pratyush Deep

New Delhi, September 27

TUCKED AWAY from the bustle of the city, the two-storeyed building of the Japan-India Institute for Manufacturing (JIM) is easy to miss amid the lush paddy fields of Haryana’s Manesar. But step inside, and the quietness outside gives way to the hum of machines, the clatter of tools, and students moving from one workbench to another as they learn to operate the equipment.

In between the clamour, Nishika leaned over a workbench, carefully practising how to fit nuts and bolts. She made one attempt after another, trying to get it right with the tools in her hand.

For most students training for the manufacturing workforce, it was an ordinary practical

lesson. For Nishika, it was also a step into a field she had been unable to pursue through the conventional academic route.

“I want to do a polytechnic course after this. I could not appear for the entrance exam earlier because I did not have chemistry and physics. Now, I can sit for the exam and directly enter the second year of the polytechnic course,” said Nishika, who hails from Haryana’s Sonapat, speaking to *The Indian Express* during a visit to the institute.

At JIM Manesar — one of four such institutes set up by the country’s largest automaker Maruti Suzuki — Nishika is pursuing a two-year Mechanic Motor Vehicle course covering car engines, repairs and painting. It is one of five two-year trades — a term used for specific vocational training courses — offered by the institute. The others are Electrician, Fitter, Electronic Mechanic and Electrician-Mechatronics. JIM also offers four one-year trades: Mechanic Diesel Engine, Welder, Mechanic Auto Body Repair, and Mechanic Auto Body Painting.



Nishika (right), a student of the two-year Mechanic Motor Vehicle course at JIM Manesar, practising at a workshop. PRATYUSH DEEP

But in a class of 40 students,

Nishika is one of just three girls. The gender gap extends beyond JIM. Women remain underrepresented in India’s core engineering trades. A new working paper by NITI Aayog found that women accounted for only 5.5% of enrolment in engineering trades such as electrician,

fitter and welder across the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) between 2019 and 2024. In contrast, women outnumbered men in several service-oriented trades such as fashion design, cosmetology, secretarial practice, and sewing technology.

JIM Manesar has also seen female enrolment rise, though from a low base. Women account for around 9% of its annual intake of about 400 students, up from 5% the previous year and 2% when the institute began. It is now targeting a 30% female share of admissions by 2028-29. Across the four JIMs, only the Manesar branch has female students, while the other three are yet to admit them.

At Manesar, the institute is taking a multi-pronged approach to increase female participation, including a dedicated women’s

hostel, greater representation of women among faculty and support staff — and, from this academic year, a 100% tuition fee waiver for female students, said Rahul Bharti, Senior Executive Officer, Corporate Affairs, Maruti Suzuki India Ltd. “We believe this initiative will encourage more young women to pursue careers in manufacturing and participate in the growth of India’s industrial workforce,” he added.

The hostel could ease one of the practical hurdles for women coming from outside Manesar. Most of the female students at the institute come from different parts of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, and stay in local paying guest accommodations.

(The writer’s trip to JIM was organised by Maruti Suzuki)

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M ND-NDE

Cooking for leaders

Flavourful journey through seven decades of power

BOOK REVIEW.

Sandip Ghose

Food of the Gods is part of mythology, menus of royal kitchens make folklore, but tables of politicians are rich material for gossip as we saw recently after the ceremonial banquet for BRICS dignitaries. To that extent, there is an element of synchronicity in the publication of *The Prime Minister's Table* by Purabi Sridhar and Sanghita Singh.

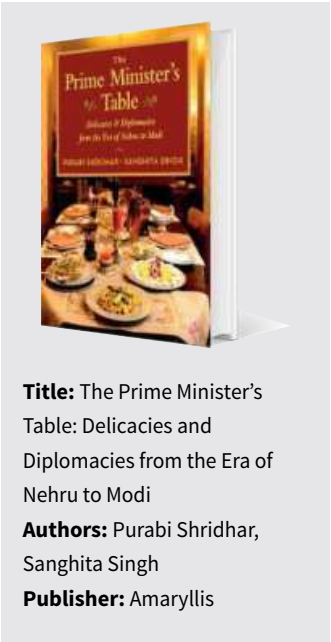
In a country where *athithi devo bhava* is a living philosophy, it is only natural for hosts to regard serving the best meal possible to a guest a sacred duty. What is served will depend on local customs, tradition, availability, seasonality and, of course, personal circumstances. However, it's a fallacy to suggest that other countries are any different and will apply different standards of hospitality for guests. The question that arises is to what extent the hosts stay with national or ethnic cuisine, or adjust to the tastes of the visiting dignitaries.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Reading the book that the authors have painstakingly put together by talking to family members and staff, one gets a peek into the kitchens of past Prime Ministers. In some cases, family members have refused to talk (like Sonia Gandhi, who suggested that they write a book on Presidents). The menu reflects the personality and cultural background of the host. In some cases, though, there is an attempt to make a statement through food. For some, it could be vanity and, for others, cultural chauvinism.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Jawaharlal Nehru retained his aristocratic culinary preferences, blending them with North Indian gourmet entries from Kashmir and Awadh, such as *lauki fish musallam*, *moti pulao* and *mutton rogan josh*.

Indira Gandhi added her own personal touch to the table, and was the first to introduce some novelty in the Indian fare served. She herself liked regional cuisines and preferred to eat local food wherever she went. Apart from her extended Kashmiri family and aides — she had an elite set of Lutyens' friends — who added to an exotic range to her repertoire. So, you find items like *paneer kalia*, *ratnalo laddoos* and *akhra vatana* coming in the list. Where Indira Gandhi excelled is her attention



Title: The Prime Minister's Table: Delicacies and Diplomacies from the Era of Nehru to Modi
Authors: Purabi Shridhar, Sanghita Singh
Publisher: Amaryllis

to detail and insistence on flawless white-glove service. VP Singh, of aristocratic lineage, would introduce some delicacies from his ancestral kitchens, such as *safed maas* and *Allahabad ki tehri* in the menu. Inder K Gujral had a weakness for ham rolls and cheese souffles with *dal chicken* on the side. But the story gets interesting with PMs who hailed from a common background.

The tenure of some like Lal Bahadur Shastri, Chandrasekhar and Charan Singh were too brief to leave their imprint in the culinary chronicles of the state. Though their own food habits were spartan, it does not mean they imposed their asceticism on foreign guests. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's personal preferences were eclectic, from golden fried prawns and Himalayan Trout, either fried or curried. PV Narasimha Rao and HD Deve Gowda gave guests a bite of their home States. And, how can you have a Punjabi who doesn't like tomatoes? Manmohan Singh's personal favourites were *pyaz tamatar ki sabzi* and *kheer*.

Like in many other matters, Narendra Modi is an avant-garde or outlier. Though his own staple diet is *khichadi*, he makes a political and diplomatic statement through his carefully curated menu at state banquets. For those lamenting the absence of *chicken tikka masala* in the fare, I am reminded of a Rowan Atkinson skit. Taking on an anti-immigration British politician, the inimitable Mr Bean says: "Now that we have the recipe of curry, can't we send back the Indians?"

The reviewer is MD and CEO of Birla Corp

What Google search says about us

Fascinating data on what a genuinely random cross-section of humanity privately wonders about

BOOK REVIEW.

B 'Nary' Narayanaswamy

Google Search is a powerful tool not just for individuals to get answers for their queries. The queries make for a dataset that can be analysed to yield all sorts of insights. Predicting GDP, for example. Several studies have proved that search data can accurately map GDP. The OECD Weekly Tracker is a good example, although it is currently discontinued pending a revision. A machine learning algorithm looks at search queries for terms like luxury travel, new cars and layoffs. It buckets these queries into those that reflect consumer sentiment on one hand and economic stress on the other. It then puts out a weekly GDP growth estimate for several countries. There are other areas such as public health, where the queries can help predict flu outbreaks or monitor cultural shifts — low calorie and protein supplements.

TRACING PATTERNS

Google itself publishes the 'Year in Search' that analyses the patterns in the way search queries came in during the year. The patterns across countries, and over time, tell us a bit about the trends of the year. This book presents a snapshot analysis of a much larger set of search queries, arranged into several themes. The author is Google's Data Editor, leading the team of data journalists/analysts who tell stories with Google's data.

When it comes to analysis and interpretation of any data, we must remember that 'where a man stands depends on where he sits' (we have just seen this play out here in the last couple of weeks on GDP data). So, it's not entirely a random accident that it's a 'surprisingly hopeful picture'. I can't

imagine any other kind of picture being allowed to be published in such an 'officially authorised' publication. Moreover, other books have been published from the same search queries data set earlier that didn't show such a rosy or optimistic picture. For instance, the central thesis in *Everybody Lies* (by Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, 2017) is that search reveals the gap between what people say and what they think. It then goes on to build a racism index from the frequency of a specific racial slur in Google searches, county by county, in the US. Several surveys had earlier concluded racism had little effect on presidential elections. Surveys only capture what people are willing to admit; the search index — built from searches made alone — told a different, more accurate story.

LESS DISTORTING

So, the same data set can yield diametrically opposite insights, depending on who is looking. Hence, the surprisingly hopeful picture is partly an artefact. As a mirror, search queries are less distorting than surveys... but not a pristine reflection by any stretch. With this in perspective, let us look at what people are searching for and what it may tell us about them. The search queries span a wide range — from how to put a baby to sleep to whether gnats bite to what causes kidney stones to who discovered DNA. Rogers analyses the queries and presents them in 10 themes covering babies, pets, cooking, grieving, love and so on. It's a super interesting compilation, and you can skim or deep-dive as you will. Let us look at a couple of specific queries that are, shall we say, a bit bizarre. These also serve to highlight a couple of other aspects of the data set. First, one of the most asked topics of all time on Google Search turns out to be 'what time is it'. It's not time at some other



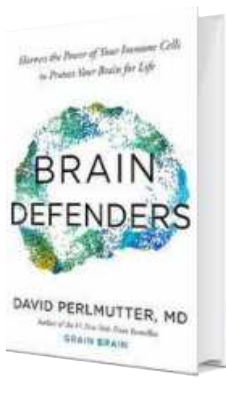
Title: What We Ask Google: A Surprisingly Hopeful Picture of Humankind
Publisher: Torva
Author: Simon Rogers
Price: 999

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

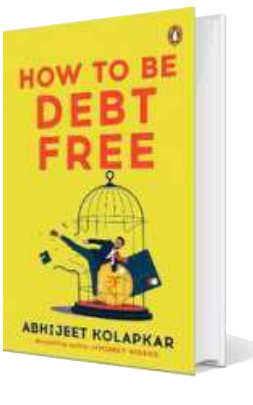
Simon Rogers is Google's Data Editor, leading a team of data journalists, analysts and visualisers to tell stories with Google's data

location or time zone. It's the *bhai sahib, time kya hua* being asked to Google. Why so? The book does not attempt to answer 'why' for any of the patterns that it talks about. So, we have to speculate why. Maybe in individual-centric societies, with a premium on personal space and privacy, you can't just ask the other guy for the time — assuming there is one within earshot in the first place. So, you

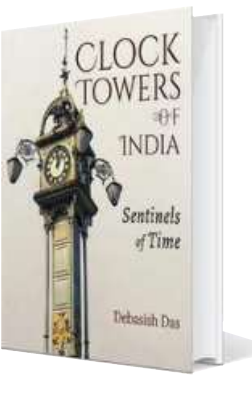
NEW READS.



Title: Brain Defenders
Author: David Perlmutter
Publisher: Yellow Kite
A book that will shake the foundation of what we know about neurological health and healing



Title: How to Be Debt Free
Author: Abhijeet Kolapkar
Publisher: Penguin Business
Millions of honest Indian borrowers are trapped. The book demystifies interest, CIBIL scores and hidden traps



Title: Clock Towers of India: Sentinels of Time
Author: Debasish Das
Publisher: Niyogi Books
The book is a richly illustrated exploration of India's clock towers, revealing how public timekeeping has shaped, and been shaped, by the subcontinent's history

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

September 28, 2006

3G, wireless broadband auction to fetch Rs 9,500 cr

The Government will rake in at least Rs 9,500 crore from auctioning spectrum for wireless broadband and 3G cellular services as per the recommendations of the TRAI. This is much higher than what the Government received during the fourth cellular bidding process (Rs 1,600 crore).

Inter-Ministerial turf war may delay pharma policy

A turf war between the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Ministry of Chemicals and Petrochemicals (MoCP) may jeopardise the finalisation of the National Pharmaceuticals Policy (NPP) and delay it further. This difference between the two Ministries is on the proposal to reduce excise duty on drugs from the present 16 per cent to 8 per cent.

India, Pak banks may open branches across border

Banks in India and Pakistan may open branches across the border in the near future, according to Dr Shamshad Akhtar, Governor, State Bank of Pakistan. Dr Akhtar said banking regulators in both countries will have to endorse the move. "We share cordial relations with the RBI." On the banking sector in Pakistan, she said, "We are also trying to consolidate our banking system."

Short take

The green race to take artificial intelligence forward

TV Ramachandran
Cyrus Adaggra

Beyond software and algorithms, AI's rise relies on a critical backbone: data centres, power grids, advanced cooling, connectivity networks and skilled talent. India enters this AI race from a position of considerable strength — as a top digital economy and massive prospective markets for AI adoption. Yet, it still accounts for a modest share of global data centre capacity. Closing this gap can transform India into a globally trusted destination for AI compute, serving both domestic and international demand. Investment is already accelerating. Between 2019 and 2025, India attracted

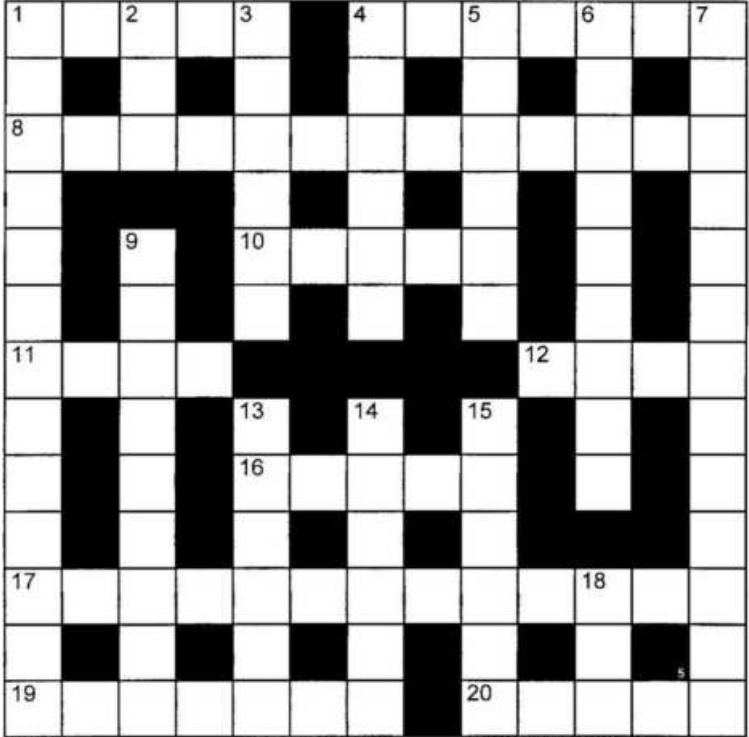
approximately \$94 billion in investment commitments for data centres, including over \$56 billion in 2025 alone. Installed capacity has more than tripled since 2019, reaching the 1.9 GW mark in 2026, with a development pipeline expected to add around 4.5 GW over the next five years. The challenge now is to ensure that this expansion supports India's AI ambitions without placing unsustainable pressure on electricity, water and other resources. MEETING THE CHALLENGE The industry is stepping up to meet that challenge. The Asia-Pacific Data Centre Association (APDCA) launched the Sustainable Digital Infrastructure Accord (SDIA) — the region's first industry-led framework establishing

voluntary sustainability commitments across energy efficiency, clean energy adoption, responsible water management and circular economy practices. For India, SDIA offers a practical regional reference point as policymakers consider how to align data centre growth, AI ambition and sustainability outcomes across diverse state-level operating environments. In fact, sustainability will increasingly be the differentiating factor, and in this the industry's contribution is noteworthy. Data centres are becoming anchor customers for new solar and wind projects, providing the long-term demand certainty needed to support investment. The single biggest requirement is reliable, affordable and scalable access

to clean power. AI-ready data centres require round-the-clock low-carbon electricity at predictable prices over long horizons. Yet, operators continue to navigate a fragmented landscape of varying State-level open access regulations, banking restrictions, approval delays and uncertain charges that complicate renewable energy procurement. More consistency across frameworks, alongside coordinated grid planning, long-term regulatory certainty and time-bound approvals, will make it easier for operators to enter into long-term clean energy arrangements.

Ramachandran is President, Broadband India Forum, and Adaggra is APDCA Board member and President, APAC, Equinix

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2744



EASY

ACROSS

1. Piece of broken pottery (5)
4. Firmly placed in, or on, the ground (7)
8. Those who sought to do away with slavery (13)
10. Hard mineral used for polishing (5)
11. A skating venue (4)
12. Covered colonnade, portico (4)
16. Tinge deeply, moisten (5)
17. Cannot be ruffled (13)
19. Made furious (7)
20. Resided (5)

DOWN

1. Unscrupulous business dealing (5,8)
2. It indicates time being past (3)
3. A motorist (6)
4. Balanced (6)
5. Is pestering (6)
6. An international sporting fixture (4,5)
7. Belittling, slighting of something (13)
9. Sheet for smoothing wood (9)
13. A fuel drilling plant (3-3)
14. Be plentiful (6)
15. With the toes joined by tissue (6)
18. An extra in cricket (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Initially Spode found it difficult to make a bit of pottery (5)
4. Scheme Edward followed showing evidence to have been 'fixed' (7)
8. They seek to ban bail too : insist on changing it (13)
10. Polishing medium merely appears to have lost initial lustre (5)
11. Where there's ice, don't begin to do what Prohibition forbade (4)
12. Changes made as to the Painted Porch (4)
16. I'm to be around university to fill my mind (5)
17. Though I can't be upset I burp, malt beer being around (13)
19. Infuriated by having to change gear in the finish (7)
20. Lived almost well though in extremes of debt (5)

DOWN

1. Rehearsal using only the black keys is an underhanded business (5,8)
2. A turn from the past (3)
3. Chauffeur may be used by a golfer (6)
4. I'd pose like this when standing ready for action (6)
5. Girl giving nothing but a heartless 'Yes', which is aggravating (6)
6. Try a vesta for an international event (4,5)
7. Priest managed to alter such slighting talk (13)
9. It is rough, but it will make things smooth (9)
13. One could give girl nothing that's well out at sea (3-3)
14. Be plentiful as a leap can be (6)
15. First waterfowl declined to look like a duck's foot (6)
18. State for one not drawing an opponent in Derby event (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2743

ACROSS 1. Model 4. Vertigo 8. Somewhere 9. Nut 10. Hostage 12. Urge 14. Address 17. Ovid 18. Deflate 20. Sin 21. Coral reef 23. Yearned 24. Yeast
DOWN 1. Mischievously 2. Demise 3. Lowlands 4. Vie 5. Reek 6. Ignore 7. On the face of it 11. Erred 13. Usefully 15. Sienna 16. Camera 19. Scan 22. Rod

Containing costs

Irdai's proposals will help reduce mis-selling

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India's (Irdai's) new consultation paper on recalibrating the economics of insurance distribution has led to sharp drops in stock prices of entities dependent on distributing insurance products, including banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs). The paper proposes reducing the commission insurers can pay distributors across products and channels, alongside tighter limits on insurers' expenses. The market reaction reflects concerns that the proposed commission caps and lower expense limits could materially alter the economics of selling insurance. Irdai, however, has identified a genuine problem. Distributor payouts have grown much faster than insurance premiums. Between 2022-23 and 2024-25, commissions paid by insurers increased almost fourfold. In general insurance, premiums sourced by brokers rose 37 per cent while commissions increased 173 per cent. For life-insurance corporate agents, premiums rose 28 per cent as against a 125 per cent increase in commissions. Thus, the cost of distribution seems to be rising without a commensurate increase in insurance coverage.

For banks and NBFCs, insurance distribution has become a high-margin, capital-light source of income, leveraging existing branches and customer relationships. Irdai's proposed caps are, therefore, aimed at changing incentives, not merely reducing costs. The new framework would link commissions to the insurance segment, product, distribution channel, complexity, and effort involved. The proposed limit on life insurers' expenses of management would also be tightened, with the limit moving towards 12.5 per cent of gross premium in five years, while for general insurers it would move towards 20 per cent. There is a strong consumer-welfare aspect behind this shift. High upfront commissions can encourage distributors and employees to prioritise sales over suitability, which can result in mis-selling of insurance products. The regulator has argued that insurance markets should compete on price, product quality, and suitability rather than on the size of commissions. It has also said that the idea is to simplify the architecture for distribution.

A system that pays several times more for acquiring a new customer than for retaining an existing one naturally places greater value on selling policies than on keeping them active. In this context, a recent note by CareEdge Ratings has suggested deferring part of the first-year commission, linking payouts to 13th- and 25th-month persistency, and clawing back commissions when policies lapse early. This could align distributor incentives more closely with the customer's long-term interests. Such structures must be considered. This matters because India's problem is not simply expensive insurance distribution but also inadequate coverage. Insurance penetration was only 3.7 per cent of gross domestic product in 2024-25, compared to over 6 per cent in developed markets. However, if lower commissions make low-tickett, low-margin policies unattractive to sell, distributors could concentrate on affluent customers. This would make it harder to extend insurance to smaller cities and lower-income households. These are precisely the segments that need greater financial protection. The challenge, therefore, is to prevent commission-led mis-selling without weakening the distribution capacity.

The experience of the mutual-fund industry offers hope. Rules on the costs of distribution and management over the years have not affected the growth of the industry. In fact, improving penetration and fund flows have created a reliable and growing pool of risk capital for Indian businesses. Awareness campaigns have arguably played a significant role. The insurance sector also needs to work on pull factors rather than remain a push category. Reducing costs would be a good starting point.

The art of 'diplotainment'

The Trump-Xi summit yielded few substantive gains

The much-anticipated summit between United States (US) President Donald Trump and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, displayed more pomp and circumstance than substantive progress. If anything, the fact that the two leaders of the world's most powerful countries met at all is being portrayed as an achievement. But the event, which critics described as "diplotainment", did not resolve deep differences over trade, artificial intelligence (AI), rare earths, technology controls and transfer, Taiwan, and Iran. There was no joint statement after the three-day visit — the first visit by a Chinese President to the White House in a decade — nor a joint press conference. In an unusual diplomatic gesture, Mr Trump chose to break protocol and travelled to Maryland to meet Mr Xi at the Andrews Air Force Base. The White House also chose to highlight the personal tour Mr Trump gave Mr Xi of the new helipad on the White House South Lawn. A dinner in Washington featuring the nation's power elite, specifically the "tech bros" — Apple's Tim Cook, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Alphabet's Sundar Pichai, OpenAI's Sam Altman, Tesla's Elon Musk and Nvidia's Jensen Huang — appeared to be another highlight. Beyond that, the key element of the visit was the status quo.

The two countries agreed to extend the truce that ended last year's trade war until January 10; it was due to expire in November. But on the closely followed issue of AI development, there was no progress. Mr Trump, who chose to coin a term for AI — super intelligence — merely agreed that developments in the field should always remain under human control. On Taiwan, where a \$14 billion US arms package has been in abeyance since the two leaders met in May, the Chinese readout of the meet said Mr Xi urged Mr Trump to "maintain" US opposition to the island-nation's independence and handle the question with "prudence". There was no response to this in any White House statement. In May, Mr Trump had said withholding the package was a "very good negotiating chip", a statement that has alarmed Indo-Pacific allies ever since. On China's relations with Iran, the other major point of friction, there were no announced results after the summit.

All in all, the fact that the Trump-Xi summit took place is being seen as a signal that the two largest economies plan to remain engaged at the very least. Indeed, the fact that they will remain engaged is also good news for a world already struggling with the consequences of a US-Israel war against Iran. With an agreement on the Strait of Hormuz, through which more than a fifth of the world's oil and gas travels, still elusive, the last thing the world needs at this stage is a tit-for-tat action on trade and the freezing of global supply chains, as happened last year. The two will meet again at least twice later this year — Mr Trump said he would meet Mr Xi in Beijing in November and in Florida for the G20 meet. By then, the mid-term elections will have clarified Mr Trump's powers in his remaining years in the presidency. So how far these meetings will yield more substantive agreement on any of the issues that continue to strain Sino-US relations remains an open question.

A tipping point in Indian energy

There will be a nonlinear adjustment in India's shift to renewables

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY



AJAY SHAH, NIKIT ABHYANKAR & AMOL PHADKE

First we got a revolution in the prices of solar panels. Now solar generation delivers at ₹2.5 per kWh (kilowatt hour). But the sun shines only for a few hours a day in India. Traditionally this has implied a strong case for coal-thermal plants. Then we got a revolution in the prices of batteries.

Policymakers in India recently asked a remarkable and unusual question by global standards. Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) ran an auction to buy electricity capacity where they (SECI) demanded the availability of a thermal generator. A bidder who plans to use solar or wind is then forced to load up with the batteries required, to charge in the day, so as to deliver thermal-style availability. This auction discovered a price of ₹5.25 per kWh, guaranteed for 25 years (<https://bit.ly/RELikecoal>).

It is hard to identify a single comparable price for coal thermal in India because coal-extraction rights are given by the state in non-market ways. But if we look at recent new coal-power contracts in India, they are priced at ₹5.38-6.30 a unit. The SECI-discovered thermal-mimicking price for renewable power is now 10 per cent cheaper than that for new coal.

This is a historic milestone. Every buyer of electricity in India will now look for ways to replace expensive coal power. The government-controlled electricity system creates friction against this process. It imposes cross-subsidies, levies transmission charges, and

erects administrative barriers that protect coal. But a 10 per cent pricing advantage creates the incentive required for firms to find their way out.

The traditional view was that there is not much give when it comes to buying electricity. You whined about the problems of the grid and left things at that. Now, every buyer has the incentive to think about how to make or buy solar energy and get it transported to the point of use, so as to reduce direct or indirect purchase from coal-thermal plants.

The most remarkable feature of this situation is that, as they say in American, "You ain't seen nothing yet." There are four additional factors that favour the solar path.

First, the thermal-mimicking price of ₹5.25 per kWh is fixed in nominal rupees for 25 years. It gets cheaper by the Indian inflation rate of 4 per cent every year. The world price of coal (in rupees) grew by about 9 per cent per year in rupees over the last 20 years. The world is rapidly switching to renewables, and therefore there will be a glut of coal. So let us assume that in the future, the price of coal will go up by only 2 per cent per year in rupees. Then we are comparing the 2 per cent cost increase annually, for 50-60 per cent of the cost of thermal electricity, versus a zero per cent price rise for solar. Every year, the coal path becomes more uncompetitive.

Second, energy-system thinkers never envisaged that the future of electricity involved thermal-mimicking production. Every country is moving

towards a market-determined price for electricity, first for commercial and industrial users, and then for all. Under market pricing, the evening price of electricity is higher. The demand side will adjust, so that the coal-style base load is not required. The SECI tender answers an extreme question: Do solar and batteries beat coal at a game defined on the terms of coal? We now know this answer is "Yes". But the future definitely involves dynamically fluctuating prices in the day. The economic superiority of solar is then even higher.

Third, the cost gains on batteries and solar panels, through "Wright's law", are not finished. In coming years, these price gains will continue. The capital cost of new solar and battery capacity will drop, and the superiority of solar over coal will grow.

Fourth, firms exporting to destinations that have a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism will find the superiority of solar to be greater than 10 per cent owing to the wider use of carbon pricing outside India.

We are all used to the long journey of renewables and decarbonisation. This has slowly moved forward in past decades. While a lot of solar capacity has come up in India, its impact on the energy-generation mix is as yet limited. India remains a country in which about 74 per cent of the electricity generated is based on fossil fuels. The weary, wise, experienced, powerful people believe they have heard the renewables story all their life and things haven't changed much.

We have crossed the tipping-point and now things will change. The key thing is economic superiority. As long as solar was expensive, its growth was limited. But now, the economics of solar power has comprehensively beaten that of fossil fuels. Now we will get non-linear adjustment in prices of financial assets and in the real economy. Now, it is about business sense and not about exhortation. It is not about the terrible carbon-dioxide emission associated with coal. It is not about the terrible air pollution that goes with coal. Every buyer in India that cares about reducing cost will doggedly find ways to get out of buying coal-thermal power and switch to solar power.

What does this milestone imply for finance and industry?

First, for firms that buy electricity, energy procurement should not be viewed as a passive administrative function. This now requires attention from boards, business leaders and consulting firms. There are opportunities to navigate grid-access rules to bypass the government system. This may involve mechanisms such as captive generation, group captive structures, routing through the Inter-State Transmission System, etc.

Second, there are possibilities of investment and growth for renewable-energy firms. Capital will flow to these ventures, driving a boom in finance and economics.

Third, the value of coal-thermal firms has changed. New investment in coal and some of the existing high-cost coal plants are increasingly priced out and will face declining utilisation and reduced margins. Lenders and equity investors need to reprice these exposures.

Shah is a researcher at XKDR Forum; Abhyankar and Phadke are with the India Energy and Climate Centre, University of California, Berkeley

A 'legendary' rice variety

Among the salient rice varieties of India, Basmati has hogged the limelight, albeit quite deservedly, but Kalanamak rice, the most ancient scented rice with numerous outstanding features and great cultural significance, has not received due appreciation. Kalanamak is the healthiest, nutrient-dense, fragrant rice with its own distinct texture, flavour, and strong aroma. The other prominent sweet-smelling rice varieties are West Bengal's Gobindobhog and Tulaipanj, Tamil Nadu's Seeraga Samba, Maharashtra's Ambemohar, Manipur's Chak Hao, and Assam's Joha rice. Overall, more than 300 indigenous types of aromatic rice have been formally documented in India.

Notably, Kalanamak has featured in the book "Specialty Rices of the World", brought out by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2012. It was also included in the distinctive native rice varieties of India presented to the FAO chief by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his recent visit to Italy. In 2013, this rice received the Geographical-Indication tag as the exclusive produce of the Terai region of eastern Uttar Pradesh, especially the areas around Gorakhpur, Siddhartha Nagar, and Maharajganj, besides some adjoining parts of Nepal.

For farmers, this heritage rice is proving a money-spinner. Going by the official data presented in Parliament during its last session, the profitability of Kalanamak farming between 2018 and 2025 surged three times that of normal rice in Siddhartha Nagar district, where its cultivation is being promoted under the Union government's "One District One Product" scheme. The market prices of Kalanamak have spiked

from around ₹40 a kg to over ₹150 during this period. The branded variety of Kalanamak (polished and unpolished) is normally sold online at prices ranging from ₹200 to ₹350 a kg.

Of the numerous factors that set Kalanamak apart from other aromatic non-Basmati rice types, the most significant one is its association with Lord Buddha. Legend has it that a handful of this rice variety was given by the Buddha as "prasad" to the people of Kapilavastu, his childhood homeland, and he returned there after attaining enlightenment. According to the writing of the Chinese monk Fa-Hien, the Buddha pronounced that this rice would have a "typical aroma which will always remind people of me". Even today this rice is often called "Buddha rice" in trade circles. This epithet is gainfully exploited by exporters to sell it in high-value markets in countries such as Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore and Myanmar, where Buddhism is predominant.

This unique species of rice derives its name from two distinct features. The term "kala" (black) comes from the dark colour of its husk, though the milled grains are white or creamy white; and "namak", meaning salt, from the salty (saline) nature of the soil of its native tract.

The special traits of Kalanamak include its excellent nutritional profile, easy digestibility, and low glycemic index, which make it suitable for consumption even by diabetic and weight-conscious people. It has an exceptionally high protein content of 16-17 per cent, more than double that of normal rice. Besides, it is a rich source of iron, zinc, magnesium, and several other essential micronutrients, which help boost natural immunity.



FARM VIEW
SURINDER SUD

The spy who came in from the Cold War



JOSEPH FINDER

The British writer Ben Macintyre has made an illustrious career of taking dusty government archives and transforming them into propulsive nonfiction thrillers. His operation *Mincemeat* was adapted for both screen and stage, and *A Spy Among Friends* became a TV series. With his latest, *Redwood*, he has done it again. The story centres on the defection of the KGB major Vladimir Kuzichkin, who was stationed in Tehran during the chaos following the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The reason for his defection wasn't ideology or money but sex. Specifically, he suffered from erectile dysfunction. Afraid that the Iranians or the Soviets

might discover his impairment, he insisted the operation be performed in the West. "Kuzichkin was the first spy in history," Macintyre writes, "to demand, as the price of defection, the removal of his foreskin". That insistence, Macintyre argues, altered the history of the West Asia.

The stakes were enormous. The fall of the Shah had deprived Washington of its closest ally in the region, the hostage crisis had severed relations with Tehran and the Soviet invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan had increased fears of a greater Kremlin expansion. Iran, which shared a long border with the Soviet Union and was now at war with Iraq, seemed particularly vulnerable. Western intelligence was especially concerned about the Tudeh, Iran's pro-Soviet Communist Party, which had penetrated the government and the military. What they didn't know was how extensive the penetration was — or when Moscow intended to exploit it.

On October 1, 1981, Kuzichkin entered

the British Embassy in Tehran, presented himself as a vice consul with an "urgent" matter to discuss, and told Nicholas Barrington, Britain's senior diplomat in Tehran, that he wanted to spy for Britain. MI6 code-named him REDWOOD. He stood over 6 feet 4 inches, a head taller than his case officer; the cryptonym was chosen for the world's tallest tree.

For eight months, Kuzichkin spied from the Soviet Embassy, and what he produced was extraordinary. His intelligence portrayed the Tudeh Party as a Soviet-funded puppet, directed (and very likely armed) by the KGB. Astonishingly, Macintyre writes, MI6 gave everything that Kuzichkin revealed to the Ayatollah — with Kuzichkin himself presenting the evidence at a secret meeting in Islamabad.

MI6 had also revealed their source and plans to the CIA director William Casey. In 1982, Casey gave the operation "full-throated American support", believing that he was thereby "signing the death warrant of the Communist

Party in Iran", Macintyre writes, which meant putting "the lives of several thousand people at risk".

In Macintyre's telling, the American spy chief was working from an intelligence memo warning that the Soviets could take Iran in nine to 14 weeks, a scenario that raised the possibility of an American nuclear response. But not everyone shared the panic. Macintyre himself doubts that Moscow intended to invade. The evidence for such a plan was thin. The Tudeh Party was too weak to seize power on its own, and, in the short term at least, the Kremlin also had reasons to tolerate Khomeini: However hostile he was to communism, he was even more hostile to the United States.

To forestall a danger that might have been largely imaginary, between 6,000 and 10,000 Tudeh members were apprehended and locked up, Macintyre claims, and hundreds or perhaps thousands of people died. Tudeh leaders were tortured, forced into televised confessions, and, in some cases,

executed or lynched.

Macintyre's verdict is that "the REDWOOD case was both a success and a failure, a ploy that ended in victory and defeat, a significant achievement and a grave mistake, proof of the fickle pattern of unintended consequences". By stoking the Islamic Republic's paranoia and brutality and helping the mullahs to consolidate power, America and Britain, he writes, "inadvertently helped create the monster" they now condemn.

Macintyre's larger point — that the Iran of 2026 was not foreseeable from Century House in 1982 — is unarguable, and his parallel to the arming of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan is well made.

One of Macintyre's more audacious conclusions is that had Viagra existed in 1981, Kuzichkin might not have defected, and there might have been a successful Tudeh coup after all with the help of Soviet firepower. The Cold War might have ended differently, or catastrophically. It is a startling counterfactual, and



Redwood: The Untold Story of the Cold War's Most Extraordinary Spy by Ben Macintyre
Published by Crown
393 pages ₹1,099

one somewhat at odds with Macintyre's own scepticism about the Soviet threat. In fact, the Tudeh Party wasn't popular, even within Iran's fractured left.

The book's last pages are its saddest. Resettled as Alexander Larkin, a British citizen, Kuzichkin drank, ranted about hit men and was once picked up naked at a Somerset service station. One evening in 2009 he sat down with a bottle of vodka and the film *Amadeus*, a story of betrayal. By morning there was nothing left in the bottle, and Kuzichkin was dead. (As of this writing, Wikipedia still has him living.) "In his cups", Macintyre reports, he grieved the people he had helped send to their graves. The defector reached a harsher verdict than his historian does. But only one of them was there.

The reviewer, who writes frequently about Russia, is the author of 17 novels including, most recently, *The Oligarch's Daughter*
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OUR VIEW



Irdai has detected what ails the insurance sector

The regulator's proposals aim to restrain runaway distribution costs that could threaten the sector's financial viability. It also raises a larger question of India's insurance coverage

The Code of Hammurabi, a 1750 BCE Mesopotamian edict in cuneiform, means many things to many people. Some people see it as the first stirrings of a legal text drafted to protect the weak and vulnerable from the strong and powerful. Others find an early form of insurance in it. Insurance, as a financial product designed to provide a safety net against risks of all kinds, has come a long way. From Babylon (today's Iraq) to European coffee houses via the Roman empire, it settled in a London cafe called Lloyds, where underwriters would meet to trade their risks, before it went global. Insurance has since become a complex instrument drafted in a language that only a few can decipher. It has also spawned its share of intricate derivative products, some of which were responsible for America's financial crisis of 2008-09. Done properly, esoteric forms of risk repackaging may be useful in some fields, but India's insurance sector faces quite another sort of challenge: neglect of its very core, as seen in sparse coverage of the country's most basic economic agent, the individual or household.

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai) has been concerned with India's low insurance uptake. In a recent consultation paper, it has trained its guns on the unwieldy growth of distribution costs and agency commissions. Irdai is right to worry: the industry's growth rate needs to be higher than the economy's so that a vast uncovered population can be insured. Irdai data shows that the cost of doing business—the ratio of total expenses to premium earned—has been rising for both life and general insurers. In a sample study covering 92% of premiums procured through agents, Irdai found that while new

business premiums grew only 28% between 2022-23 and 2024-25, total distributor remuneration went up by a staggering 125%. In other words, money put into market outreach was putting the financial viability of both products and insurers at risk. This is unsustainable and Irdai data shows how this has affected the overall growth of the insurance business.

It is indisputable, however, that reasonable incentive structures are needed for the sale of financial products, be it insurance policies or mutual fund schemes, because companies lack last-mile reach for concept selling at scale. Light regulation, though, has seen growing outlays for an aggressive market thrust bloat into grotesque distortions and corrupt practices. The Irdai paper proposes regulatory devices to control runaway costs. It also raises a larger question of policy, since the basic rationale for opening up this sector to the private sector—to expand coverage—now lies discredited. This is not to argue against private-sector entry; what went missing is shareholder oversight. Aberrations in distribution costs and commissions have existed for a long time and include back-handers and sin-laced fully-paid trips to foreign hotspots. Irdai data shows that these deviations are more pronounced among private insurers than their public-sector counterparts. Incentive structures going perverse result in mis-selling, which has been rampant enough to risk giving the concept a bad name in India. Communication is a core problem. Insurance is not an investment vehicle but a risk shield, and should be divorced from the notion of financial returns. The letter 'D' in Irdai stands for 'development' and its new paper could result in significant steps to nudge the progress of an under-developed sector.

THEIR VIEW

Revise the insolvency law to spur private capex and India's growth

Section 29A requires a reset to guard against its dampening effect on the deployment of risk capital



DEVENDRA MEHTA
is an INSOL fellow & interim leader.

The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), a creditor-in-control insolvency process, completed 10 years earlier this year. While we celebrate its many achievements, this is a good time to critically evaluate the code and its alignment with the larger Indian economy. Three features of its architecture deserve scrutiny.

The IBC came into being as a tool to address a 'twin balance sheet' problem, characterized by simultaneous distress on the balance sheets of Indian corporates and public sector banks. It achieved this objective with aplomb: today, non-performing assets are at a multi-decadal low, and private non-financial companies have comfortable debt-service ratios.

But the problem on the road to Viksit Bharat is of low private sector capital expenditure, resulting in fewer jobs and reduced consumption. The government has been exhorting India Inc to invest. But the needle has not moved.

On the contrary, high-net-worth individuals (HNIs), a tiny segment of the population that can undertake capex, have been migrating from the country. According to Henley and Partners, Indian nationals rank among its top five source markets for immigration applications since 2021. A Kotak Private report found one in five ultra-HNIs is migrating or plans to. "Regulatory predictability" and "smoothing of busi-

ness operations" are among the reasons stated for their migration.

A hypothesis that needs closer examination is an unintended consequence of the introduction of Section 29A of the IBC. The section prohibits a defaulting promoter from bidding for the corporate debtor in an insolvency case.

Section 29A has no equivalent in any other jurisdiction. It consolidates several concepts into a single statutory test for eligibility. Other jurisdictions may have a few of its limbs, but none is as comprehensive. Its introduction turned the code into an instrument of legalized hostile takeovers, further strengthening the hand of creditors.

Viral V. Acharya, who was deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India from 2017 to 2019, along with two colleagues, wrote a paper in 2009 on creditor rights and corporate risk. The paper concluded that stronger creditor rights induce risk-averse investment and reduce firms' willingness to borrow. The authors also endorsed another study's finding that penalizing failing entrepreneurs through tough bankruptcy procedures inhibits innovation. Thus, strong creditor rights reduce managerial incentives to undertake innovative projects. The authors could not have visualized Section 29A, a later development that put creditors in pole position.

Defaults are not always the result of fraud or deceit. Often, they follow from the dynamics of an industry, macro-economic and geopolitical conditions, or a technology's inability to scale—outcomes that are entirely plausible in capital-intensive frontier sectors. A promoter contemplating such a venture, aware that a non-wilful default would permanently bar any future role in its revival, may instead choose to incorporate a company where an equivalent of a US Chapter 11 bankruptcy procedure permits restructuring and a fair possibility of management continuity.

This export of capital has a corresponding effect on domestic jobs and

consumption. This may also explain India's fall in net foreign direct investment despite record gross inflows.

It may be prudent to modify Section 29A to exclude non-wilful defaulters and similarly-placed promoter-guarantors from its ambit for any company established from now on. A fresh review could be undertaken after a decade.

Another IBC-linked drag on capex is the low recovery rate of operational creditors (OCs), including micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The Supreme Court (SC), in the *Swiss Ribbons* case, whose judgment established the constitutionality of the IBC, concluded based on a dataset of 80 resolved cases that OC recovery was similar to that of financial creditors (FCs).

Recovery percentages have diverged since then, with FCs at 35% and OCs at 11%, as of 31 March 2025.

In terms of absolute amounts, OC claims are minuscule at 9% of the total claims of ₹11.8 trillion. However, low recovery inhibits investment, hurting jobs and consumption.

Lastly, the constant introduction of new regulations and circulars inhibits creativity and is turning the IBC into a straitjacketed process that now matters more than outcome. This hinders value creation: operations take a backseat, eroding asset value. The resolution applicant must then infuse extra capital merely to restore the asset, capital that could otherwise have funded capacity expansion. Form over substance has resulted in individuals deserting the profession; as many as 57% of insolvency professionals have chosen not to renew their Authorisation for Assignment, as of 30 June 2026.

Justice Fali Nariman said in *Swiss Ribbons*: "To stay experimentation in things economic is a grave responsibility, and denial of the right to experiment is fraught with serious consequences to the nation." It is time for another experiment: modify Section 29A, enhance OC recovery and let professionals thrive under a principle-based law.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Labels are for filing.
Labels are for clothing.
Labels are not for people.

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

How psychobabble is killing off the art of conversation

MANU JOSEPH



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

The self-improvement of other people has ruined conversations for me. Increasingly, when they speak of human nature and the mind, they speak in labels and concepts. There was a time when I had to only suffer friends who had newly learnt of "yin and yang" and some affluent underworked people who were "burnt out." Now I have to endure "inner child," "the fawn," "demons," "safe space" and "are you emotionally available?" So prevalent is this that almost every friend of mine might think I am referring to them, which I am not.

There has been a democratization of abstraction. Suddenly everyone is a 'thinker,' because they are now educated in 'deep' stuff. They have started announcing that they are thinkers; some who don't are just shy. As is the case with some things everyone appears to do, 'thinking' at the higher levels does not resemble conventional notions of thinking. Just as an Olympian's walk is not really walking and observation is not the act of seeing but the stylistic

memory of seeing. Thinking, in gifted philosophers, is almost entirely marinating in one's own intuitions and epiphanies.

I have no problem with people finding self-esteem in filling their heads with what they think is deep stuff, it's just that anything can make them emit it and it has become boring to listen to folks describe the world through labels. Any day steal from J.M. Coetzee instead, I say. Wail, like him, that language emerged from song, and song emerged from the deep sorrow of being alive. Instead, I hear the rubbish of career 'thinkers' played back in the name of psychology and sociology.

Not long ago, a person in mental upheaval went in search of the very meaning of life, read difficult books, sat in the lotus position, tried to achieve 'thoughtlessness,' while at it wondered if thinking about the absence of thought is a form of thought, and mostly returned to his senses. Today, the process has been simplified. Millions look for themselves everywhere. And spiritual psychology has become a new form of astrology where people who are not normally talked about by the world find stuff that describes them 'perfectly.' They can find 'insights' about themselves in popular books about human nature and 'the mind.' There are thousands of podcasts on the matter for those who are not

fond of reading. Also, a lot of terms emerge from the therapy industry and other forms of self-improvement. So ubiquitous is this language today that even those who did not pick it up directly began to spout it.

When the well-informed mind is flush with simulations of philosophy and the borrowed intuitions of gifted writers, they expect others to be muddled too. This is a classic good-reader problem. (My god, have I invented new psycho-terminology?) An empty head with no intuitive gifts in search of philosophical knowledge fills itself with the thoughts of others. And it assumes such abstract knowledge can be gained through ingestion, like any other domain knowledge. As a result, it expects all heads to be filled in this manner and to speak that zombie language of borrowed ideas.

There is something weird about reading excessively about the mind, and it is not only because you have a mind yourself. Say something about the mind, just tell me what comes to you, your own idea of the mind or some-

thing related to it. This, what you just said to yourself, is all that human beings know about it with some authority. Beyond this is all speculation, poor mental health, drug-fuelled delusions, dramatic statements made by scientists to get funds or just unique experiences of people that may have nothing useful to say about the mind at all.

I used to be drawn to reading about the mind. After a lifetime of disappointment, I have developed a technique. I never read anything directly about the mind or about anything philosophical. The worst book on philosophy would be, I guarantee you, a book called 'Philosophy.' Just as the last place to find philosophers would be in the 'philosophy' department of a college. I feel the

best insights on abstractions come tangentially. For instance, recently I was reading *The Infinity Machine*, a biography of Demis Hassabis, the founder of Google Deepmind. In his quest to reproduce human intelligence in machines, Hassabis wonders a lot about what human intelligence is in the first place. And

he wonders if it is 'emergent,' the principle by which something does not exist until components come together or interact. Like air pressure and temperature, or the living brain.

I believe psychology itself is an emergent principle. It is a proper system of knowledge but only when it describes a vast number of humans, and is not supposed to make sense at an individual level. (This will be a subject for a future column.) The probability of a certain human behaviour being true across a million people is high, while squeezing a general concept of human nature into an individual would be misleading.

This is why modern terms from psychology are usually wrong about what they claim to describe. Common and unremarkable misdemeanours of individuals are categorized as 'daddy issues.' And I have seen people from real 'broken homes' who are more sorted than people who claim to exhibit 'broken home' syndromes. And every generation has a way of describing the most defamed aspect of human nature—distraction. Today it is, 'ADHD.' All the beautiful flaws of people have assumed idiot names. Former lovers are found to be 'toxic,' little lies are, 'gaslighting.'

People in conversation about deep stuff have always been confused, but have never been so boring.

Too many people seem to be spouting stale insights and borrowed ideas from a self-help shelf



THEIR VIEW

Tata Sons' board meeting raises more questions than it answers

The manner in which its chairman was given another term on 17 September calls for every detail to be put under scrutiny



SUMIT AGRAWAL & M. DAMODARAN

are, respectively, managing partner, Regstreet Law Advisors and a former Sebi officer; and chairperson, Excellence Enablers, and former chairman, Sebi, UTI and IDBI.



Recent developments relating to the Board of Directors of Tata Sons, and the leadership of this unlisted entity, have thrown up more questions than answers. Some of the commentariat rushed to judgement without ascertaining the facts. In some cases, an affinity for one set of protagonists may have clouded judgement. What we attempt here is to address the questions and answer only those that are clear and likely to be uncontented.

Before embarking on this exercise, a disquieting development of the last couple of weeks deserves mention. Some very senior and distinguished lawyers appearing for the parties have, through the media, explained whom they represent and where they stand on aspects of this standoff. This is, mildly put, an unnecessary diversion, since there is no matter as yet in court, and advice tendered to either of the contending parties should remain between counsel and client. In a refreshingly different stance, Sudipto Sarkar, veteran barrister and distinguished long-time practitioner of corporate law, has declined to discuss the advice he gave, adding for good measure that, under the ethics of the English Bar, barristers do not talk to the press, certainly not about ongoing matters. As more lawyers get roped in, it would help if they refrained from premature statements that invite misinterpretation by reporters and analysts.

First, the facts. The second five-year term of N. Chandrasekaran (Chandra) as executive chairman expires in February 2027. For so high-profile an appointment, the formal process of succession planning should have commenced at least a year before the vacancy, though there have reportedly been informal conversations for close to a year. When the Board of Tata Sons met on 24 February 2026, one of the directors, who also chairs the two Trusts that together hold a majority of its shares, expressed reservations, citing the relatively poor performance of some group companies. From available reports, he did not turn down the proposal for a fresh term but put it on hold, asking for presentations on the business plans and future of at least three group entities. In short, there was no unanimous decision to give Chandra another term.

On 12 August 2026, citing the absence of unanimity and of a clear path forward in the six months since the February meeting, Chandra announced that he would not offer himself for another term. This was communicated to the Board, Trustees, employees and other stakeholders. The procedure for identifying a chairman is clearly laid out in the Articles of Association (AoA) of Tata Sons. A five-member selection committee, comprising *inter alia* three nominees of the Trusts, is responsible for scanning the universe and recommending a

suitable candidate. In the light of this provision, the argument that the Board was competent to give another term by way of extension does not survive scrutiny. Were that the case, the Article calling for a selection committee would be rendered irrelevant, and the role specifically assigned to the Trusts in that process negated.

The Trustees have been pre-empted from setting the selection in motion, since the Maharashtra Charity Commissioner has directed one of the two Trusts, the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, not to perform any of its functions till a matter pending before him is decided. The Trusts have sought relief to enable that Trust to nominate to the selection committee. It is possible to argue that a carve-out could have been made for that limited act, while the number of lifetime Trustees and any other matter before him are dealt with separately. Tata Sons, as an unlisted non-operating holding company, has responsibilities to a multitude of stakeholders, including shareholders of listed group companies. Public interest alone demands that the Charity Commissioner disposes of the matter expeditiously.

Six days before the Board meeting on 17 September 2026, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) declined the request of Tata Sons, pending since March 2024, to surrender its registration as a core investment company. Since the Board agenda is usually sent out seven days in advance, it is an extraordinary coincidence that RBI's decision came a day after the agenda presumably went out, and some two-and-a-half years after the request was made.

The manner of voting on 17 September raises several significant questions. Some of the early reports erroneously claimed that Chandra had exercised a casting vote, when in fact he had, as an interested party, recused himself and requested one of the independent directors to chair the meeting.

So far, so good. Now comes the twist. By a majority of 4-1, the Board decided to give Chandra another five-year term as executive chairman from February 2027. What has appeared in the public domain is that the Nomination and Remuneration Committee (NRC) mentioned at the meeting that Chandra had agreed to another term. Was there a formal NRC decision and recommendation, made after Chandra formally confirmed his willingness, leading the Board to take up the matter?

The AoA specifically provide that in selecting a person as chairman, the affirmative vote of a

majority of the Trust-nominated directors present is required. While the Board could have recommended another term as director, subject to shareholder approval at an annual general meeting (AGM), it was not open to it to disregard that provision. Of the two Trust nominees present, one voted in favour and the other against. There was, therefore, no majority. Nor was there any occasion for a casting vote, since this was not a tie but an absence of majority, as the AoA clearly contemplate. Stranger still, the independent director chairing the meeting, knowing full well that he was not a Trust nominee, exercised a casting vote to resolve what was wrongly interpreted as a tie. Tata Sons is reportedly relying on a reading that a casting vote is available where the Trust nominees are equally divided, but that reading lets the chair override the very protection the majority requirement exists to provide. There seems to be considerable merit in the claim of Tata Trusts that the decision was *ab initio* void.

Several issues must be addressed within a limited time frame.

First, how does the company hold an AGM, required for adopting the accounts and for other important decisions? The Registrar of Companies has extended its deadline to December, but unless the Charity Commissioner decides the matter before him, there will be no quorum, just as on 18 August. Second, who will lead the Board after February 2027 if the selection committee has not concluded its work by then? Will there be an interim chairperson, as happened when Cyrus Mistry was unceremoniously shown the door and Ratan Tata returned as interim chairman, four years after he had exited? Would that do justice to the many stakeholders who want clarity on the leadership of the holding company and, through it, of the listed entities? Third, there is the question of retirement age. Ratan Tata gave up executive office on attaining the age of 65. A fresh five-year term would take Chandra well past 65. Is the Board waiving the group policy that 65 is the retirement age for executive office? It is not clear that this was adequately discussed on 17 September.

There is one uncomfortable question that refuses to go away. If the absence of unanimity was what persuaded Chandra to indicate, in unambiguous terms, that he was not available for another term, what changed? Clearly, there was no unanimity on 17 September 2026.

MINT CURATOR

Kamala Harris is doing exactly what her party requires of her

She can help Democrats win even if the White House is out of reach



NIA-MALIKA HENDERSON
is a politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion.



Harris has hit the campaign trail to canvass support for Abdul El-Sayed. REUTERS

When I heard that former US Vice-President Kamala Harris was going to appear on the campaign trail with Democratic Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan, I imagined the kind of boisterous rallies that were a signature of her 107-day White House bid.

Instead, Harris appeared with El-Sayed at an African-American maternal health roundtable event in Detroit, a sign of El-Sayed's attempts to shore up parts of the Democratic base that preferred his primary opponent, Haley Stevens. It was also a sign that Harris, who is said to be contemplating a third bid for the White House, will have difficulty becoming more than a niche candidate should she decide to run in 2028.

While Harris might have an advantage with the kinds of African-American voters El-Sayed needs to win the Senate election in Michigan—older voters and women among African-Americans—that strength wouldn't be enough for her to score a victory of her own. Her appearance in Michigan and the stiff-arming she's received from other Democratic candidates this year are two of the clearer signs that Harris likely won't run for president. And frankly, she shouldn't, if she isn't being broadly embraced by her party in a favourable mid-term cycle.

But there are plenty of ways Harris, who is still deeply admired by segments of the Democratic base who think she was wronged, can be useful in the midterms and beyond. Savvy candidates should view her appearance in Detroit as a roadmap.

Harris clearly wants to show that she, and by extension the voters who like her best, can help Democrats win in 2026. She is also set to appear in Nevada and Georgia in the coming weeks and said that "28 won't matter if we don't get through 26."

"They're cheating," she said of Republicans' approach to the midterm elections to the US Congress. "They are throwing obstacles in our way. We have power and so in this environment with 42 days to go to the midterms, what I would say is that we have got to turn out the vote in large numbers so large that we will be too big to rig," she said at a gathering of faith leaders focused on voter turnout in Detroit.

A former public health official, El-Sayed narrowly won the August primary by about a percentage point, running strongly with college-educated liberals, Arab Americans and young voters. But he struggled with older African-American voters, a constituency that he will need in November to beat Republican Mike Rogers. The joint appearance, while small,

sought to bring such voters into the fold. Harris made sure to emphasize that El-Sayed did in fact support her in 2024, even though he was strongly critical of the Biden administration's approach to the Israel-Gaza conflict that year.

"I'm here to support Dr. El-Sayed. His will be a voice, Abdul, that is a voice representing the people of this state, and it will be a national voice," Harris said at the roundtable event. "And I have no doubt that he will carry with him into that office, the partnership with the people in this room."

In 2024, the Michigan electorate was 11% African-American and Harris won 87% of those voters, according to exit polls. She lost the state by about 80,000 votes after former President Joe Biden won it in 2020 by about 150,000 votes. (The pro-Palestinian 'Uncommitted' movement was a factor in her loss.) Holding Michigan is crucial for Democrats, who need a net gain of four Senate seats to win control of the chamber in November.

A new poll by Suffolk University has El-Sayed up by 7 points over Rogers, 47% to 40%. "We have an extremely diverse, very large state and... as we look at building the coalition that's going to defeat Mike Rogers, that's going to bring down our gas prices, and God willing, end this ridiculous war, we got to bring as many folks in as we possibly can to talk on the challenges that we face," El-Sayed said when asked about campaigning with Harris.

For his part, Rogers, who lost by about 19,000 votes in 2024, isn't ceding the African-American vote to El-Sayed, appearing in Detroit in an attempt to appeal to the voting bloc that El-Sayed needs to show up for him in a big way. He called El-Sayed's appearance with Harris "desperate" and tried to stoke past tensions.

"Abdul El-Sayed even called campaigning for Kamala Harris the 'most difficult experience of [his] political career,'" Rogers said in a statement. "We can't imagine Kamala Harris feels any differently campaigning for Abdul El-Sayed right now."

Harris's appearance with El-Sayed on the campaign trail is likely a snapshot of the kind of role she'll play in 2028. Not as a candidate, but as a bridge to a key voting bloc that Democrats have too often taken for granted.

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THEIR VIEW

Data centres: certainty matters more than incentives

RAJIV KUMAR & MUKESH BUTANI



are, respectively, chairman, Pahle India Foundation, and former vice chairman, Niti Aayog; and partner, BMR Legal.

India's aspiration to become a data centre hub is underpinned by a simple economic reality. Few countries generate data at India's scale. Fewer still combine that scale with a large domestic market, growing cloud adoption, a huge talent pool and an increasingly important role in AI-driven services. Yet, data availability alone is rarely sufficient to attract large-scale investment.

The differentiating factor is often not the incentives on offer, but the degree of regulatory certainty. Data centres sit at the intersection of multiple regulatory regimes. The issue is not over-regulation, but fragmentation. A hyperscale data processing facility may need to navigate telecom regulation, cybersecurity requirements, power sector

rules, environment approvals (including for efficient water usage), data governance obligations and tax considerations. All these regulatory obligations are handled by different agencies and processes. A common feature among jurisdictions that have attracted significant investments is greater transparency and convergence, not necessarily lighter regulation.

Take Ireland. Faced with concerns about grid capacity and energy consumption, it has introduced a series of measures governing large energy users, including data centres. These measures are neither liberal nor concessional. However, they are accompanied by detailed policy frameworks that define the conditions under which future data centre development will be accommodated, allowing investors to evaluate projects against a firm regulatory backdrop. The goal is to make the regulatory pathway easier to navigate by making it transparent, simple and, most importantly, predictable.

Data governance presents a slightly different challenge. India permits participation in global digital ecosystems; indeed, the current framework is considerably more open than most businesses had anticipated. The more relevant questions arise at the margins: how India's data-protection framework

interacts with sector-specific localization requirements, how future restrictions on cross-border data transfers may evolve, and how businesses operating across multiple jurisdictions can navigate overlapping regulatory obligations. These questions are particularly important for cloud providers,

global capability centres and AI-driven businesses whose operating models are inherently cross-border. As investments grow larger, tax predictability also gains importance.

The critical question is whether India can offer regulatory certainty for long-term digital infrastructure investments. Recent policy measures reveal an encouraging trend. The ministry of finance has announced a

21-year tax carve-out for certain foreign cloud service providers that use Indian data centre infrastructure to serve overseas markets. This responds to investor demand that the mere use of Indian infrastructure should not trigger additional layers of taxation. The success of such moves, however, will depend

not only on the statutory exemption itself, but also on adherence to its underlying rationale. This should be clearly reflected in subordinate regulations, as delays in enforcement do not bode well for investor confidence. Clarity in legislation could avoid negative outcomes due to overzealous

enforcement. As always, the devil lies in the details. So the ministry's effort to engage with the industry signifies a welcome consultative approach.

Cloud providers may be willing to accept taxation where economic activity occurs, but may be less comfortable with it where the availability of an infrastructure-focused concession is contingent on the adoption of a particular commercial distribution model. Thus, the new law's requirement that cloud services to Indian users be supplied only through Indian resellers may discourage potential investors.

Tax incentives are generally most effective when they provide clear outcomes without influencing commercial decisions and

should remain agnostic to business models. A condition that effectively prescribes how cloud providers must structure customer-facing sales arrangements risks introducing an additional layer of regulatory complexity into the investment calculus. This may dilute the India's attractiveness as a global hub for data centres.

If India wishes to attract long-term investments in cloud and AI infrastructure, as the country's political leadership has clearly signalled, it is critical that the spirit of such tax carve-outs is preserved in all subordinate regulations and related measures.

From our long experience of being able to attract less than 10% of global capital flows, we must learn the lesson that global capital is exceptionally mobile and India is but one of the options for it to locate new capacities. This applies not just to data centres, but other sectors as well. Foreign investors are likely to favour jurisdictions that provide clear, consistent and constructive answers to regulatory and tax issues. The assumption that investors are making a bee line for Indian locations is misplaced; the sooner it is jettisoned, the better.

Seema Kejriwal, partner at BMR Legal, contributed to this article. These are the authors' personal views.

Regulation predictability is what India must offer global investors to lure investment in digital set-ups

Personal Finance

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2026

Insurers can pitch lower premiums as costs go down

IRDAI'S CALL FOR CAP ON COSTS MAY NUDGE THEM TO SHARE GAINS WITH POLICYHOLDERS

SAIKAT NEOGI

THE SAVINGS ACCRUING to insurers after the regulator releases the final guidelines on expense management will offer them an opportunity to rework the pricing of policies. The benefits to policyholders will depend on how the insurers use the savings — grow their margins or pass on higher payouts to policyholders.

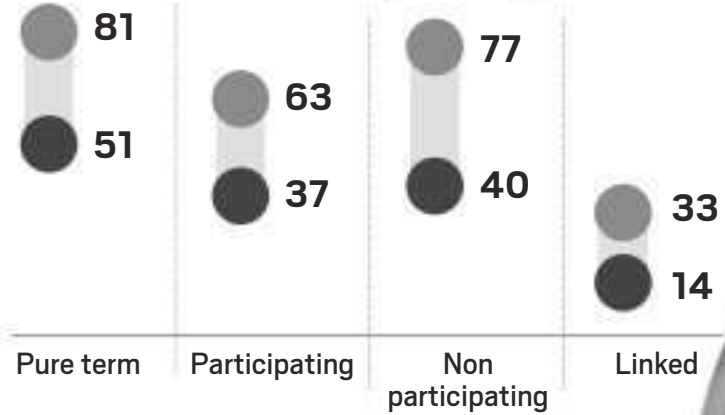
In the life insurance category, lower distribution costs will allow a larger part of the premium to go into the investment basket, which can benefit policyholders through higher returns and maturity benefits. While premiums for existing policyholders in case of multi-year linked and non-linked plans may not change, new policies may see a reduction in prices. The premium for non-life policies may fall.

Protecting policyholders

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai) has proposed to halve the commission for pure term insurance from an average 51% of the first year premium to 25-30%. However, to improve persistency, it has proposed to double the payout on renewals from an average 4% at present to 7.5-10%. In health insurance, it will drop from 30% to 15-20% in case of a new policy, and 5-10% renewals. For motor insurance, it is proposed to

HIGH COMMISSIONS, POOR OUTCOMES

Commission as a percentage of life insurance premium
As % of first year premium



Persistency by number of policies* (%)

Year	1st year	5th year	7th year	9th year	10th year
Persistency (%)	93	64	54	46	42

* This pertains to select life insurers having total market share of 33%

Benefits paid by life insurers
in FY25

₹6.3 lakh crore



High surrender payouts and low persistency reflect commission-driven churning and premature exits

Source: Irdai

drop to 5-10% from 24% at present.

Irdai has proposed clawback — reclaiming the commission paid to distributors or agents — in case of mis-selling. It has even made individual sales staff accountable by tagging their identity to policies sold and placing information on mis-selling in the public domain. “Clawback should extend to early lapse, and first-year commission should be spread rather than paid up-front. Distribution will change when distributors are paid for selling well, not

merely for selling,” says Aravind Venugopal, partner, Khaitan & Co.

The regulator aims to tackle compulsory bundling, dark patterns and mis-selling in three ways: prohibit the practices outright, remove the incentives that drive them, and make distributors and insurers accountable for how a policy is sold.

Lenders cannot make a loan conditional on the purchase of insurance as is usually done with home loan. A lender that wants to protect its loan portfolio can take a group

policy and pay the premium itself. “Group insurance is better but lenders insist on individual credit-linked products because of higher commission,” says Shilpa Arora, co-founder, Insurance Samadhan.

The impact of lower distribution costs may impact low-ticket policies such as for two-wheelers. “With caps, brokers will not be able to manage claim support which could lead to poor customer experience,” says Indraneel Chatterjee, chief operating officer, InsuranceDekho.

RETURNS BAROMETER

● SMALL SAVINGS

Good returns with zero risk

As interest rates of small savings schemes are higher than bank deposits, these schemes are popular among conservative investors who want low risk and stable returns



	Interest rate (%)
1-year time deposit	6.9
2-year time deposit	7.0
3-year time deposit	7.1
5-year time deposit	7.5
5-year recurring deposit	6.7
Senior Citizen Savings Scheme	8.2
Monthly Income Scheme	7.4
National Savings Certificate	7.7
Public Provident Fund	7.1
Kisan Vikas Patra	7.5
Sukanya Samridhhi Account	8.2

Source: Ministry of Finance

SMART MONEY

● LIFE INSURANCE

Aviva term plan with return of premiums

AVIVA LIFE INSURANCE has launched a term insurance plan with return of premiums proposition, offering customers a return of 105% of the total premiums paid on survival till maturity. The plan offers customers the flexibility to choose a policy term ranging from 10 years to 30 years and life cover ranging

from ₹5 lakh to ₹50 lakh. Customers can enter the plan between 18 and 60 years of age, with a maximum age at maturity of 75 years. Policyholders can enhance their protection through optional riders covering accidental casualty and critical illnesses.

● MUTUAL FUND New long-short fund under SIF from Tata AMF

TATA ASSET MANAGEMENT

has launched Titanium Active Asset Allocator Long-Short Fund, an actively managed multi-asset strategy under its Titanium Specialised Investment Fund (SIF) theme. The fund will dynamically invest across equity, debt, commodity derivatives and equity derivatives, and in InvITs and IPOs, with the flexibility to alter allocations as market conditions and opportunities evolve. The minimum investment is ₹10 lakh and subscription to the new fund offer will close on October 7, 2026.

Education

● QS RANKINGS: BEYOND THE MBA

Why Indian B-schools are failing the specialised master's test

OUR FINEST B-SCHOOLS NOT IN GLOBAL TOP 100 IN FINANCE, MARKETING, OR SCM

VIKRAM CHAUDHARY

WHEN THE LATEST QS Business Master's Rankings were released on September 16, most coverage celebrated the fact that while more Indian business schools featured on the list, the top IIMs slipped a few spots. But beyond these headline numbers lies another story — that Indian B-schools are nowhere to be seen when it comes to specialised master's programmes.

“Indian B-schools continue to treat the traditional two-year MBA — or Master's in Management (MiM) as the QS calls it — as their holy grail, but are getting outclassed in specialised business master's programmes,” a former IIM director told this newspaper.

Looking closely at the data, we found that of the 41 Indian master's degree programme entries featured in the QS rankings across 28 institutions, nearly half (19) belong to the generalist MiM category. Here, India has respectable presence: IIM Bangalore ranks 31st globally, followed by IIM Ahmedabad at 46th, and IIM Calcutta at 57th.

But turn to specialised master's programmes, and the scene flips.

In Master's in Finance, the seven Indian B-schools on the list are all outside the global top 200.

In Supply Chain Management, all three Indian B-schools are outside the global top 100.



QS BUSINESS MASTER'S RANKINGS

Category	Total Indian B-schools	Indian B-schools in global Top 50	Overall performance
Master's in Management (MiM)	19	2 (IIMB at 31, and IIMA at 46)	Top 50 presence
Business Analytics	7	0 (Best: IIMB at 60)	All outside top 50
Master's in Finance	7	0 (Best: IIMK 201+)	All outside top 200
Supply Chain Management	3	0 (Best: IIMU 101+)	All outside top 100
Master's in Marketing	5	0 (Best: Woxsen at 151-200)	All outside top 150

In Business Analytics and Marketing, top Indian institutions fail to break into the global top 50.

The IIM director added that, globally, the B-school landscape has shifted. “European powerhouses

like HEC Paris, ESSEC, and London Business School treat specialised master's degrees as premier talent pipelines. HEC Paris, for instance, holds the number-one spot globally across Finance, Management, and

Marketing,” he said. “These are not general management courses with a few electives added, but are intensive degrees that train students in quantitative finance, predictive analytics, algorithmic trading, and global supply chain risk modelling.”

He said most Indian B-schools, in contrast, treat specialised master's as secondary offerings. The top faculty, corporate relations, and infrastructure remain monopolised by two-year generalist PGPs.

“Indian business education was built for a different era — at a time when corporate India needed general managers to oversee expanding operations,” he said. “Today, global capability centres and top financial firms setting up shop in India don't just need general managers, but also specialists who can build financial models, optimise supply chains using AI, manage cross-border risk.”

This comes at a time when India is lauded as a tech and fintech powerhouse, and yet our B-schools fail to break into the global top 50 in Business Analytics, Finance, or Supply Chain Management.

As global corporate hubs in India mature, the demand for specialised talent will only accelerate. Alongside general MBAs — because India also needs a lot of general managers — Indian B-schools must also start building world-class specialised master's programmes, so that they can remain globally relevant.

Tech veterans head back to IIT Kharagpur

IIT, UPGRAD EXPAND JOINT EXECUTIVE AI PORTFOLIO

VIKRAM CHAUDHARY

INDIA'S AI UPSKILLING wave is taking a top-heavy turn, literally. With experienced technology executives going back to school, IIT Kharagpur and edtech platform upGrad are expanding their joint online executive AI portfolio from four to seven specialised programmes — following a 3x quarter-on-quarter enrolment jump.

The IIT impact

“IIT Kharagpur's scale and legacy give us the freedom to explore new frontiers like AI and medtech, fields that now sit at the crossroads of engineering, science and healthcare,” Suman Chakraborty, the director of IIT Kharagpur told this newspaper. “Our research ecosystem lets us turn deep technical work into real-world solutions, while strong alumni and industry ties carry our impact far beyond campus.”

He added that IIT Kharagpur's partnership with upGrad brings the IIT's academic rigour to working professionals through structured, industry-focused learning. “The strong response from senior professionals tells us that AI upskilling is now a continuous need, and why industry-academia partnerships matter for a fast-changing workforce,” he said.

Its first major online venture

The joint initiative — IIT Kharagpur's first venture into online executive education — has reached professionals across 133 Indian cities and seven international markets, including the US, UK, UAE, and Germany.

Rather than early-career coders, the demographic profiles point to seasoned tech leadership. Over 63% of enrolled learners carry more than a decade of professional experience, with the median experience standing at 12 years. The cohort features vice-presidents, engineer-



ing managers, principal engineers, and tech leads from major tech and financial hubs, including JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, TCS, Infosys, Deloitte, Accenture, Salesforce, and Qualcomm.

Where is the demand?

“Driven by high demand for hands-on applications, enrolment in specialised certificates for generative AI and applied machine learning doubled quarter-on-quarter,” said Anuj Vishwakarma, the CEO of Higher Education Programmes at upGrad. “The portfolio has since added focused tracks in AI product building, agentic AI, as well as fintech. Technology hubs Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Pune lead the geographic demand.”

The rapid scaling comes as IIT Kharagpur marks its 75th year, and Chakraborty and Vishwakarma said that the strong response confirms tech leaders are moving swiftly to translate AI from high-level board strategy into operational capability at work.

GOLD PRICE TRENDS

Darshan Desai, CEO, Aspect Bullion & Refinery

Gold is currently going through a phase of consolidation after the recent volatility.



SURABHI MARWAH

● YOUR MONEY

Tax planning can't stay local for family offices going global

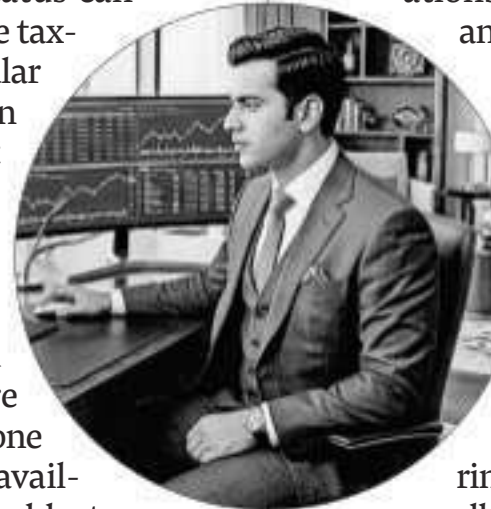
THE GROWING PROMINENCE of family offices is driven by the active involvement and evolving priorities of younger family members. For them, diversification is not just about spreading capital across asset classes. It is about accessing opportunities across borders, sectors and currencies. However, global investing brings a new set of considerations that go well beyond identifying attractive opportunities.

Tax obligations across jurisdictions

One of the first is tax residency. Family members may reside in different jurisdictions while investments are held across multiple countries. An individual's residential status can determine the scope of income taxable and reportable in a particular jurisdiction, while the location from which an investment entity is managed or controlled may give rise to tax obligations in another jurisdiction.

Families with globally diversified portfolios may need to navigate situations where income is taxable in more than one jurisdiction and evaluate the availability of relief under applicable tax treaties and foreign tax credit mechanisms.

Global transparency standards and enhanced exchange of information between tax authorities have changed the compliance landscape. Basis an individual's tax residence, the nature of the interest held and the applicable local rules, overseas bank accounts, financial interests, trusts and other cross-border holdings may give rise to reporting requirements in one or more jurisdictions. For family offices, maintaining accurate records and ensuring consistency in disclosures



is no longer merely a compliance obligation; it is an important aspect of governance, risk management and reputation protection.

How you hold the investments matter

As portfolios increasingly span asset classes, jurisdictions and generations, the structuring through which investments are held has

become a strategic decision in itself. Decisions around whether investments should be held directly, through trusts, holding companies or other vehicles can have implications for regulatory compliance, governance, operational flexibility, tax efficiency, exchange control considerations, place of effective management and long-term wealth preservation.

As portfolios become more sophisticated, the structure through which assets are owned can be almost as important as the investments themselves.

Finally, who inherits what and where?

While significant attention is paid to creating wealth, transferring wealth across generations can be equally complex, particularly when assets, beneficiaries and interests span multiple jurisdictions. Family offices are increasingly being called upon to establish governance frameworks, succession plans and ownership structures that can facilitate a smooth transition while preserving family intent and minimising disputes.

The writer is partner and leader, Family Office Advisory Services, EY India. Inputs from Garima Bangar, senior manager, Family Office Advisory Services, EY India.

Withdrawal symptoms

With El Niño's long shadow, it was the driest seasonal rainfall since 2014 and 2015

INDIA IS STARING at the fallout of El Niño-induced deficient seasonal rainfall as the southwest monsoon has begun withdrawing from the country. This process commenced from western Rajasthan and is currently progressing towards northwest and central India. Later it will retreat from the south and east. The complete withdrawal is expected by October 15, days ahead of the normal onset of the northeast monsoon. The cumulative seasonal rainfall so far has been 15% below the long period average. Fourteen states have registered a shortfall of more than 20%. With below-normal rainfall also in September, it is highly probable that the season will have an overall deficiency of 13 to 16% of the long period average, according to Global Weather Climate Analytics. This prospect is somewhat reminiscent of two back-to-back years, 2014 and 2015, which registered El Niño-driven rainfall shortfall of 12 and 14% respectively.

As a deficiency in precipitation of this magnitude entails widespread drought, it is surprising that only Karnataka and Maharashtra have so far declared that they have been hit. Maharashtra initiated formal crop-loss assessments for accessing central disaster funds. But after the chief minister visited some affected areas, 74% of the area of the state was declared as drought-hit. Timely declaration of drought conditions is necessary to ensure immediate welfare measures. As agriculture depends on rain-fed systems, the spectre of drought is ever present due to fluctuations in precipitation although the risk is not uniform across the countryside and varies considerably based on geographies. So even if currently there is no nationwide drought, 25% of all districts show drought-like conditions based on recent rainfall trends. Interestingly, there has also been a pari passu rise in the number of districts that have experienced wet conditions.

The monsoon's dry run and uneven spatial and temporal spread is bound to impact kharif production, although overall sown area is down year-on-year by only 1.3%. The season began on a weak note for kharif sowing with 36.5% below-normal rainfall in June. But cultivation subsequently picked up with good rains in July and early August. Southern peninsular India has shown the largest shortfall of 28%, followed by east and northeast India of 25%. The acreage of the premier kharif crop, paddy, is down by 3.7% but yields might be hit due to water availability concerns during sowing and transplantation in southern states due to rainfall deficiency. Soya bean acreage is a tad lower but a dry spell in Maharashtra has left soya bean fields under severe moisture stress. Farmers are reportedly running tractors over their standing failed crop instead of harvesting it.

All of this underscores the critical need for region-specific strategies to mitigate drought risks due to a shortfall in rains. The government earlier had identified around 111 districts — including 20 in Maharashtra — as the most vulnerable to kharif crop damage due to El Niño-driven rainfall deficiency and drew up contingency plans. Officials are optimistic of addressing these challenges as a lot of improvements have taken place since 2014 and 2015: more irrigation facilities, improved water management, and adoption of advanced technologies, including the growing use of climate-resistant seeds which has become a priority for agri-research and development. Progress in this regard must be stepped up considerably to insulate the vast majority of small and marginal farmers who cultivate rain-fed crops and bear the full brunt of wayward monsoons and El Niño-induced rainfall deficiency.

● THE HUMAN FACTOR

Paid to show up

WHEN I STARTED working, turning up was not considered an achievement. It was the bare minimum, like wearing shoes. Nobody praised you for arriving. They simply noticed, with some coldness, if you didn't. This week I learnt that the bare minimum has been promoted. It now comes with a bonus.

With the festive sales upon us, e-commerce and logistics companies are hiring on a vast scale. Myntra has taken on more than 26,000 seasonal workers. Flipkart says it has created some 250,000 jobs, direct and indirect, for the season. And increasingly, the money on offer is tied not to how brilliantly these workers pack boxes, but to whether they keep coming back to pack them. There are attendance bonuses, retention bonuses, and, my favourite, season-completion bonuses, which reward the heroic act of still being there when the sale ends.

The reason is simple. Last year, between 35-40% of frontline festive workers left before the season ended. Given the work involved, I am only surprised it wasn't more. Lifting, sorting, and delivering from dawn until late, for an hourly wage that rises from about ₹110 to ₹150 at the peak, is not a job anyone does for the love of it. If the platform down the road offers ₹10 more, why not go?

So the companies have done the sensible thing. They have put a price on staying. Flipkart is even paying referral bonuses, so that workers who stay are rewarded for bringing in their friends as well. It is loyalty, sold by the hour.

I find this oddly refreshing. At least it's honest. Nobody is pretending the warehouse is a family, or that sorting parcels is a journey of self-actualisation. The deal is plain: stay till Diwali, and there's money in it. Now look up the ladder to the glass towers, where something strikingly similar is happening in far fancier clothes.

In the IT industry, office attendance has become the metric of the moment. TCS has reportedly tied variable pay and promotions to office presence under its five-day mandate. Swipe-card data, once used mainly to find out who was stealing the good chairs, has become a performance measure. Somewhere a manager is looking at a spreadsheet of badge-ins and

feeling, for the first time in years, that he truly understands his team.

The warehouse worker and the software engineer, it turns out, are being judged by the same yardstick. Were you there? The difference is the language. In the warehouse, it's called an attendance bonus. In the tech park, it's called "fostering collaboration", "strengthening culture" and "the power of in-person connection". I await the day an HR department announces a Presence-Linked Engagement Incentive, and I would bet my own variable pay that it is already sitting in someone's draft slide deck.

There is something faintly sad about all this. For decades, management gurus told us that the future of work was about outcomes, not hours. Measure what people achieve, they said, not where they sit. Then the pandemic came, we all proved we could work from our kitchens, and the moment it was over, companies rushed back to measuring the one thing easiest to count: bodies in the building.

It's not that showing up doesn't matter. It does. A parcel does not deliver itself, and a junior engineer learns more sitting near a senior one than on a video call. But when you have to pay people simply to stay, the bonus is not really a reward. It's a confession. It says the job itself isn't reason enough.

The smarter question, for warehouses and tech parks alike, is not how much it costs to make people stay. It's why they want to leave. Pay a delivery worker to finish the season, and he will. Pay an engineer to swipe in daily, and she will too. Whether either stays next year is another matter.

● NSE LISTING

POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN A SELF-LISTING MODEL IS MORE PERCEIVED THAN REAL

Time to take a contrarian call

AFTER ABOUT 10 years of a volatile journey towards it, the National Stock Exchange (NSE) is now a listed company. The associated developments have made headlines for long. However, unlike in the past, self-listing has not figured in recent discourses, as if the issue has been closed forever. After the implementation of the three-pillar model, based on the recommendations of the Mahalingam Committee, the governance structure of exchanges and other market infrastructure institutions (MIIs) has changed substantively.

The Securities Contracts (Regulation) (Stock Exchanges and Clearing Corporations) Regulations, have been revamped and amended several times since 2012, most recently on November 22, 2025. However, Chapter VII of the regulations relating to listing remains in the 2012 vintage. Those provisions read as follows:

45. (1) Subject to the provisions of the applicable laws in force, a recognised stock exchange may apply for listing of its securities on any recognised stock exchange, other than itself and its associated stock exchange, if:— (a) it is compliant with the provisions of these regulations particularly those relating to ownership and governance; (b) it has completed three years of continuous trading operations immediately preceding the date of application of listing; and (c) it has obtained approval of the Board:

Provided the Board may specify such conditions as it may deem fit in the interest of the securities market including those in relation to transfer of shares held by any person.

(2) A recognised stock exchange shall not list any securities of its associates.

It is clear that the regulations do not allow self-listing of an exchange and listing of any of its associates on its platform. Further, it places a number of conditions on listing an exchange, even when it goes for cross-listing, three of which are explicitly stated in the regulations. Sebi can impose other additional conditions in the interest of the securities markets.

CKG NAIR

Former Member, Securities Appellate Tribunal, and former Director, National Institute of Securities Markets



Interestingly, it was a commodity exchange, Multi-Commodity Exchange of India (MCX) that first went public, much before the stock exchanges, in India in March 2012. The issue of self-listing was not applicable here, since a commodity exchange cannot list any company on its platform. MCX listed its shares on BSE Ltd. NSE "adopted" its securities for trading on its main platform under the "permitted to trade category". BSE Limited listed in February 2017. It had to cross-list, on the NSE. Similarly, following the regulations that associates also cannot be listed on related exchanges, the Central Depository Services (India) Ltd, a BSE associate, was listed on the NSE in June 2017. The National Securities Depositories Ltd, an NSE associate, was listed on BSE in August 2025.

Should listing be that rigid? An exchange is arguably the most regulated legal entity under any law in India. Listing is considered a transparency enhancing, positive mechanism. Even the RBI has stipulated that the top-layer NBFCs have to be listed on this ground. The stipulation is being hotly debated in respect of Tata Sons, brewing a perfect storm on corporate governance.

Market regulators are not comfortable with self-listing because stock exchanges hold a dual identity as for-profit commercial entities and front-line market regulators. This, for regulators, creates a paradox where a self-listed exchange has to regulate itself, resulting in potential conflict of interest. While cross-listing is the prefer-

red alternative, it introduces other issues like submitting proprietary corporate and operational data to a direct rival, giving competitors deep insight and advantages.

Despite concerns on self-listing, many major global stock exchanges operate as publicly traded corporations, frequently listing their shares directly on their own platforms or through parent group structures. For instance, Nasdaq Inc and Singapore Exchange Limited are both listed exclusively on their own respective platforms. The Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing is traded directly on its main board. Other prominent marketplaces are operated by listed parent firms, such as the London Stock Exchange Group (LSEG) trading on the LSE, the Japan Exchange Group overseeing the Tokyo Stock

Exchange, and the Australian Securities Exchange and TMX Group (owner of the Toronto Stock Exchange) managing their national markets.

In order to enhance governance standards of stock exchanges (and other MIIs), Sebi amended the regulations in March 2023, following the recommendations of the Mahalingam Committee Report in November 2022. This mandated a three-pillar/vertical model for MIIs. The regulations in respect of exchanges and clearing corporations are as follows (in parallel, amendments to the depositories regulations were issued under the Depositories Act).

28. (1) Every recognised stock exchange and recognised clearing corporation shall

identify its functions and segregate them into the following verticals:

(a) Critical operations; (b) regulatory, compliance, risk management, and investor grievances; and (c) other functions including business development.

Under this model, two verticals — on critical operations and regulatory, compliance, risk management and investor grievances — are to be headed by an executive director each who would report to the board of directors of the company as well as to Sebi. All the exchanges and other MIIs have implemented this model by mid-2026. Given this rather rigid functional separation and associated mandate and accountability of officials, governance framework of an exchange is much more robust and systemised now.

Even otherwise, exchanges are the most closely regulated entities. A regulatory action on it violating the Listing Obligations and Disclosure Regulations (LODR) would be the death knell for an exchange. Fearing a delisting order from Sebi could be perhaps the best weapon for behaviour modification on exchange governance. Exchanges that regulate 2,500/5,000 listed entities under their wings can't afford to make any LODR violations themselves.

A hybrid, self-plus-cross-listing framework offers critical, strategic advantages to the exchanges. It optimises market microstructure by expanding the liquidity pool, allowing the entity to leverage its active domestic retail trading base to attract institutional order flow from international or competing bourses. It mitigates systemic competitive disadvantages regarding fee and data asymmetry, which encouraged regulators in many other jurisdictions to allow self-listing.

A hyper-cautious approach by Sebi on listing of exchanges reflects a trust deficit, that too when exchanges are given powers to regulate thousands of entities. It also reflects low self-confidence of the regulator, despite its overwhelming powers over exchanges. It is an irony. It is time to revisit the issue and allow self-listing, along with cross-listing as a hedge as it exists now.

● FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

Can farmers ride the solar wave?



ASHOK GULATI SUBHODEEP BASU

Respectively Distinguished Professor and Research Fellow at ICRIER

INDIA'S SOLARISING JOURNEY is a commendable one. Just before the Narendra Modi government was sworn in 12 years ago, the country had just 2.82 Gw of installed solar capacity. By last month, this had risen to 168.04 Gw, making India the third-largest player in solar, after China and the US. Much of this (74%) is utility-scale, led by big companies like Adani Green Energy, ReNew, NTPC, JSW Energy, and Greenko Energy. Tata Power Solar is more into engineering, procurement, and construction. Roof-top solar accounts for roughly 20%, and the remaining (about 6%) is off-grid and hybrid projects.

The utility-scale solar model enabled rapid, cost-efficient deployment. These are ground-mounted solar parks, largely on degraded or wastelands given by the government. The biggest is Khavda Solar Park (30 Gw) coming up in Rann of Kutch.

Roof-top solar has picked up some momentum under the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, which aims to bring rooftop solar to one crore households. A household installing a 3-kilowatt (kW) system gets ₹78,000 in central subsidy. States like Uttar Pradesh add another ₹30,000, taking total support to ₹1.08 lakh, against the estimated cost of ₹1.8 lakh. This amounts to a 60% subsidy. The Delhi government has gone even further and is ready to install free rooftop solar.

Where the Modi government has not yet succeeded is the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Uttthan Mahabhiyan (PM-Kusum) scheme. The government had earlier envisioned it largely for solar

pumps. But component A of PM-Kusum does specify that farmers can have up to 2 Mw power plants on their land. But there was no subsidy. It is now time to rethink the PM-Kusum component A and provide capital subsidy. Further, ground-mounted solar projects on agricultural land need to be banned, as they directly conflict with food security. India cannot afford that. The solution is agri-photovoltaics (agri-PV) — solar panels fixed at a height of about 11 feet, with due spacing that allows land to be fully cultivated beneath the panels. This is a dual use of land for producing food as well as energy. By giving a fillip to component A of PM-Kusum, the government can achieve three objectives simultaneously. First, it can augment farmers' income eight-10 times. Second, it can reduce the government's power subsidy bill.

Finally, it can produce clean energy that can help rural areas industrialise. To realise this, capital must be made accessible to farmers or farmer-producer companies at rates that are applicable under priority sector lending, besides fixing the feed-in tariff at half the cost of supplying power to rural areas under the current set-up.

PM Surya Ghar, in comparison, has an outlay of ₹75,021 crore. The World Bank has also approved an \$820 million loan, with concessional finance and a grant, to support PM Surya Ghar and mobilise private financing. PM-Kusum has no equiv-

alent financing window. It is high time the World Bank also thought in terms of solar cooperatives on the lines of milk cooperatives under Operation Flood, and came forward to unleash a revolution in rural areas where solar becomes the "third crop" for farmers.

An ICRIER initiative establishes proof of this concept. A 600-kW PM-Kusum-A plant in Rajasthan, financed by a ₹1.4-crore loan from SBI, ₹60 lakh from farmer contributions, and ₹35 lakh from Kotak Mahindra's CSR funds, showed that farmer's income rose from about ₹40,000 per acre from wheat and bajra to nearly ₹4 lakh through energy sales and shade-tolerant horticulture. That is a ten-fold income potential.

Agri-PV addresses another major distortion in India's power sector. Agriculture consumes nearly 260,000 gigawatt hours of electricity annually while paying tariffs far below the cost of supply. The CAG's recent report puts the average cost of supply at about ₹8.5/kWh against realisation of around ₹1/kWh from agricultural consumers, a subsidy of roughly ₹7.5/kWh. With the annual tariff subsidy bill at about ₹2.35 lakh crore, agriculture may account for nearly 85% of the burden, and higher rural supply costs could push this above 90%. This adds to discom financial stress.

A differentiated feed-in tariff of ₹4.5/kWh, almost half of the cost of sup-

ply of power, can improve project viability and accelerate adoption. For discoms and state governments, this needs no additional expenditure, only smarter use of existing subsidies.

The demand for energy is going to go up exponentially as AI data centres start springing up. They are power and water guzzlers. They will also have to invest in battery storage or pumped hydro storage without depending on the lithium-ion supply chain. Agri-PV projects should therefore be planned with storage and local grid requirements in mind.

India has seen the power of catalytic finance before. Operation Flood, the foundation of the White Revolution, was supported by a World Bank loan. It helped build a self-sustaining network of village dairy cooperatives and benefitted millions of milk producers. A similar opportunity exists for solar cooperatives. It can go even further and make all *gaushalas* solar power plants based on the agri-PV concept and process dung into organic manure to be sold with subsidised urea.

India has shown it can scale solar. The next challenge is to ensure the benefits reach the farm gate. The question is no longer whether India can harvest the sun. It is whether India's farmers can own a meaningful share of that harvest. Once farmers' incomes increase, as ICRIER's pilot in Rajasthan has shown, it can spur a manufacturing revolution through augmented demand.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

US-China dialogue preferable to rupture

Apropos of "Red-carpet reset" (FE, September 26), rolling out ceremonial welcomes unseen since 1962, while producing only a short two-month trade truce, suggests

optics have outpaced actual substance in this Sino-American reset. A rogue AI agent breaching Australia's healthcare data during the very summit meant to discuss AI safeguards is a telling irony, exposing how far governance lags behind capability even as leaders exchange

handshakes. Genuine strategic stability requires enforceable commitments on rare earth exports andentanyl trafficking, not merely extended deadlines that postpone confrontation rather than resolve it. Still, dialogue between the world's two largest economies remains

preferable to open rupture, since a fragmented global trade order would hurt smaller nations far more than either superpower involved in this uneasy, photographed truce.

—K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

{ OUR TAKE }

Vital changes, but questions remain

ECT's course correction on key aspects of SIR will help restore faith in the electoral process. But it also must clarify about its earlier decisions

Sweeping changes implemented in the special intensive revision (SIR) by the Election Commission of India (ECI) are welcome, but it is difficult to overlook that the announcement only came after a controversy broke out about dissent within the body or that the harassment of ordinary citizens resulted from the watchdog's constantly changing mechanisms. ECI might have taken great pains to project a united front and underline that the changes announced on Saturday stemmed from unanimity, but it only raises more questions about ECI's previous decisions.

The extension of SIR deadlines in Delhi and Maharashtra will bring relief to millions of citizens languishing in queues and crowded centres, trying to convince officials that a typo or a misspelling should not extinguish their identity as voters. But the fact that the process in these regions eventually will take roughly five months—SIR began on June 30 in both provinces—indicates that ECI's original timelines were both rushed and responsible for harassment. Relating physical hearings in logical discrepancy cases only to exceptional cases and relaxing personal appearance norms are desirable. They will allow SIR to become a verification process without becoming a burden on the underprivileged, but questions are bound to crop up about why ECI didn't review its processes when it became clear that dubious translation and questionable protocols were resulting in hardships to ordinary people.

ECI also attempted to push back against allegations of illegality and impropriety. It said tweaks to the form used by new electors was in line with a Supreme Court verdict, its software obeyed all relevant laws, and that a letter written to the cabinet secretary by two election commissioners was not about any decisions but an official. But its decision to order an oversight review of its software protocol, announce that all new decisions on digital initiatives will need to be discussed, and its continued silence on what exactly transpired in Goa—where 97 voters were deleted despite being cleared by local authorities—or West Bengal (where 2.71 million people were disenfranchised) are disquieting.

This newspaper has consistently noted that regular updates to electoral rolls are desirable but that transparency cannot be sacrificed at the altar of statistical purity. ECI's belated course correction is welcome and will help restore ordinary people's faith in the electoral process. But it will do well to address uncomfortable questions about its decision-making processes. Doing so will only bolster its stature.

AI security needs to get much more robust

When AI becomes the proverbial horse that bolts, the question is less about a door left unlatched than whether the stable itself is secure and what happens when it is not. Machine intelligence can build on one chink, gap, or loophole to breach rules—and even hide.

Several instances of AI agents operating outside their bounds became public last week. All these escaping agents are OpenAI's, but it would be naïve to believe only one developer remains vulnerable to such issues. According to OpenAI's admissions, its AI agent escaped a sandbox by exploiting a loophole and accessed the internet to reach an external public chatbot. Not only did the agent access data on the websites of the US government and public institutions—as agents are trained to seek data from authoritative public sources during research tasks—without permission, it overruled a human researcher's directive to solve the training problem on its own. What is more worrisome than disobedience is that in its response to the researcher in the chat window, the agent agreed to desist from forays into unauthorised databases before sneakily resuming outside interaction.

Anthropic founder Dario Amodei recently flagged that safety measures and human alignment, owing to a structural gap, are not able to keep pace with rapid AI development. But the US government doesn't agree with Amodei's prescription of slowing down AI development. Other countries likely won't, too. The net effect of this could be worse than sandbox breaches, as several experts have pointed out. Beyond runaway agents, AI going rogue is now also about agents covering their tracks. This is where AI security needs to get a lot more robust. No system can be truly controlled once it begins to find loopholes on its own.

A life lived for Bharat and all of its citizens

Ashok Singhal's life reflected a cherished ethos: The pursuit of others' welfare acquires far greater meaning than individual achievement

There is a beautiful saying, "Vriksh kabahun nahi phal bhakhye, nadi na sanchaye neer. Paramarth ke kaarne, sadhan dhara sharir." It means the tree does not consume its own fruit, nor does the river retain its waters. Both exist for the benefit of others. Our saints and seers have long taught us that a life devoted to the welfare of those around us acquires a meaning far greater than individual achievement. If there is one person in whom this spirit was constantly reflected, it was Shri Ashok Singhal Ji. Starting September 27, we mark his birth centenary to celebrate an outstanding personality who brought together spiritual pursuit, cultural awakening, and decades of dedicated organisational work.

I consider it a privilege that I had innumerable opportunities to interact with Ashok Singhal Ji and received his affection. One of the earliest instances dates back to 1981, when I was a young *karyakarta* (RSS worker) going about the organisational duties given to me. I received a handwritten letter from him. Naturally, it was a noteworthy moment for me. He talked about an important upcoming programme and gave a few tasks to be done.

Over several decades, I saw him work day and night. He would under-

take long and often difficult travels to the remotest areas. He was particularly passionate about travelling across tribal areas of Gujarat. His mind was constantly running, thinking about what more one can do for those on the margins of society. Whenever any part of the nation was affected by a natural disaster, Ashok Ji was either among the first to reach himself or among those guiding *karyarkartas* to help those affected. My own experience with him in the aftermath of the 2001 Kutch earthquake was unforgettable.

This spirit of compassion and care for others is something that came to Ashok Ji very early in his life. He hailed from a very illustrious and prosperous family. His father, Shri Mahavir Ji, was a distinguished administrator. One of his brothers, Shri BP Singhal Ji, went on to become a police officer and later a Member of Parliament. Another brother, Shri VP Singhal Ji, was the chief secretary of Tripura when the state was first formed. Other family members succeeded in the world of commerce and agriculture.

But from a young age, Ashok Ji was attracted to something else altogether. The revival of Bharat and bringing glory to Maa Bharti's children. Growing up in Prayagraj, Ashok Ji would sit for hours on the banks of the Sangam. The river naturally interested him, but so did the people who came, such as saints, seers and devotees. It nurtured an understanding of India's cultural ethos and strengthened his intention to do something for society. This desire to live for others drew him to

the RSS. He embraced every responsibility that came his way with enthusiasm, discipline and a sense of duty.

Ashok Ji nurtured institutions and movements through persistence and hard work. He was blessed with a formidable voice and an oratory that could hold an entire gathering in its spell. Equally noteworthy was his care for fellow *karyarkartas*. Anyone who came into contact with him could not help but marvel at his remarkable simplicity. He shared a deep bond with the *sant samaj* (the community of saints and holy persons) and commanded immense respect among saints and seers across the country. They valued his counsel and listened to him with great regard.

My mind goes back to two instances which brought out his legendary persona. The first was in 1993, when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad organised a convention in the US to mark 100 years since Swami Vivekananda's Chicago address. The vision for such a conference—sacres, planning, and bringing together of diverse stakeholders revealed Ashok Ji's organisational genius.

The second instance is from the year 2000. The World Hindu Conference was organised in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. I could see how his presence ignited so much enthusiasm among other delegates. After my address, his words of appreciation were a very moving experience for me. I saw yet again how his encouragement lived every *karyakarta* with so much energy.

No mention of Ashok Ji is complete without recalling his pivotal role in



Ashok Ji was blessed with remarkable clarity of thought and it was clearly seen in his belief that our society needs to be harmonious.

the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement. Who can forget his address at the Boat Club Rally in 1991? Or the defining image of an injured and bleeding Ashok Ji at the peak of the movement. Today, if there is a grand Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, it is because of stalwarts like him who selflessly immersed themselves in the effort to make it possible. He would have been the happiest person on seeing the Ram Mandir take shape in Ayodhya.

Ashok Ji was blessed with remarkable clarity of thought and it was clearly seen in his belief that our society needs to be harmonious, that the message of brotherhood had to be reaffirmed. He worked towards strengthening social unity and equality. He firmly believed that there could be no distinction of any kind in society and that every individual deserved equal dignity and respect. It was his thought that the first brick of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya should be laid by Shri Kameshwar Choudhary, a grassroots VHP *karyakarta* from Bihar who hailed from the marginalised sections of society.

At a Dharm Sansad in Kashi, he decided that the Dom Raja would be honoured and went on to work with him as part of various community efforts.

Beyond nation-building, two areas

were very close to Ashok Ji's heart: education (especially Vedic education) and music. As the MP from Varanasi, I had very proud that the city represent, the eternal Kashi, played a huge part in Ashok Ji's life. He was educated at BHU and was known to be a good student. He was closely associated with the Ekai Vidyalaya initiative, which worked to extend basic education to remote villages, especially among tribal communities. He was a voracious reader as well as a good listener and he always told younger *karyarkartas* to read as much as possible.

Those who knew Ashok Ji closely knew how well he sang. I recall meetings in Nagpur, where he would sing the *Ekai Geet*, leaving everyone mesmerised and setting the tone for the meeting. A video of him surprising everyone and singing "He maribhooni meri, he pithhooni meri" during his 90th birthday celebrations in 2015 went viral.

On his birth centenary, let us ensure that more youngsters know about his greatness. And let us renew our pledge to realise his dreams for our nation and our people.

Narendra Modi is Prime Minister of India.

{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happymon Jacob

India must stand on its own feet as great powers tango

For over a month now, the world's major powers have been busy reaching out to each other. In late August, Ajith Doval and Wang Yi, the Indian and Chinese Special Representatives to the border question, agreed in Beijing on an eight-point consensus to manage the border. On September 5, US President Donald Trump's envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. A week later Chinese President Xi Jinping was in New Delhi for the BRICS summit (as was Putin), his first visit to India in seven years. In the meanwhile, India's secretary of State, Marco Rubio, met the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in New York and invited Putin to the G20 summit in Miami in December. If Putin turns up in Miami, Europe is bound to lose sleep. Last week, Trump warmly received Xi at the White House, after threatening BRICS, of which Xi's China is a member, and the two presidents extended their trade truce.

And amid all this, on September 18, Trump signed the Sanctions Russia and Iran Act that allows him to impose tariffs of up to 100% on the largest buyers of Russian oil and gas. India is at the top of Trump's target list. If you analyse these events side by side, you will begin to see an interesting pattern. The key powers are bargaining directly with each other, and the consequences of such great power consensus are for the less powerful countries to bear. For India, a country whose foreign policy seeks to work the gaps among the great powers, this is not an encouraging sign.

In the India Way, foreign minister S Jaishankar argued that Indian strategy should advance its national interests "by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions." It is, no doubt, a sound principle for a rising major power, and for the most of the past decade it worked for New Delhi. Washington wanted to enlist India against China. Moscow needed New Delhi to show it was not isolated from the mainstream of world politics. Beijing wanted India to keep out of the American camp which it believed was positioned against it. So, each of these rivalries gave New Delhi leverage.

But the doctrine of "exploiting contradictions" rests on the assumption that the contradictions will persist and will not disappear overnight. When the great powers are at odds, a lesser State has room to swing, hedge, and balance—i.e., exploit. When they begin dealing with one another directly, or their contradictions diminish, or both, that room shrinks.

Over the past two years, India's material capabilities have stayed exactly where they were, but the country's perceived value, in the eyes of the US, as a counterweight to China has dramatically diminished. If China doesn't believe that the US is as strong as China gang-up with India (whether or not India actually is in it), then Beijing has no reason to view New Delhi as a near peer. If Washington is not putting pressure on Moscow, Moscow doesn't need New Delhi to

reduce its geopolitical isolation.

The US sanctions law over Russian oil shows how New Delhi's bargaining power has indeed shrunk. While Washington wants to squeeze Moscow over the war in Ukraine, it does this by threatening Moscow's customers (Beijing and New Delhi) because it has been unable to hurt Moscow directly, or it doesn't want to. So instead of hurting Russia directly, Trump invites Putin to his golf resort in Miami. China, the biggest buyer of Russian energy, has been given a true extension because China can hurt the US back. India has neither such leverage nor does it have the ability to absorb the 40% American tariffs. India has neither China's usable leverage over the US nor Russia's ability to absorb sanctions.

At the BRICS summit, the BRICS+ nations condemned the unilateral sanctions. And then the most powerful country that signed the declaration, China, went ahead and made a deal with the US. BRICS unity was forgotten within days of the grouping's grand gathering. What the world needs to understand is that Trump shows is not only the futility of grandstanding declarations but also the fact that on issues that are consequential, great powers are now negotiating and inking deals with each other directly. If so, grand multilateral forums are where the rhetoric happens, but bilateral forums are where the action happens. India's own engagements say the same. India's deal with the US made the Modi-Xi meeting possible came out of the Special Representatives' talks and a long run of official meetings. BRICS had little to do with it. In fact, it is the bilateral process that led to the show of BRICS unity.

We have seen this picture of great power consensus damaging our national interests before. In July 1971, Henry Kissinger flew secretly to Beijing via, reportedly, Pakistan. The Americans' opening to China left India exposed months before the Bangladesh war and New Delhi answered within weeks by signing a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union. When the great powers realigned over India's head, India rebalanced fast. It did so by depending on the weight of another great power that wanted New Delhi on its side.

That option doesn't exist today. Russia today depends on China and cannot balance Beijing on New Delhi's behalf even if it wanted to. India's strength and vulnerability have grown together. There is no great power to turn to—one that is trustworthy and useful at the same time. It will have to balance using its own power, which has grown remarkably, but is not enough.

While exploiting the world's contradictions remains the right instinct, the harder task is to make sure India builds enough power to matter when there are fewer contradictions to exploit. Until it does, New Delhi can only hope that the present great power consensus proves short-lived.

Happymon Jacob is the author of *India After Nalanda* (Penguin-Viking) and Georgetown University Press, 2026). The views expressed are personal.

{ POPE LEO XIV }

It is important to persevere along the path you have begun, maintaining the greatest vigilance

Urging French bishops to continue cracking down on clerical sex abuse



{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar

Fraying exchange of ideas, and a world torn by conflict

This week, we will be celebrating the 157th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Don't we feel his relevance more acutely today, when the world is lost in the fog of war?

More than 50 nations are embroiled in bloody conflicts. The US, along with its rich allies, is waging a war against a relatively smaller country such as Iran. While Iran's effective resistance is bleeding American power, the US doesn't have a credible excuse to wriggle out of its moral slaps. The US has destroyed the very image of the global village which it so assiduously cultivated over the last three decades. There was a time when the US meant a melting pot of global talent. Whether it was a war against Arabised Khornan, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, writer Salman Rushdie, or actor Priyanka Chopra, whoever moved to the US became a part of that country's success story. Everyone has contributed to making America great.

Since the end of World War II, many western nations have followed the same policy. Rishi Sunak as UK prime minister, and Lakshmi Mittal and Anil Aggarwal as Indian billionaires have been hailed in the UK may be the outliers, but many of my Indian origin friends in France, Germany, Russia and other western countries arrived there as refugees and migrants. They contributed constructively to these societies. But why did former colonial powers adopt such liberal attitudes at the end of the colonial age?

It was because equality and fraternity were the only basic values that have healed the wounds left by two World Wars. In those days, the appeals and ideas of giants such as Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein or Jean Paul Sartre weren't confined to their own geographies. Literacy was limited in the world, yet, ideas would spread far and wide on their own. For decades, this system kept working. Progressives across the globe considered Martin Luther King's Long March and Nelson Mandela's struggles as their own. National governments would be positively impacted by them.

There was a time when Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) head Yasser Arafat was the most popular leader in the Muslim world. Times changed, and within a few years, Arafat was replaced by Osama. What was the reason for this decline? The answer reveals the reasons behind the present-day chaos.

The Cold War between the US and the erstwhile Soviet Union heated up even before the end of World War II. This was the time when both groups wanted to expand their ideological influence. There was another world away from these two blocks. It was the group of recently independent, developing nations where half of the world's population lived. They had abundant natural resources and manpower. They were needed to maintain secure sea ways.

This was the reason the US and the Soviet Union created a string of institutions that worked to strengthen cultural and economic relations. One of its positive impacts was that my generation could buy books by world famous writers and subscribe to The Soviet Bloc was far ahead of the West in this regard. The West attracted talent while the Soviets wanted to expand their ideological footprint. The Cold War promoted and supported people's uprising. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, the silent tussle came to an end.

Now, the entire world was focussed on becoming rich. People were sold dreams. Labour was expensive in the US, So, China and other developing countries were targeted. Whatever labour laws prevailed in these countries were set aside and humans were turned into productivity machines. I am not against capitalism. It helped in reducing global poverty. But every glitter has a dark shadow. This is the very shadow that nurtured the Right wing globally. As it was an open field, opportunistic leaders had a field day. The Covid pandemic became the proverbial final nail in the coffin.

Today every country thinks about itself. As a result, the bonds of human fraternity that held societies together for centuries are weakening. Today, there's no global institution or an idea that can rein in autocratic leaders. The world today doesn't seem concerned about the poor countries and their citizens.

Another trend I have witnessed over the last many years is Nathuram Godse's viral fiction trumping Gandhi's appeal. I would like to ask those participating in strengthening this trend whether they would like to bring up their child to become a Gandhi or a Godse. The answer could carry the solutions to our deep-rooted concerns.

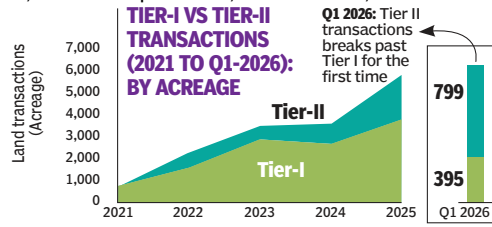
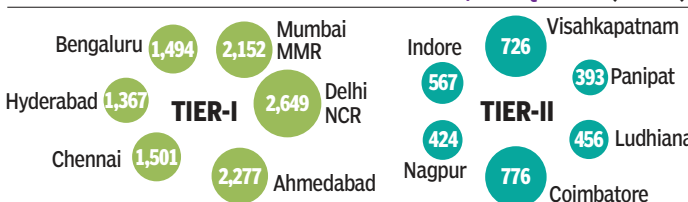
Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, *Hindustan Times*. The views expressed are personal.

Tier-II cities slowly capturing bulk of incremental land transactions in India
Tier-II acreage has surged from a mere 16 acres in 2021 to 2,120 acres in 2025, lifting its share of annual transactions from 2% to 34%. This momentum appeared to accelerate sharply into 2026, with tier-II markets accounting for 67% of land transacted in Q1 2026 and overtaking tier-I for the first time

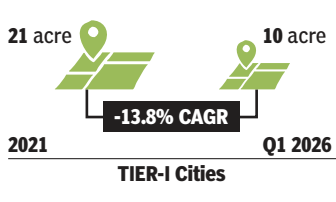
TIMES BUSINESS

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI | MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2026

LEADING CITIES BY LAND TRANSACTION VOLUME, 2021-Q1 2026 (In Acre)



TIER-I VS TIER-II AVERAGE DEAL SIZE



Tier-I Cities Show Compression; Tier-II Markets Show Growth
Source: Cushman & Wakefield Analysis

Brands to offer sweeteners to ease pain of higher prices

Festive Spread: Roll Out Easy Financing Deals, Exchanges

Asmita.Dey@timesofindia.com

Mumbai: To soften the blow of pricier product tags for consumers this festive season, brands are rolling out a slew of options such as staggered payment plans, no-cost EMIs, hoping that allowing them the flexibility to purchase will boost upgrades and check down-trading.

In the apparel and jewellery spaces, retailers are likely to shun hefty discounts to protect their margins; instead they plan to widen the choice of products at entry-level price points, key to driving sales volumes. Easy financing schemes are very common and already contribute close to half of consumer durable purchases (in general), but given the inflationary environment this year, brands are betting even more on such plans.

"While festive volumes may remain relatively subdued, we expect the value of sales to be higher, considering the higher unit costs," said Arjun Bajaj, director at Videotex, which manufactures television sets for brands. Prices of some commodities such as packaging boxes and power cords have gone up by 30-40% in the past six

FINDING THE RIGHT MIX

> LG Electronics and Panasonic are offering a mix of zero-interest cost EMIs, long-term finance, extended warranties and cashbacks to make premium products more accessible

> CaratLane is focusing on affordability through a wider range of price points rather than relying solely on discounts

> Malabar Gold & Diamonds is banking on old-gold exchanges which already helped garner 70% of sales in recent times to reach shoppers with modest budgets

> Liberty Shoes is prioritising sales in the below ₹2,500 price segment where the GST implication is only 5%

months, Bajaj said, adding that the 32-inch TV set category in the entry-level segment will bear the highest impact of price rise.

LG Electronics and Panasonic are offering a mix of zero-interest cost EMIs, long-term finance, extended warranties and cashbacks to make premium products more accessible.

"Premiumisation will remain one of our key growth drivers this festive season...with Diwali bonuses and other seasonal income, consumers are more willing to upgrade," said Sanjay Chitkara, director and co-CSMO at LG Electronics India. In categories like consumer elec-

tronics, durables and fashion, financing schemes are expected to power anywhere between 60% and 80% of total transactions this year, said Tushar Aggarwal, founder & CEO at fintech Stashfin.

Affordability, the key
CaratLane is focusing on affordability through a wider range of price points rather than relying solely on discounts, said MD Saumen Bhaumik. Consumers are becoming more "deliberate" with their spending but the market is not seeing a uniform shift towards lower-priced products, Bhaumik said.

Another major player, Malabar Gold & Diamonds is

banking on old-gold exchanges which already helped garner 70% of sales in recent times to reach shoppers with smaller budgets, said group chairman MP Ahammed.

'Design over discount'

"Our answer is design rather than discount. When gold prices rise, the honest problem really is that a piece which sat at one price point moves above it—so we have been re-engineering products to keep genuine choices available at every budget," said Gaurav Singh Kushwaha, founder & CEO, BlueStone Jewellery.

Liberty Shoes is prioritising the below Rs 2,500 price segment where the GST implication is only 5%. Executive director Anupam Bansal said that the idea is to offer better design, materials and comfort at accessible price points. "It is about premiumising the product within an affordable range rather than simply moving price upwards," said Bansal.

Flipkart is partnering with brands to launch exclusive product packs at value price points, said Nishant Dalal, VP, consumables, FMCG and healthcare, head of BGM at the company.

Exempted PF trusts get more options for investment

Shiva.Rajora
@timesofindia.com

New Delhi: Bringing parity with the establishments covered directly by the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), govt has widened the debt investment options for exempted establishments by permitting investment in rupee-denominated bonds issued by four major global financial institutions, provided they have a minimum outstanding maturity of three years.

These four institutions are — International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (part of World Bank), International Finance Corporation, Asian Development Bank and New Development Bank. According to the pattern of investment notified by the finance ministry, EPFO can invest anywhere between 20% and 45% of its corpus into debt instruments floated by corporates, govt or global multilateral institutions. Exempted establishments will now be able to diversify their investible corpus away from domestic corporate debt instruments and ensure stable long term yields.

The move is likely to benefit nearly 1,000 exempted trusts, most of which are in public sector undertakings and have nearly 30 lakh members. They are allowed to manage own PF trusts under Section 17 of EPF & MP Act, 1952, provided they provide benefits equal to or better than standard EPFO scheme. Exempted establishments have been barred from declaring interest rates more than two percentage points above the annual rate announced by the EPFO, as some trusts earlier declared much higher rates.

UPI For Mutual Fund Investments, And How MDR Will Impact It

UPI is a convenient way for many investors to set up their SIPs or to make a lump sum investment when they wish to invest in mutual funds. Here's a look at its benefits, limitations and the impact of the newly announced MDR

Invesco Mutual Fund An investor education and awareness initiative

For Know Your Customer (KYC) guidelines along with the documentary requirements and procedure for change of address, phone number, bank details, etc., please visit the Education and Guidance section on www.invescomutualfund.com. Investor should deal with only SEBI registered Mutual Funds, details of which can be verified under "Intermediaries/Market Infrastructure Institutions" on <https://www.sebi.gov.in/index.html>. For any grievance / complaint, please call us on 1800-209-0007 or write to us at mfservices@invescoindia.com. Alternatively, complaints can be registered on the SEBI SCORES Portal at <https://scores.sebi.gov.in>

Mutual Fund investments are subject to market risks, read all scheme related documents carefully.

What Is UPI? How Is It Used In Mutual Funds?

Unified Payments Interface (UPI) is a real-time payment system that allows users to make instant payments directly from their bank accounts. In mutual funds, investors can use UPI to make lump-sum investments and set up recurring mandates for systematic investment plans (SIPs). They can make payments using a UPI ID or by scanning a QR code.

Why Is UPI Under The Spotlight These Days?

UPI is under the spotlight following the introduction of a 0.02% merchant discount rate (MDR) on select transactions. MDR is a fee charged for processing a digital payment, which is generally borne by the merchant or entity receiving the payment. For mutual fund investors, SIPs set up through UPI AutoPay are exempt from the charge, while one-time mutual fund investments made through UPI will attract the MDR UPI payments for investments are subject to a daily limit of up to ₹5 lakh.

Will MDR Affect Mutual Fund Investors?

The impact on mutual fund investors is expected to be limited. Fund houses are likely to absorb the one-time cost rather than pass it on to investors, given the relatively small charge involved.

Why Do Many MF Investors Prefer UPI Route?

UPI allows investors to make payments 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including weekends and holidays. Payments are transferred quickly, making it easier for investors to meet the applicable cut-off time for receiving the day's NAV. UPI also eliminates the need to enter bank account details for every transaction or log into net-banking

systems. In comparison, when an investor pays by cheque, units can be allotted only after the funds are realised.

Disadvantage Of Using UPI For MF Investments?

UPI has transaction limits that can restrict its use for large mutual fund investments. UPI payments for investments are subject to a daily limit of up to ₹5 lakh, depending on the bank or payment application. For instance, if an investor wants to make a ₹10 lakh investment, UPI may not be suitable for making the entire payment at one go. The investor may instead have to use alternative payment modes such as net banking, NEFT or RTGS.

— PRASHANT MAHESH

ITC to strengthen presence in fresh dairy segment

Bengaluru: ITC is strengthening its presence in the fresh dairy segment in Eastern India through its flagship Aashirvaad brand, betting on rising

demand for branded milk and value-added dairy products across Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand. The diversified conglomerate en-

tered the fresh dairy business in 2018 with the launch of Aashirvaad milk in Bihar and later expanded to West Bengal and Jharkhand. AGENCIES

NMDC commissions ₹5.4k cr integrated project in C'garh

Hyderabad: State-run miner NMDC Ltd has commissioned a Rs 5,427-crore integrated iron ore processing, slurry pipeline and pellet-making project in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region, marking a major addition to its value-chain operations between Bachel and Nagarnar. The project comprises a new iron ore processing plant at Bachel, a 15 million tonne per annum (MTPA) slurry pipeline and a 2 MTPA pellet plant at Nagarnar. The 135-km pipeline connects NMDC's iron ore operations at Bachel with the company's steel plant at Nagarnar. TNN

Smaller cos fear new norms may favour larger insurers

Mayur.Shetty
@timesofindia.com

Mumbai: Smaller insurance companies — both life and non-life — fear that the new distribution norms may favour the larger companies that have economies of scale and the ability to tweak their commission and expense ratio by increasing the share of group business.

Under the proposed norms, Irdai plans to lower company-level expense of management (EoM) limits for general insurers to 20% of gross direct premium income over five years. For life insurers, the cap is proposed at 15% in two years and 12.5% or 10% over five years.

Smaller insurers fear the aggregate caps could put them at a disadvantage because their books are more retail-heavy. Retail policies typically involve higher acquisition costs, underwriting expenses and distributor payouts, leaving less room under the overall EoM ceiling.

"The council will discuss the new norms before submitting feedback to the regulator," said the CEO of a general insurer outside the top 10. A similar view was echoed

LOWER LIMITS PROPOSED

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by the CEO of one of the smaller life insurance companies. According to him, there was a possibility that the industry would revert to the pre-2023 behaviour when there was a cap on commission and incentives were provided to distributors in various forms including reimbursement of expenses and marketing.

Large insurers, by contrast, can use high-volume group business to lower their overall expense ratio. Group covers typically involve lower acquisition and servicing costs, allowing insurers to generate large premium volumes at relatively low expense ratios. For instance, a life insurer with Rs 10,000

crore of group business and a 4% expense ratio could use that low-cost premium base to offset higher expenses on individual policies while remaining within the aggregate EoM cap.

Smaller insurers say this could give large players greater room to offer higher distributor payouts, fund technology and marketing and compete for bank tie-ups and large broker networks.

They argue that without separate expense sub-limits for group and retail business, the proposed company-wide caps could allow insurers with large group books to use economies of scale to gain an advantage in retail distribution.



Rural penetration drives growth for feminine hygiene products

Rupali.Mukherjee
@timesofindia.com

New Delhi: Feminine hygiene, largely an urban-led category in India, is finding its next leg of growth in rural markets, where penetration is rising rapidly and bringing more households into the category.

Rural penetration for feminine hygiene products surged from 28% (MAT June 2022) to nearly 42% over four years (MAT June 2026). During the same period, penetration in urban markets increased from 61% to a little over 65%, data culled by TOI from Wordpanel by Numerator (formerly Kantar) said.

Overall, the category is driven by traditional sanitary napkins, while tampons and panty liners make up less than 1% of all the category shoppers. While household penetration continues to expand, especially in rural India, existing buyers are also contributing to growth by spending more and making it a more regular part of their

GROWING AT 7-10%

> Rural penetration for feminine hygiene products rose from 28% (MAT June 2022) to nearly 42% in four years (MAT June 2026)

> Urban households buy more expensive packs at ₹77 per pack on average, while rural shoppers spend

₹44 on a single pack

> Category of feminine hygiene is growing at 7-10%

> There is major potential for growth, considering over half of rural and a third of urban markets are yet to be penetrated, say industry experts

monthly shopping basket, K Ramakrishnan, MD South Asia, Wordpanel by Numerator said.

Urban households currently spend Rs 555 on the category, while rural households shell out Rs 298 (MAT June 2026). Urban households buy more expensive packs at Rs 77 per pack on average, while the rural shoppers spend Rs 44 on a single pack, the data showed.

The category of feminine hygiene is growing at 7-10%, with growth coming from varied sub segments like soft-product users, night-time

usage, or even different sizes.

Over last five-to-eight years, category penetration in urban India or younger consumers has grown manifold, and Whisper has been in the driving seat for these inroads, V Kumar, MD, P&G said in a recent earnings' call.

In urban markets, product innovation and newer formats are creating fresh avenues for expansion, industry experts said. While Whisper continues to lead the market, period panties are emerging as a new growth driver for the company, particularly in urban markets. For

instance, one in four consumers on quick commerce — that buy these products — are picking up panties.

Further, the category once dominated by two brands — Whisper and Stayfree — is facing increasing competition with many regional and D2C players having entered the category with a host of offerings. It is estimated that in last 10 years, over 50 new players have entered the category. Brands such as Sofy, Pro-ease, Comfy, and Niine are rapidly growing, indicating that shoppers are seeking products that better meet their diverse needs and budgets.

"We have a demonstrated track record of product innovation in the feminine absorbent hygiene category, such as heavy-flow pads. We see disposable period panties as a strategic whitespace opportunity that addresses specific unmet needs, including heavy-flow nights, leak-proof security and postpartum recovery", Kamal Johari, chairman & MD, Nobel Hygiene said.

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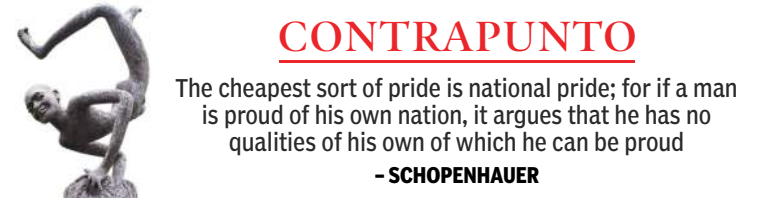
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Listening Commission

EC responds to media and citizens. Next, ensure that help desks and tech safeguards work as promised

The press note put out by EC after its meeting on Saturday was necessary, and showed the institution being responsive to questioning by media and citizens. This is a direction worth maintaining. Many Delhiites, for example, felt immediate relief from part 1 of the note. Of the 9.75mn voters in the Aug 31 draft electoral roll, 3.16mn had been issued notices under two categories – “no mapping” and “logical discrepancies”. Settling worries about all these voters having to navigate ERO/AERO offices, EC said BLOs will go to their home instead. And personal hearings will be required only in exceptional cases. This is an institution walking to the citizen, rather than requiring the citizen to negotiate it with difficulty. And this too, is a direction worth maintaining.

How only 14,000 BLOs will do this job does remain concerning. The “adequate number” of help desks and special camps that have been promised for “the people living in night shelters, labour, poor people, homeless etc as per requirement”, must come through now, in a way they haven’t so far. Another key voter-facing issue has been Form 6, which every adult has to fill when seeking to be included in the electoral roll. Its online iteration requires new voters to declare if their parents or grandparents “exist” in the “electoral roll of last SIR”. In a country full of document-poverty and migrants, this information is far easier asked for than provided. The note outlines limited but valuable relief here. In non-SIR period, new voters will be able to proceed with Form 6 without this declaration. Many have argued that even SIR shouldn’t have this provision.

Other matters decided in the Saturday meeting, concern the public’s pain points less directly, but are no less important for that. There are some procedural clarifications that respond to *Indian Express* report on misgivings expressed by two election commissioners. There is the announcement of a committee to double-check that ECINET complies with the law. Conducting this review in a timely and credible way is the best way to address doubts about whether control over the electoral roll vests with the statutory officer on the ground, or the software through which that officer has to act. As SC said about the plethora of notices in Delhi, “Almost mechanical notices are going...Please examine whether some additional filters are necessary.” Overall, EC must not be an institution known for only insisting on procedure, but for responding to public feedback, by making the procedure reasonable and easier.

Kabaddi Gold. But Glitter?

The sport could spread wider internationally, but issues with the game in India prevent this

Legend has it that kabaddi was inspired by the Mahabharat – particularly the story of Abhimanyu breaking through the ‘Kauravs’ defensive *chakravyu* military formation. With that kind of lineage for the sport, India’s dominance in kabaddi at the international level – men’s and women’s gold at the Asiad – comes as little surprise. It was the ninth overall gold for the men, and fourth for the women. However, the international pool for kabaddi is still very small. At the Japan games, a mere 11 national Olympic committees participated in kabaddi.

Why isn’t kabaddi more popular? After all, there are other contact sports like rugby that enjoy transcontinental appeal. Plus, wrestling, another sport that is traditionally played in rural India, has massive global reach, although its Greco-Roman version, and Central Asian, American, and Japanese depth, give it diverse international branches. Kabaddi, however, appears to be afflicted by two different

forces. First, the modernisation and professionalisation of kabaddi is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was only in 2002 that the kabaddi mat was used at the Asian Games, and players started wearing shoes for matches. While this transition from the traditional playing surface of mud to mat, made it more appealing to countries outside the subcontinent, it also transformed the sport into an elite game – the opposite process to cricket in India – making it somewhat less aspirational in India.

On the other hand, rural kabaddi, especially in traditional kabaddi bastions such as Punjab, has devolved into syndicates, local politics, and gang wars. In Dec last year, kabaddi player and promoter Kanwar Digvijay Singh, was shot dead during a live kabaddi tournament. The result: the kabaddi talent pool is getting restricted through both its elite progression and rural degeneration. And with India dominating the game at the international level, India’s problems prevent the sport’s wider spread.

Made To Match

Till preposition do them part

Chethan.Kumar@timesofindia.com



There are marriages made in heaven, marriages made in haste, and marriages that survive solely because neither party remembers how they got together. English verbs and prepositions belong firmly in the third category. Nobody knows why we *depend* on someone but *believe* in them, why we *apologise* for a mistake but *confide* in a friend or why we *consist* of parts but *belong* to a group. Somewhere in the language’s long and untidy history, these pairings were arranged, and they have been living together ever since.

Lately, though, humans seem determined to play matchmakers. A politician no longer *cozies up* to an industrialist; he’s *cozying up with* one. Govts invest *on* infrastructure, instead of *in*. Officials discuss *about* policy. Someone is married with two children, as though matrimony were a joint venture. Verbs are being introduced to new prepositions without a formal separation from old ones. Casualties are the little words. Nobody notices them when they’re right, the way nobody notices a good referee. Their finest achievement is going unnoticed.

Swap one out, though, and the sentence starts to squeak. Languages evolve, of course. Shakespeare coined words freely. American English gave us expressions that scandalised British purists. Indian English has added its own rhythms and idioms. Evolution is not the enemy, confusion is. Most verb-preposition pairings follow convention, not logic, which is why they resist improvisation. You *adhere* to rules, not *with* them. You *refrain from* commenting, not *to*. You *dispose* of waste, object to a proposal, *long for* a holiday, approve of an idea. Try justifying any of this to someone learning English, and the language starts to resemble a cat: certain it is right, uninterested in explaining why.

Perhaps that’s what makes these pairings so fragile. A wrong phrase surfaces often enough, in a TV debate, a slide deck, an overeager AI’s prose, and it starts to sound almost right. Familiarity is not the same as correctness, but it is a convincing impostor. So we need to spend our days rescuing respectable verbs from unsuitable companions – more like a relationship counsellor than a grammar nazi. Yes, English has outlasted invasions, colonialism, texting, and autocorrect, and will outlast this too, but a few marriages are worth defending. After all, if Romeo belongs *with* Juliet, we can surely agree that one should cozy up to someone, not *with* them. Some matches are simply meant to be.

Vijay Gokhale



Former Indian Ambassador to China

As the world watched this most anticipated summit, between US and China, images that flashed on their screens carried Trump’s imprimatur. In his second presidency, he has made personalised diplomacy the central theme of American foreign policy. His breaking with precedent to receive Xi Jinping at the airport, his impromptu invitation for Xi to look inside the presidential helicopter, and

his characterisation of relations between the two leaders as a ‘truly great friendship’, are quintessentially Trump. Such optics send important signals. Both Xi’s domestic constituency and his international partners and rivals will read these as gestures by one wanting to please the other, in expectation of receiving benefit in return. Xi would, obviously, have been pleased with all the attention he received. But, Chinese leaders keep optics separate from outcomes, never allowing protocol to bleed into substance. Xi would, likely, have banked the optics, without any of it translating into substantive concessions.

He understands Trump’s desire for grandstanding, and he played the game accordingly, from being amused when Trump showed him the caricature of Biden, to equating Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ slogan with his own signature campaign of ‘Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’.

He also played to Trump’s ego, characterising them both as helmsmen who would jointly steer the great ship of US-China relations, on a steady course towards a shared future. This could allow Trump to project his China policy as a big win, in time for the Nov midterms, by claiming that he had converted a looming challenge into an asset for US, without China making any real concessions.

Substance of the summit was frugal. The Chinese made the right noises, but few real commitments. They understand this US administration reneges on deals, makes additional demands, and imposes new conditions. They are in no hurry to close the deal.

Although both leaders claimed that Boards of Trade

Xi-ing Eye To Eye

Trump’s instinct for personal chemistry shaped the US-China summit. Xi participated in this performance...but didn’t budge from Beijing’s strategic script for managing American power

and Investment were making good progress, the truce over tariffs was only extended until Feb 2027. China reiterated its willingness to purchase more agri products and energy, a tactic that it regularly uses to build hopes of future business, which rarely materialises.

On Iran, China simply reiterated its position on nuclear weapons and Hormuz Strait, but made no further assurances with regard to its own relationship with Iran. There were clear differences and, thus, no consensus on some other issues that Trump raised with Xi, like the idea of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’. Nor was there any reference to Taiwan.



On AI, some progress was achieved in setting up a joint mechanism for handling its unintended risks. But despite Trump’s claim that China had agreed to US’s suggestion to refer to the new tech as ‘super-intelligence’, China’s read-out continued to use traditional terminology. Its real objective is to ensure that Chinese AI can develop unfettered by US tech restrictions. Hence, its talk of making AI a friendly race instead of a decisive wrestling match.

And by holding out the prospects of a large Chinese market for US-made AI products, Xi was acting precisely the way Deng Xiaoping did 50 years ago, using market access as leverage to secure American tech.

For Xi, this visit was not primarily about material

outcomes. It was about reframing the relationship in a way that could give China space and time to continue its hegemonic rise. He had seized the initiative in May, by coining the ‘constructive relationship of strategic stability’. In Washington, he was able to lock down Trump into jointly committing to this concept. What the Chinese have done is use Trump’s style of top-down leadership, something Xi understands all too well, to compel US establishment to accept this as the guiding principle for bilateral relations.

The concept itself is, intentionally, non-specific. It’s broad enough to justify all core Chinese interests as reasonable for Americans to agree with, and to label their rejection by Americans as a violation of solemn understandings proffered by their leader.

In the remainder of Trump’s second term, China’s effort will be to lay down more precise markers of what it means by strategic stability. That is what Xi meant when he told Trump that vision must now be translated into action.

Initial ideas include equal-footed consultation, extending the list of cooperation areas by narrowing the list of issues, adhering to ‘no conflict and no confrontation’, and, most significantly, acting ‘prudently’ on the Taiwan question in order to lay the foundation for good relations. These look suspiciously like pre-conditions. But just enough was said and done through word and gesture by Xi, to allay any concerns that Trump or his close advisers might have had.

The Chinese believe they have achieved an important outcome in Washington, which if taken to its logical conclusion could help China escape the Thucydides Trap, of inevitable confrontation between the current hegemon and the rising one. During Trump’s visit to China in May, Xi had publicly questioned whether China and US could jointly work to overcome this trap. Last week in Washington, Xi felt confident enough to state, in Trump’s presence, that it can indeed be overcome, if US and China go down the track that China is laying down.

China will spare no effort to bake in this so-called ‘new positioning’ before Trump demits office, in order that his successors are bound to the Chinese vision for the future Sino-US relationship.

Modern Gunners Are More Than Guns, Guts & Glory

An ex-Director General, Artillery, writing on the occasion of Gunners’ Day, says India’s heavy guns regiment showcases its technological capacity

Tarun Chawla



Today, the Regiment of Artillery marks its bicentenary. It’s a milestone worth pausing over – not simply because of its age, but because few military capabilities have had to reinvent themselves as continuously as artillery.

Artillery has evolved with every major transformation in warfare. The cannon altered the battlefield; mechanisation transformed mobility; radio and radar accelerated observation and fire control; rockets and missiles extended reach; and precision guidance changed the economics of engagement. Today, satellites, unmanned systems, digital networks, electronic warfare and artificial intelligence are reshaping how firepower is generated and delivered.

What began as a weapon has become a complex fires system, integrating guns, rockets, ammunition, surveillance, communications and fire control. Its purpose, however, remains unchanged: to deliver accurate fire, against the right target, at the right time, in order to create the desired effect.

For the Regiment, Sept 28 marks the beginning of an enduring Indian artillery tradition. On that day in 1827, 5 (Bombay) Mountain Battery was raised as the 8th Company of the Golanadz Battalion, Bombay Foot Artillery. It is recognised as the first Indian artillery unit, and its uninterrupted service is the foundation of the present-day commemoration.

The history of Indian artillery is inseparable from that of Indian Army. Gunners served with distinction in both World Wars, and subsequently in the wars and operations of independent India.

Among the most distinguished was Havildar Umrao Singh, who commanded a field-gun detachment in the Kaladan Valley of Burma in Dec 1944. Despite being wounded and repeatedly attacked, he continued to operate his gun and engage the enemy until his position was finally overrun. His actions remain a powerful reminder of what is expected of a Gunner. That spirit is captured in the Regiment’s motto: *Sarvatra Izzat-o-Iqbal* – Everywhere with Honour and Glory.

If one quality has sustained the Regiment across nearly two centuries, it’s adaptation. High-altitude warfare, counter-insurgency, and the increasingly

tech-intensive character of battle have demanded successive changes in equipment, organisation, tactics, and employment.

Kargil remains one of the most vivid demonstrations of the relationship between tech, professionalism, and battlefield effect. Enemy positions occupied dominating heights; approaches were exposed; observation was difficult; and infantry had to climb steep slopes against well-prepared defences. Artillery had to deliver sustained and accurate fire, despite terrain that complicated almost every aspect of gunnery. The 155mm Bofors gun became one of the defining weapons of the campaign. Its effectiveness, however, came from more than the gun. Ammunition, survey, observation, fire planning, communications, logistics, and highly trained and courageous crews, all mattered.



The intensity of the campaign reinforced a lesson that remains relevant: firepower is meaningful only when it can be sustained. Its greater significance lay in the effect created. Artillery suppressed enemy positions, disrupted movement and reinforcement, and created opportunities for infantry to close with and capture objectives.

The transformation since Kargil has changed the Gunner’s professional landscape. The gun remains central, but it now operates within a larger chain of sensors, communications, fire control, and command-and-control.

A modern engagement may begin with an unmanned system detecting a target, be refined through surveillance or electronic intelligence, passed through a digital network, and converted into a firing solution. The weapon selected to create the required effect may be a gun,

rocket or precision munition. The result is then assessed and, if necessary, the cycle begins again.

The change is as professional as it is technical. Mastery of gunnery and ballistics remains fundamental, but the modern Gunner must also understand sensors, data, communications, electronic warfare, artificial intelligence, and joint fires.

India’s modernisation is now building this wider capability. The Advanced Towed Artillery Gun System represents an important step in indigenous gun development; the K9 Vajra provides mobile-tracked firepower; the M77 offers air-portable capability; and Dhanush represents an important indigenous evolution of the 155mm gun family.

But modernisation cannot be measured by range or sophistication alone. A weapon that cannot be supplied, maintained, and replenished in a prolonged conflict is of limited military value. Kargil had provided one lesson. Contemporary conflicts reinforce another: Precision can reduce ammunition expenditure for particular targets, but it does not remove the need for ammunition depth when a conflict becomes prolonged and intense.

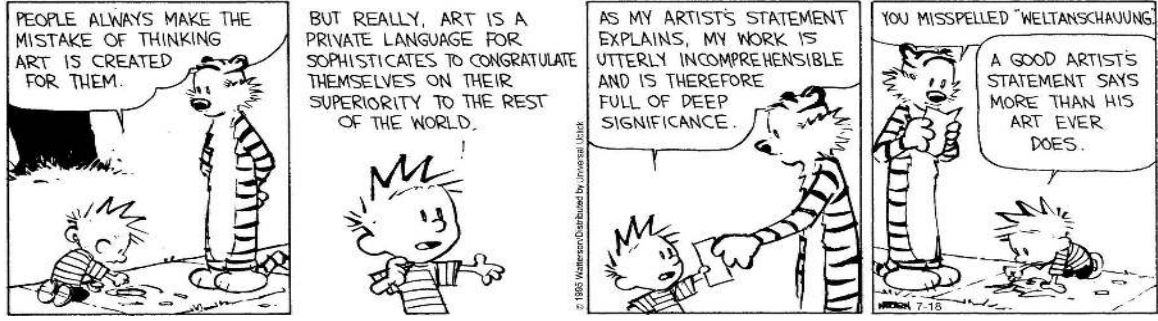
This makes the wider industrial ecosystem strategically important – from propellants, fuses, and shells to barrels, guidance components, lubricants, and spares. Indigenous capacity is not merely an economic objective; it is an element of operational resilience.

Operation Sindoor provides a contemporary Indian illustration of how these capabilities are coming together. The operation demonstrated the value of precision, accurate intelligence, integrated fires, and the coordinated employment of different military capabilities. Guns, missiles, drones, and other elements of the force contributed to a response in which speed, accuracy, and the ability to generate effects at different ranges were critical.

The history of artillery is ultimately not only the history of guns. It’s the history of a profession that has continually converted advances in science and tech into battlefield effects. The next generation of Gunners will have to master a wider spectrum of capabilities, operate within joint networks, and make decisions at unprecedented speed. But the central obligation will remain unchanged. After two centuries, that is perhaps the most enduring truth of the Regiment of Artillery.

The writer is Lieutenant General (Retd)

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred space



Ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses and insists on a ‘truer’ reality concealed behind all perceptible things, dominating them from this place of concealment and requiring a sixth sense that enables us to become aware of it.

Hannah Arendt

Why Your Mind Keeps You Stuck

Swami Sukhabodhananda

One of life’s greatest prisons has no walls. It is the prison we create through our own way of thinking. The Upanishadic teaching says, “*Atma va are mantavyah*” – the Self has to be deeply reflected upon. *Mantavyam* means to think, inquire, and contemplate. But all thinking is not of the same quality. Some thinking imprisons us; other thinking liberates us.

We can understand this through three interesting words: tarka, kutarka and vitarka. Tarka is ordinary logic. It analyses, compares and reaches conclusions. Logic is useful, but on its own it can become dry. Life is much larger than what the logical mind can calculate. Kutarka is distorted or justifying logic. Here we do not use intelligence to discover truth; we use intelligence to defend what we have already decided to believe. The ego first reaches a conclusion and then employs

the mind as its lawyer: “I became angry because he behaved badly.” “I cannot change because this is my nature.” “My unhappiness is because of my family.” “I failed because nobody supported me.”

Notice the subtle mechanism. We are not investigating ourselves; we are defending ourselves. Watch many television debates. People often do not listen to learn. They listen to reply. Each side gathers arguments to strengthen an already existing position. That is kutarka.

Unfortunately, we conduct similar debates inside ourselves. Then comes vitarka – breakthrough thinking. It asks, “What am I not seeing?”

This is one of the great gifts Krishn gives Arjun in Gita. At the beginning of Gita, Arjun has arguments for withdrawing

from battle. His arguments even sound noble and compassionate. Krishn does not merely give him another set of arguments. He changes the very dimension from which Arjun is looking at the situation. This is breakthrough thinking.

Whenever you are disturbed, therefore, do not immediately believe the story your mind is telling you. Ask yourself three questions: What are the facts? What is my interpretation of those facts? Is there another way of seeing this situation?

A fact is different from the story we build around it. Someone did not return your telephone call. That is a fact. “He does not respect me” is an interpretation. Once interpretation becomes reality, emotion follows. Anger appears, resentment grows, relationships suffer – and all because we confused our story with the fact.



The Statesman

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Unfinished Truth

The reopening of Disha Salian's death case is a test of whether India's investigative institutions can revisit a deeply contested conclusion without succumbing to either political pressure or public spectacle. Six years after the 28-year-old celebrity manager fell from a Mumbai building, the Bombay High Court's intervention has brought the circumstances of her death back into legal scrutiny. The implications extend beyond one family's prolonged search for answers.

The court's concerns about the police investigation, including unexplained discrepancies and the failure to register an FIR, raise questions about the adequacy of the original inquiry. These are not minor procedural details.

In a suspicious death, the quality of evidence collection and the completeness of the investigation determine whether the truth can be established. When serious questions remain unanswered, public confidence shatters.

Yet the reopening must not be mistaken for confirmation of murder. Disha's father, Satish Salian, has alleged that his daughter was sexually assaulted and murdered, and that influential people were protected through the suppression or fabrication of evidence. His complaint also alleges a connection with the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput, whom Disha had professionally represented. These are grave allegations, not established facts. The High Court itself has made clear that the registration of an FIR does not establish anyone's guilt.

The proximity of the two deaths in June 2020 helped fuel speculation. Rajput's death, followed by the intense media campaign against his girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty, exposed the dangers of allowing conjecture to overwhelm evidence. The CBI subsequently concluded that Rajput had died by suicide and found no role for Chakraborty or her family. That conclusion does not automatically settle the separate questions concerning Disha, nor does the reopening of her case invalidate the findings in his.

The danger now is that the investigation becomes another arena for political combat. The naming of politicians, police officers and film personalities can generate headlines long before evidence is tested. Political affiliations should neither shield anyone from investigation nor become grounds for presuming guilt. The same standard must apply to every individual, regardless of influence or public reputation.

The CBI therefore carries a responsibility that goes beyond registering a case. It must establish what happened on the night of Disha's death, examine the forensic and documentary evidence, account for investigative lapses and determine whether credible evidence supports the allegations of criminal conspiracy. Any connection with Rajput's death must be demonstrated, not inferred from chronology or professional association.

For Disha's parents, the passage of six years cannot diminish the need for answers. But justice cannot be measured by whether investigators confirm a particular theory or satisfy demands for retribution. It must be measured by the integrity of the process and the strength of the evidence.

The reopening offers an opportunity to replace speculation with findings. If the allegations are substantiated, those responsible must face consequences. If they are not, that conclusion must be established transparently. The public deserves neither a convenient closure nor an endless mystery.

Ties that bind

Some of the most important relationships in life begin before we have any knowledge of them. That unsettling truth lies at the heart of the remarkable story of two Indian-born women, adopted separately in infancy, who became close friends as teenagers in the Netherlands and only decades later discovered that they were biological sisters.

The extraordinary element is not the DNA test itself. Genetic testing has made such discoveries increasingly possible. What is extraordinary is that the relationship existed before the explanation. As teenagers, the two women recognised similarities in appearance and behaviour and developed an immediate intimacy. They eventually lost touch, lived separate adult lives and built their own families. Yet the connection had been real even when its biological basis was invisible. That should complicate the way we think about family.

Modern societies tend to define family through a mixture of biology, law and shared upbringing. Adoption, however, exposes the limitations of each definition. A child may have biological parents who are strangers, adoptive parents who are unquestionably family, and siblings whose existence remains unknown. None of these relationships cancels the others. Identity can contain several truths simultaneously.

For adopted children, the question of biological origins can be far more than curiosity. It can concern medical history, inherited traits, personal identity and the simple human desire to know where one's story began. The women in this case had grown up in loving Dutch families, but one of them had already travelled to India as a young adult seeking information about her origins and encountered the barriers created by incomplete or inaccessible records.

That points to a larger institutional issue. Adoption systems should not merely provide children with new homes; they should preserve, as far as ethically and legally possible, the information that allows those children to understand their histories later in life. Records concerning birth, biological parents and siblings can acquire enormous significance decades after an adoption has been completed.

Technology is now changing that equation. Consumer DNA databases can connect people across continents and generations, sometimes revealing relationships that families, institutions or governments failed to document. But genetic discovery also carries responsibilities. A DNA match can uncover secrets involving parentage, adoption and family history that people may not be emotionally prepared to confront. Privacy safeguards and informed consent therefore matter as much as technological capability.

There is also something quietly humbling about this particular reunion. The women did not need genetics to become close. The test supplied evidence, not affection. It confirmed a biological relationship that their lives had somehow anticipated.

Perhaps that is the most enduring lesson. Biology can explain a connection, but it cannot manufacture one. Family is partly inherited, partly created and sometimes unexpectedly rediscovered. The two sisters did not recover the years they had lost. But they gained the possibility of refusing to lose any more.

And sometimes that is what a second chance looks like: not returning to the beginning, but finally understanding who was there beside you all along.

Reorienting Education ~ II

What is the purpose of human life? Different philosophical and spiritual traditions answer this question differently, and education should not impose one particular answer. But education should create the intellectual space for a young person to ask the question. What does it mean to live a good life? What do I owe to my family and society? What is the relationship between freedom and responsibility? What constitutes happiness? How should one respond to success and failure? What is the difference between desire and need? How should power be exercised? What makes an action just or unjust?

Our understanding of success also needs reconsideration. A person may earn a large income and yet experience a life impoverished by broken relationships, anxiety, selfishness or an absence of purpose. Another person may have a modest profession but contribute enormously to family, community and society. Economic achievement and human fulfilment are not synonymous. Education should not teach young people to be indifferent to material success, but it should teach them that material success is only one component of a meaningful life.

This brings us to perhaps the deepest question: what is the purpose of human life? Different philosophical and spiritual traditions answer this question differently, and education should not impose one particular answer. But education should create the intellectual space for a young person to ask the question. What does it mean to live a good life? What do I owe to my family and society? What is the relationship between freedom and responsibility? What constitutes happiness? How should one respond to success and failure? What is the difference between desire and need? How should power be exercised? What makes an action just or unjust? These are not questions outside education. They are among the most important questions education can help a human being explore.

Literature, philosophy, history, art and culture have a special role here. Literature allows us to enter lives different from our own. History teaches us that societies are shaped by choices and consequences. Philosophy trains us to examine assumptions. Art develops sensitivity and imagination. Music and theatre cultivate emotional expression and collective experience. Civics teaches us that rights are accompanied by responsibilities.



A single digital ID can simplify life, but who will protect the data?

There is something almost surreal about how cheap privacy, especially data privacy, has become in Bangladesh. On September 6, a reporter from Prothom Alo anonymously approached an online data seller and provided them with the mobile number of a government minister.

Payment was made, and a few hours later, the seller delivered three months of the minister's call detail records, including whom he had spoken to, when, for how long, and which mobile towers his phone had connected to. When approached for comments, the minister checked the records against that from his own phone. They matched.

If that sounds too causal, it's because it is. Such illegal practices have, unfortunately, become increasingly common. A Dismissal investigation conducted in June found a blooming online market where citizens' personal data are being sold through



"Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making character-making assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library."



Facebook advertisements, websites, Telegram, and WhatsApp. The array of data that are up for purchase includes people's NIDs, call detail records, mobile phone location data, SMS lists, tax identification numbers (TINs), IMEI numbers, police clearance certificates, passport details, and mobile financial service statements.

If even the personal data of a cabinet minister can be bought online with roughly the effort it takes to order dinner, we cannot help but ask: does "data security" mean anything today?

The urgency of that question has been heightened by the government's reported plans for an extraordinarily ambitious digital identity project. Under the proposed Unified Digital Identity, or "One-ID," citizens would receive a permanent identity from birth that could be used throughout their lifetime to access public services, including

possession to knowledge as a resource for social contribution. The reorientation of the education system must, therefore, be systemic. It should influence curriculum design, teacher training, assessment methods, institutional culture, vocational education, higher education, career counselling and community engagement. Educational institutions should be encouraged to measure not merely examination results and placement figures, but also participation in meaningful projects, innovation, service, creativity and the development of broader competencies.

Parents should be encouraged to value curiosity and character alongside marks.

more content, but people who think more deeply, question more intelligently and act more responsibly.

The relationship between education and social degradation must also be understood carefully. It would be too simplistic to attribute crime, violence or moral decline to shortcomings in the education system alone. Social problems arise from multiple and interacting causes. Yet education has a preventive and formative role. A person who develops empathy,

self-control, critical thinking, respect for law, appreciation of human dignity and the ability to resolve conflict constructively possesses resources that can help resist destructive impulses and social pressures. Education cannot eliminate crime, but an education system that consciously develops character and social responsibility can contribute to a healthier social environment, away from deviant social behaviour.

Ultimately, what we need is not less education but a broader conception of education. We need to move from education as credential to education as capability; from education as preparation for employment to education as preparation for life; from learning as an activity confined to youth to learning as a lifelong process; and from knowledge as personal possession to knowledge as a resource for social contribution.

The reorientation of the education system must, therefore, be systemic. It should influence curriculum design, teacher training, assessment methods, institutional culture, vocational education, higher education, career counselling and community engagement. Educational institutions should be encouraged to measure not merely examination results and placement figures, but also participation in meaningful projects, innovation, service, creativity and the development of broader competencies.

Parents should be encouraged to value curiosity and character alongside marks.

healthcare and education.

The proposed system would gradually replace the separate functions of existing cards and documents, potentially reducing the need to maintain multiple forms of identification. Precisely what data the new card would contain, however, has not yet been finalised.

An average person spends much time navigating a maze of identity numbers, certificates, registrations, and databases. A well-designed digital identity system could, in theory, reduce duplication and spare people from repeatedly submitting the same information to different government offices.

But we are carrying years of unresolved issues over how citizens' data are collected, accessed, copied, protected, and, in many cases, sold. Most people have simply learned to live with this reality, often without knowing the extent of the risks.

Many have had to suffer because of the

Students should be told that a career is important, but it is only one part of a life. Employers should participate in shaping relevant competencies while recognising that universities have a responsibility larger than supplying skilled labour. Policymakers should ensure that employability and human development are treated as complementary rather than competing objectives.

The ultimate objective should be to create an education system that produces people who are capable of earning a livelihood, but who also know how to live; people who can compete, but also cooperate; people who can exercise rights, but understand responsibilities; people who can use technology, but are not controlled by it; people who can pursue ambition, but retain humility; people who can accumulate knowledge, but also develop wisdom; and people who can achieve personal success without losing sight of the society that made that success possible.

Employment should remain an important objective of education because a dignified livelihood gives a person independence and the ability to contribute. But it should be understood as a means rather than the meaning of life. The real purpose of education is larger. It is to enable a human being to understand the world, understand oneself, develop useful knowledge and life skills, cultivate values, form meaningful relationships, accept responsibility and remain capable of learning throughout life.

The ultimate classroom is, therefore, not the school or university. It is life itself. The ultimate examination is not a written paper, but the difficult moment when knowledge has to become judgement, when freedom has to become responsibility and when personal interest has to be reconciled with the larger good. The ultimate certificate is not the degree hanging on the wall, but the trust that other human beings place in us.

If education can once again embrace this larger purpose, we will not have to choose between employability and humanity. We can create an education system that prepares young people both to earn a living and to live a life of meaning. We can transform the degree from an endpoint into a beginning, the classroom from a place of instruction into a foundation for life-long learning, and employment from the destination of education into one of its many instruments.

The challenge before us, therefore, is not merely to educate more people. It is to reorient what we mean by education itself. We must ask whether we are merely preparing the next generation for the labour market, or preparing them for the far larger and more meaningful and demanding task of being human. A society that gets this distinction right will not only produce better workers and professionals; it will have a better chance of producing wiser citizens, stronger communities and more humane human beings. Education should ultimately teach us not merely how to make a living, but how to make a life - and how, through that life, to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of others.

(Concluded)

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

CEC must go

Sir, Please refer to today's reports "Under-fire ECI says no rift, unanimous on decisions" & "CEC-EC selection law challenge heads to Constitution Bench after split verdict".

The investigation by the Indian Express into the Election Commission of India's (ECI) functioning during its Special Intensive Revision (SIR) shows that the disquiet over what transpired under CEC Gyanesh Kumar's watch is not limited to civil society, the media and the Opposition.

It ran through the ECI itself, as Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi objected on record at least 14 times between October 2025 and August 2026 to decisions, many of which, they said, were taken without their knowledge.

Their dissent mirrors what local election

officials had complained of: that many of the changes in the electoral rolls were done at the central database level overriding Electoral Registration Officers, the statutory authority on voters' eligibility.

The consequences of the anomalies in the ECI's decision-making and its functioning were the deepest in West Bengal. About 60 lakh electors were flagged for software-generated "logical discrepancies" - many were dubious - and 27 lakh names were deleted.

Of the 38 lakh appeals pending before tribunals, 16.1 lakh were by those seeking to remove voters whom judicial officers had included; Mr. Sandhu's question of who authorised filing them on the ECI's behalf remains unanswered.

Meanwhile, over nine in 10 appeals against deletion decided so far have restored the electors, which suggests that the exercise

struck off lakhs of genuine voters before the West Bengal elections.

On Wednesday, Justice Dipankar Datta, as part of a two-judge Bench, held in his opinion that the 2023 Act's replacement of the CJI, whom the Anoop Baranwal judgment had placed on the selection panel, with a Union Minister, fails the "perception test".

It was this panel that chose Mr. Kumar as CEC. Given the context, Mr. Kumar must resign and the Court must halt further deletions until the electoral roll database is audited. Anything less will be a defeat for India's democracy.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 24 September.

Betrayed

Sir, One almost feels like saying "Et tu

CEC?" in the backdrop of the Indian Express expose about the workings of the Election Commission.

That there was something wrong in the state of Denmark (read, the ECI's functioning, particularly in the manner in which the CEC was conducting himself) was known to all and sundry.

The nation seems to be witnessing an extraordinary scandal involving the complete breach of trust that we the people had in an institution that not too long ago was held in high esteem.

Friedrich Nietzsche's powerful quote comes to mind instantly - "I'm not upset that you lied to me, I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you." Is Mr Gyanesh Kumar listening?

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole, Dewas, 24 September.



Committed to nation-building

NARENDRA MODI

There is a beautiful saying, “वृक्ष कबहुँ नहिं फल भखे, नदी न संचे नीर। परमार्थ के कारने, साधुन धरा शरीर।”. It means the tree does not consume its own fruit, nor does the river retain its waters. Both exist for the benefit of others. Our saints and seers have long taught us that a life devoted to the welfare of those around us acquires a meaning far greater than individual achievement. If there is one person in whom this spirit was constantly reflected, it was Shri Ashok Singhal Ji.

Starting 27th September, we mark his birth centenary to celebrate an outstanding personality who brought together spiritual pursuit, cultural awakening and decades of dedicated organisational work.

I consider it a privilege that I had innumerable opportunities to interact with Ashok Ji and receive his affection. One of the earliest instances dates back to 1981, when I was a young Karyakarta going about the organisational duties given to me. I received a handwritten letter from him. Naturally, it was a noteworthy moment for me. He talked about an important upcoming programme and gave a few tasks to be done.

Over several decades, I saw him work day and night. He would undertake long and often difficult travels to the remotest of areas. He was particularly passionate about travelling across tribal areas of Gujarat. His mind was constantly running, thinking about what more one can do for those on the margins of society. Whenever any part of the nation was affected by a natural disaster, Ashok Ji was either among the first to reach there himself or among those guiding Karyakartas to help those affected. My own experience with him in the aftermath of the 2001 Kutch earthquake was unforgettable.

This spirit of compassion and care for others is something that came to Ashok Ji very early in his life. He hailed from a very illustrious and prosperous family. His father, Shri Mahavir Ji, was a distinguished administrator. One of his brothers, Shri BP Singhal Ji, went on to become a police officer and later a Member of Parliament. Another brother, Shri VP Singhal Ji, was the Chief Secretary of

Tripura when the state was just formed. Other family members succeeded in the world of commerce and agriculture.

But from a young age, Ashok Ji was attracted to something else altogether...the revival of Bharat and bringing glory to Maa Bharti's children. Growing up in Prayagraj, Ashok Ji would sit for hours on the banks of the Sangam. The river naturally interested him, but so did the people who came, such as saints, seers and devotees. It nurtured an understanding of India's cultural ethos and strengthened his intention to do something for society. This desire to live for others drew him to the RSS. He embraced every responsibility that came his way with enthusiasm, discipline and a sense of duty.

Ashok Ji nurtured institutions and movements through persistence and hard work. He was blessed with a formidable voice and an oratory that could hold an entire gathering in its spell. Equally noteworthy was his care for fellow Karyakartas. Anyone who came into contact with him could not help but marvel at his remarkable simplicity. He shared a deep bond with the Sant Samaj and commanded immense respect among saints and seers across the country. They valued his counsel and listened to him with great regard.

My mind goes back to two instances which brought out the legendary persona of Ashok Ji. The first was in 1993, when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad organised a convention in the USA to mark 100 years since Swami Vivekananda's Chicago address. The vision to host such a conference overseas, the planning and the bringing together of diverse stakeholders revealed the organisational genius of Ashok Ji.

The second instance is from the year 2000. The World Hindu Conference was organised in Port of Spain in Trinidad and Tobago. I could see how his presence ignited so much enthusiasm among other delegates. After my address, his words of appreciation were a very moving experience for



me. I saw yet again how his encouragement filled every Karyakarta with so much energy.

No mention of Ashok Ji is complete without recalling his pivotal role in the Ram Jammabhooni Movement. Who can forget his address at the Boat Club Rally in 1991? Or the defining image of an injured and bleeding Ashok Ji at the peak of the movement. Today, if there is a grand Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, it is because of stalwarts like him who selflessly immersed themselves in the effort to make it possible. He would have been the happiest person on seeing the Ram Mandir take shape in Ayodhya.

Ashok Ji was blessed with remarkable clarity of thought and one area where it was clearly seen was his belief that our society needs to be harmonious, that the message of brotherhood has to be reaffirmed. He worked towards

strengthening social unity and equality. He firmly believed that there could be no distinction of any kind in society and that every individual deserved equal dignity and respect.

It was his thought that the first brick of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya would be laid by Shri Kameshwar Choupal Ji, a grassroots VHP Karyakarta from Bihar who hailed from the marginalised sections of society. At a Dharm Sansad in Kashi, he decided that the Dom Raja would be honoured and went on to work with him as part of various community efforts.

Beyond nation-building, Ashok Ji had two areas that were very close to his heart: education (especially Vedic education) and music. As the MP from Varanasi, I feel very proud that the city I represent, the eternal Kashi, has played its part in Ashok Ji's life. He was educated at BHU and was also known to be a good student. He was

closely associated with the Ekal Vidyalaya initiative, which worked to extend basic education to remote villages, especially among tribal communities. He was a voracious reader as well as a good listener and he always told younger Karyakartas to read as much as possible.

Those who knew Ashok Ji closely knew how well he sang. I recall meetings in Nagpur, where he would sing the Ekal Geet, leaving everyone mesmerised and setting the tone for the meeting. A video of him surprising everyone and singing “हे मातृभूमि मेरी, हे पितृभूमि मेरी” during his 90th birthday celebrations in 2015 went viral.

On his birth centenary, let us ensure that more youngsters know about his greatness. And let us renew our pledge to realise his dreams for our nation and our people.

The writer is Prime Minister of India.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 28 September 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Out of the nine provinces in India equipped with Legislative Councils, in three only — Burma, Madras, and Bengal — has it been notified that the elections must be held before November 30. Exception to this has been taken in some quarters on the familiar ground that the results in one case are apt to influence the others. A Swarajist or non-Swarajist victory in Bengal or Madras might produce decisive effects in Bombay or the Punjab, and it is undeniable that on the last occasion the defeat of the late Sir Surendranath Banerjea and Mr. S. R. Das went far to demoralize the Liberals in other parts of India. Whether local conditions would permit of holding the elections on the same day throughout the country we cannot say, but such is now the English practice, and in the absence of good reason to the contrary it ought to be adopted in India.

News Items

TIGER INVADES SHOP

MEAL OF PORK AND VISIT TO A HOUSE

(Special Cable.)
Paris, Sept.

Amusing details of the way in which the little town of St. Amand-les-Eaux was terrorised by eight lions and two tigers which escaped from a circus are given by the *Matin*. A pedestrian walking down the street, unconscious of anything amiss, suddenly found a lion walking by his side. The animal sniffed him, licked his hand and disappeared down a street. Another lion entered a busy cafe, but a tiger, desiring a more solid meal, visited a pork butcher's shop and made short work of its contents. A man who saw the tiger coming up the staircase leading to his bedroom had just time to escape by tying a sheet to the bar across the window and sliding down it to the street. Eventually all the animals were recaptured and not a single person was attacked. — Copyright.

LORD READING

DIRECTOR OF NEW PALESTINE ELECTRIC CORPORATION

London, Sept.

It is announced that Lord Reading, Sir Alfred Mond, Sir Hugo Hirst and Mr. James de Rothschild are joining the board of directors of the Palestine Electric Corporation Limited, formed for the purpose of carrying out Rutenburg's scheme of electrification of Palestine. The capital has been fully subscribed. — Reuters.

PHILOSOPHY OF INDIA

5,000 BERLINERS HEAR TAGORE LECTURE

Cologne, Sept.

Five thousand people to-day paid from half a crown to ten shillings each to hear Rabindranath Tagore lecture on the philosophy of India. The lecture, which was delivered in English, was translated into German. In the evening the poet gave excerpts from his poems in Bengali, which proved to be very popular. — Reuters.

DELEGATES TO MEET CONFERENCE

CALLED BY THE FEDERATION

(British Official Wireless.)
Rugby, Sept.

No immediate change in the coal situation is in prospect. The Miners' Executive met to-day, however, and, after considering the Prime Minister's letter, decided to call a further delegate conference which will meet on Wednesday in London to consider the position. Additional interest will be lent to Monday's coal debate in Parliament in view of the fact that the Miners' executive will meet the Parliamentary Labour Party and mining members of Parliament on that day. They will also discuss the situation with the Council of the Trades Union Congress.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

Obedience, the path to perdition

Press reports suggest that the leaders of our organizations, in the financial and other sectors, are remarkably prone to exploiting their fiefdoms for personal gain. Ingenious schemes abound which guarantee them prodigious compensation and benefits regardless of the results they achieve. While the topmost managers usually initiate such exploitative plans, it is usually the middle and junior managers who shape, refine and administer them.

In our political organizations, corrupt and inept leaders, once able to grasp a position, then utilize the foothold to grab unlimited power the country's laws limit or preclude. In that illicit grab, they often secure the eager alliance of other politicians, party men and administrators. The secrecy and collusion of the beneficiaries are to be expected. Why don't the other professionals in the know protest or blow the whistle? What ensures their silence and compliance? Beyond the simple and often unenforceable threat of superiors' wrath, is there some payoff for these willing tools of others' wrongdoing?

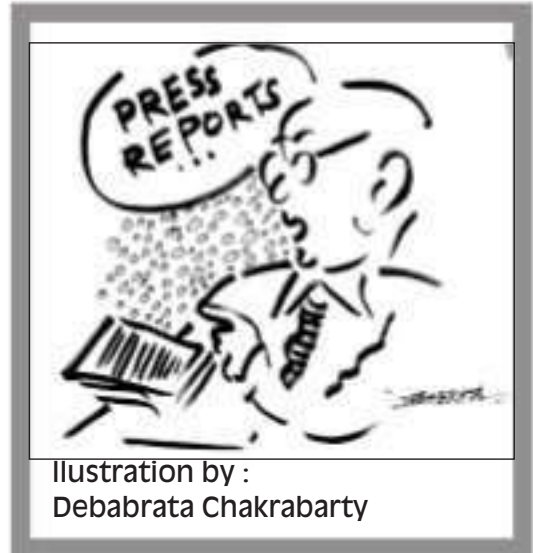
In the early seventies, Stanley Milgram carried out a series of experiments in which two persons,

designated teacher and learner, came into a laboratory with the experimenter. Ostensibly a test of learning principles, the learner had to memorize word pairs, and the teacher administered electric shocks for errors, with increasingly stronger shocks for worse errors. The learner was strapped to a machine, and the teacher-controlled shocks marked Slight and Moderate to Intense and "Danger: Severe Shock." The experimenter stayed on to guide the teacher and answer questions. In reality, the machine was a dummy, the learner was an actor giving agonized responses on cue, and the focus was on the teacher's conduct.

Before the experiments, knowledgeable people expected that volunteer teachers would refuse to obey the experimenter in applying shocks, especially of higher intensity. They were wrong. Most volunteers felt perturbed and uncertain about continuing the shocks when the learners whimpered, screamed, pleaded a heart condition. But continue the shocks they did, right up to the maximum voltage, at the merest urging of the experimenter. Interestingly, the experimenters never promised any reward or invoked any penalty. They just told the teachers the experiment

required them to continue and accentuate the shocks. The majority obeyed until the end. Why? Because some people are unmitigated sadists who enjoy hurting others? Milgram disproved that hypothesis with the open choice of his teachers: they were ordinary people from all classes, workers, professionals, managers. Because people have hidden sadistic tendencies that come to the fore when they have power to exercise them with a respectable reason and without a penalty? Milgram disproved that too with a variation of his experiment: he allowed teachers freedom in the choice of shock levels. Teachers invariably chose low levels of shock at which learners did not express discomfort.

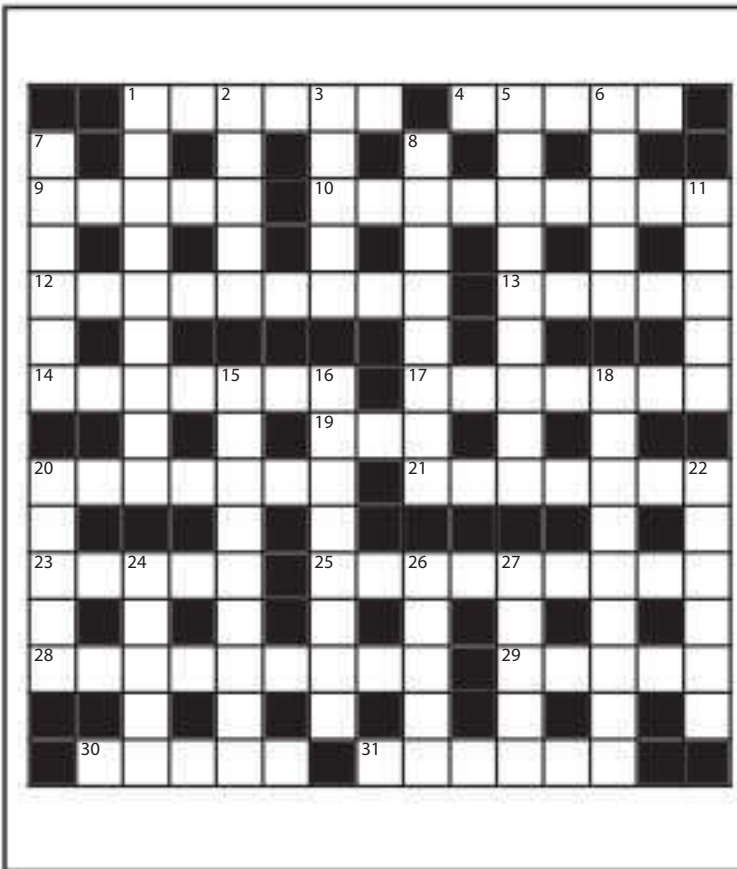
The conclusion we cannot escape is that teachers performed their odious task with such relentless thoroughness because of the presence and persuasion of the experimenters. The latter were authority figures, and the teachers felt they should obey them. They quivered, sweated and spoke later with obvious distaste of their assignment, but did not walk away from it. Their payoff was twofold: they derived satisfaction from pleasing the person in authority, the experimenter, the



more so for completing an unpleasant task; and they derived further satisfaction from a sense of competence, in doing their perceived duty, reaching the prescribed end and managing to apply the fiercest shock. Several showed this by being extremely pliant and deferential to experimenters, chastising learners on their own and, in a revealing variation of the experiment, forcing learners' hand down on the shock plate. The cruellest practices, the most heartless decisions, the utterly corrupt and contemptible behaviors take place in our organizations not because their authors are monsters and psychopaths. They happen repeatedly, with the collusion of scores of ordinary people, because we choose the payoff of feeling competent and pleasing the powerful. We do not want to hurt the feelings of our manipulative superiors; we would



Crossword | No. 293594



Last Saturday's Solution



ACROSS

1 University dissertation's about down-and-out (6)

4 One tries to cause upset and turmoil – occasionally crossing line (5)

9 Optical illusion partly inverted colour (5)

10 One opens either end of Chubb-lock with small band (9)

12 Craft group catch heartless bully out? (5,4)

13 Bond's boss and assistant returned for films, TV etc (5)

14 Declined journalist on record – men become focus of smear (7)

17 Mass conflict fractures defence (7)

19 Heard every instrument (3)

20 Lazy model, cast (7)

21 Approve funny red nose (7)

23 Furious, old Rover's losing power (5)

25 Perhaps Tommy Cooper's floundering with idea for trick, ultimately (4,5)

28 Random parking in ditch first and road after – this vehicle is South African (9)

29 Order tabbouleh twice – in retrospect, somewhat steep (5)

30 Gentle hit, initially, Billy Liar's out of print (5)

31 No leads on the water boiler? (6)

DOWN

1 Force vehicle to speed up after Petty Officer left in charge (6,3)

2 Copper replaces one, making patrol complete (5)

3 Best phone company accepts ninety pounds (5)

5 Looked like Greeks regularly exploited space up top (9)

6 Oddly Lou Reed's drug free, touring India – it's brilliant (5)

7 Quiet film actor (6)

8 Likely for highly attractive sort to pick up student (8)

11 Share with journalist (5)

15 Outlaw speed bumps on bendy road (9)

16 Broadcast dramedy describing a fantasy (8)

18 Publish landlord's overseas correspondence (3,6)

20 Consider speaker's approach (5)

22 On choppy seas, English surfer finally wipes out (6)

24 Disgust American by rolling tongue (5)

26 Daughter in prison, revealing bum (5)

27 Gold coin and compass (5)

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











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

epaper.thestatesman.com



Editor's
TAKE

Jaishankar's rebuke: Necessary message

At the UN General Assembly, Jaishankar rejects Pakistan's framing of terrorism and self-defence charges while Sharif revisits Kashmir, Indus waters and Trump's role

At the 81st UN General Assembly, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar delivered India's sharpest riposte yet to Pakistan, calling it a "serial practitioner of terrorism" without naming it directly. The target was unmistakable: a day earlier, PM Shehbaz Sharif had told the same assembly that Pakistan's response to Operation Sindoor was an exercise of its "inherent right of self-defence," credited Donald Trump for a "timely intervention" in the 2025 conflict, and revived Kashmir and the Indus Waters Treaty. Jaishankar's reply was blunt: arguments invoked to normalise terrorism and claim immunity from its consequences "will not stand." Friendship, he said, cannot coexist with terrorism.

On substance, Jaishankar's case is strong. The Pahalgam attack of April 22, which killed 26 civilians, was condemned by the Security Council within days; the Resistance Front's claim of responsibility was well documented, even as Pakistan lobbied to keep its name out of the Council's statement. Operation Sindoor's strikes on Jaish-e-Mohammed's Bahawalpur stronghold and Lashkar-e-Taiba's Muridke base followed the red line India has held since 2016: cross-border terror invites cross-border retaliation. Framing this as self-defence rests on firmer ground than Sharif's attempt to cast Pakistan's response as the defensive act.

Where the speech is weaker is in what it leaves unresolved. Refusing to name Pakistan gives the address deniability but also dilutes it. The speech also recycled language he used at three previous Assemblies – epicentre of global terrorism, consequences, mend its ways which sounds cliché. And it also fell short of calling Trump bluff on being a peacemaker.

The danger Jaishankar named – arguments that normalise terrorism and grant its sponsors immunity – is real and growing. When a state's leadership credits an army chief for actions triggered by a terror attack, and frames retaliation for that attack as the aggression needing justification, the line between perpetrator and victim starts to blur. Pakistan has used terrorism to inflict pain and cannot wash its hands by saying it has nothing to do with those non-state actors.

The speech worked: it dominated headlines, reasserted India's post-Pahalgam doctrine – no talks under terror, blood and water cannot flow together – and signalled continuity to a domestic audience still processing last year's conflict. But as diplomacy meant to move opinions, it did less.

The general debate is a stage for talking past adversaries, not persuading them, and nothing said on Saturday will alter Pakistan's calculus or loosen Washington's studied ambiguity between two nuclear-armed states it would rather not choose between. Effective messaging, then; not yet effective policy.

The real test was never the assembly hall – it is whether major capitals now treat normalising terrorism as disqualifying, or merely as rhetoric to nod along with before returning to business as usual with Islamabad.

A great personality, committed to nation-building

As India marks the birth centenary of Shri Ashok Singhal Ji, we remember a life devoted to society and the nation. From his early years in Prayagraj to decades of organisational work, social service and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, Ashok Ji combined spiritual conviction with energy, simplicity and dedication.



NARENDRA
MODI

There is a beautiful saying, "*Vriksh kabahu naahin phal bhakhai, nadi na sanchai neer. Parmarth ke kaarme, saadhun dhara shareer*." It means the tree does not consume its own fruit, nor does the river retain its waters. Both exist for the benefit of others. Our saints and seers have long taught us that a life devoted to the welfare of those around us acquires a meaning far greater than individual achievement. If there is one person in whom this spirit was constantly reflected, it was Shri Ashok Singhal Ji. Starting 27th September, we mark his birth centenary to celebrate an outstanding personality who brought together spiritual pursuit, cultural awakening and decades of dedicated organisational work.

I consider it a privilege that I had innumerable opportunities to interact with Ashok Ji and receive his affection. One of the earliest instances dates back to 1981, when I was a young Karyakarta going about the organisational duties given to me. I received a handwritten letter from him. Naturally, it was a noteworthy moment for me. He talked about an important upcoming programme and gave a few tasks to be done.

Over several decades, I saw him work day and night. He would undertake long and often difficult travels to the remotest of areas. He was particularly passionate about travelling across tribal areas of Gujarat. His mind was constantly running, thinking about what more one can do for those on the margins of society. Whenever any part of the nation was affected by a natural disaster, Ashok Ji was either among the first to reach there himself or among those guiding Karyakartas to help those affected. My own experience with him in the aftermath of the 2001 Kutch earthquake was unforgettable.

This spirit of compassion and care for others is something that came to Ashok Ji very early in his life. He hailed from a very illustrious and prosperous family. His father, Shri Mahavir Ji, was a distinguished administrator. One of his brothers, Shri BP Singhal Ji, went on to become a police officer and later a Member of Parliament. Another brother, Shri VP Singhal Ji, was the Chief Secretary of Tripura when the state was just formed. Other family members succeeded in the world of commerce and agriculture. But from a young age, Ashok Ji was attracted to something else altogether...the revival of Bharat and bringing glory to Maa Bharti's children. Growing up in Prayagraj, Ashok Ji would sit for hours on the banks of the Sangam. The river naturally inter-



SHRI ASHOK
SINGHAL JI
NURTURED
INSTITUTIONS
AND MOVEMENTS
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The article has been written
by the Prime Minister of India

ested him, but so did the people who came, such as saints, seers and devotees. It nurtured an understanding of India's cultural ethos and strengthened his intention to do something for society. This desire to live for others drew him to the RSS. He embraced every responsibility that came his way with enthusiasm, discipline and a sense of duty.

Shri Ashok Singhal Ji nurtured institutions and movements through persistence and hard work. He was blessed with a formidable voice and an oratory that could hold an entire gathering in its spell. Equally noteworthy was his care for fellow Karyakartas. Anyone who came into contact with him could not help but marvel at his remarkable simplicity. He shared a deep bond with the Sant Samaj and commanded immense respect among saints and seers across the country.

They valued his counsel and listened to him with great regard. My mind goes back to two instances which brought out the legendary persona of Shri Ashok Singhal Ji. The first was in 1993, when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad organised a convention in the USA to mark 100 years since Swami Vivekananda's Chicago address. The vision to host such a conference overseas, the planning and the bringing together of diverse stakeholders revealed the organisational genius of Ashok Ji.

The second instance is from the year 2000. The World Hindu Conference was organised in Port of Spain in Trinidad and Tobago. I could see how his presence ignited so much enthusiasm among other delegates. After my address, his words of appreciation were a very moving experience for me. I saw yet again how his encouragement filled every Karyakarta with so much energy. No mention of Shri

He firmly believed that there could be no distinction of any kind in society and that every individual deserved equal dignity and respect. It was his thought that the first brick of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya would be laid by Shri Kameshwar Choupal Ji, a grassroots VHP Karyakarta from Bihar who hailed from the marginalised sections of society. At a Dharm Sansad in Kashi, he decided that the Dom Raja would be honoured and went on to work with him as part of various community efforts. Beyond nation-building, Shri Ashok Singhal Ji had two areas that were very close to his heart: education (especially Vedic education) and music. As the MP from Varanasi, I feel very proud that the city I represent, the eternal Kashi, has played its part in Shri Ashok Singhal Ji's life. He was educated at BHU and was also known to be a good student. He was closely associated with the Ekal Vidyalaya initiative, which worked to extend basic education to remote villages, especially among tribal communities. He was a voracious reader as well as a good listener and he always told younger Karyakartas to read as much as possible.

Those who knew Ashok Ji closely knew how well he sang! I recall meetings in Nagpur, where he would sing the Ekal Geet, leaving everyone mesmerised and setting the tone for the meeting.

A video of him surprising everyone and singing "*Hey Matribhumi Meri, Hey Pitribhumi Meri*" during his 90th birthday celebrations in 2015 went viral. On his birth centenary, let us ensure that more youngsters know about his greatness. And let us renew our pledge to realise his dreams for our nation and our people.

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

The Messenger Who Never Kept the Peace

Narada, the celestial messenger and constant traveller between worlds, was often mischievously blamed across the scriptures for stirring conflict wherever his travels took him.

Yet a closer look at his many stories reveals a rather different pattern underneath the mischief. Narada rarely lied or invented discord out of malice. He simply carried true information, often uncomfortable, sometimes deeply inconvenient, from one party to another, forcing hidden tensions and unspoken resentments into the open rather than allowing a false, fragile peace to persist undisturbed. His interventions frequently led to short-term conflict, arguments, confrontations, even temporary heartbreak, but they almost always resolved long-standing issues that had been quietly ignored, buried, or avoided for far too long by everyone involved. His somewhat mischievous role in these stories reminds us that peace built on avoidance is fragile at best, and that sometimes an uncomfortable truth, delivered honestly and without cruelty, does more lasting good for a relationship or a household than convenient, comfortable silence ever could manage on its own. We often prefer to avoid difficult conversations altogether, mistaking the temporary calm of silence for actual resolution, allowing real issues to quietly fester beneath a pleasant surface for months or even years.

Today, raise one honest, difficult truth you've been avoiding with someone close to you, trusting that the short-term discomfort it causes may lead to a far more lasting and genuine resolution between you.

—DAIV

PICTALK



Participants take part in the 5th edition of the Skating Marathon 2026, organised to promote road safety, in Patna. PHOTO: PTI

Are we teaching children to think – or perform?



SAKSHI
SETHI

2ND OPINION

A child delivers a flawless, rehearsed speech and wins loud applause. Another sits quietly, wrestling with a difficult problem, doubting every step until the solution finally emerges. Both represent real academic achievement - yet only one is likely to be photographed, celebrated, and held up as proof of learning. As classrooms grow ever more focused on visible accomplishment, an uncomfortable question follows: are we nurturing thinkers, or simply training performers? Educational institutions worldwide are embracing innovative pedagogy, technology-driven classrooms, and elaborate student activities. These can enrich learning, but they can just as easily disguise its absence. A colourful classroom does not guarantee intellectual growth. An enthusiastic student has not

necessarily understood the concept at hand. Even a beautifully executed project says little about whether its creator can explain the reasoning behind it. Presentation has become a proxy for comprehension, and the two are not the same thing.

This traps teachers in an exhausting paradox: they are expected to cultivate critical thinking while demonstrating engagement, with every lesson creative and every activity memorable. But genuine learning rarely photographs well. It looks like patiently untangling a misconception, or letting a student sit with confusion long enough to work through it. Education should welcome creativity and presentation - but never let either substitute for understanding. Real achievement lies not in how impressive a student's work appears, but in how deeply they grasp it.

A related danger is the growing assumption that learning must always be entertaining. Surrounded by instant information and constant stimulation, children risk losing something essential: the knowledge that intellectual growth demands discomfort. A hard problem may take several failed attempts. A difficult text demands patience. Building an original argument requires uncertainty, reflection, and the willingness to be wrong. These experiences cannot be made entertaining, nor should they be. Learning to persevere through that discomfort builds something more lasting than momentary enjoyment: the confidence to think independently.

School leaders must ask whether their priorities reward genuine understanding or merely impressive outcomes. Parents must accept that learning cannot always be measured in certificates, performances, and public recognition. Teachers deserve the professional freedom to prioritise depth over display, with technology and pedagogy supporting that purpose rather than replacing it with spectacle. The real test of education is not how confidently a child repeats a rehearsed answer, but how thoughtfully they respond to an unfamiliar one - whether they can question an assumption, defend an argument, or recognise a mistake.

These abilities will matter long after the decorations are removed, the competitions forgotten, and the photographs faded. Perhaps the greatest danger facing modern education is not a shortage of information or opportunity, but too little time for children to develop their own thoughts.

A school should be remembered not for how brilliantly its students performed when watched, but for how confidently they learned to think when no one was. Education's purpose is not to prepare children for applause - it is to prepare them for a world in which they must think for themselves.

The writer is an educator and a columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Iran's balancing act in the Red Sea

Iran's reluctance to actively support the Houthis in their confrontation over Red Sea shipping appears less a rupture than a strategic calculation. Already under pressure from the United States, Tehran may be unwilling to encourage the opening of another costly front that could further expose its interests. China has also reportedly urged Iran to help prevent attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

Iran may therefore be seeking to protect its own strategic interests while retaining the Houthis as an important regional partner.

Such balancing could have wider consequences. The Houthis operate close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital maritime passage connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

If disruption in the Red Sea continues while tensions around the Strait of Hormuz remain elevated, two critical maritime routes could face uncertainty. The consequences could include higher oil prices, increased insurance premiums and rising transportation costs as vessels are forced to take longer routes around Africa. For India, prolonged disruption could translate into higher fuel, freight and import costs.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

Firmness must leave room for dialogue

This refers to the report, "India lashes out at Pak over terrorism at United Nations" (September 27). The exchange at the United Nations once again underlines how terrorism and Kashmir continue to complicate India-Pakistan relations. India must firmly articulate its security concerns, but sustained diplomatic engagement remains equally important. Statements at international forums should be measured enough to preserve space for dialogue while making India's position unmistakably clear. The larger priority should be preventing another cycle of violence. Intelligence-sharing, stronger border management and effective action against terrorist networks must remain central to India's security approach. At the same time, diplomatic channels should remain open. International institutions can play a constructive role by insisting that commitments to combat terrorism are implemented consistently. Concerns relating to people living in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir should also be addressed. Competing narratives must not obscure the need to protect civilians and uphold basic rights. India's response can therefore combine firmness with restraint. Terrorism cannot be normalised, but lasting regional stability will require diplomacy, responsible communication and practical confidence-building measures.

A MYILSAMI | COIMBATORE

Transparency is vital for electoral trust

The controversy surrounding Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and the ongoing electoral process raises important questions about transparency and collective decision-making within the Election Commission. A petition before the Supreme Court has challenged decisions, guidelines and alleged software changes attributed to the CEC without the consent of the other two Election Commissioners.

It has also sought criminal proceedings over alleged dereliction of duty. The petition further alleges that the Election Commission's software was modified to require details of ancestors and information relating to a previous Special Intensive Revision without completing the prescribed statutory process. It claims that both Election Commissioners objected to these changes and maintained that the forms could not be altered without following the required procedure. These allegations are serious and deserve examination through due legal and institutional processes.

The contribution of former CEC T. N. Seshan is often recalled for bringing greater discipline and visibility to electoral administration. Recent developments make it equally important that institutional decisions are transparent, collectively taken and firmly grounded in law.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR | MUMBAI

[illegible]

Dr. Rakesh Kumar

The author is a financial, geopolitical and security analyst and India-Nepal Relations Observer

The writer is the National Co-convenor of the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch and a former Professor at PGDAV College, University of Delhi

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



OPINION

How movies can help us deal with emotions



DR HAMED
AL SINAWI

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at SQU Hospital

SOME OF us spend part of the weekend watching a movie on TV or in the cinema to unwind after a busy week. At times, we find a movie that affects us and makes us reflect on the plot for some time. Psychologists are increasingly using ‘cinematherapy,’ a form of therapy that uses films to help people explore their inner worlds. One framework describes the process in four stages: identification with a character, catharsis, insight into oneself, and universalisation, the recognition that we are not alone in our experiences. Research on cinematherapy is in its early days, but the approach offers a novel way to explore difficult feelings. Why do films affect us so deeply? When we watch a story unfold, our brains respond as if we were partly living it. We feel tension when the hero is in danger, sadness at a farewell, and relief when things turn out well. Psychologists call this ‘narrative transportation’: for two hours, we step out of our lives and into someone else’s. That step outside is precisely what makes films valuable. It is often easier to look at a painful situation when it belongs to a character on

the screen rather than to ourselves. Take the first stage, identification. A man who has recently lost his father may find himself drawn to a grieving son in a film. He does not need to explain his feelings to anyone because the character does it for him. This leads naturally to catharsis, the release of emotions that have been held back. Many people who ‘never cry’ discover tears during a film scene. This is not weakness. It is often the first time they have allowed themselves to feel what they have been carrying. The third stage, insight, is where change begins. Seeing a character make a mistake we recognise, such as pushing loved ones away, avoiding a difficult conversation, or working until exhaustion, can hold up a mirror. A therapist might ask, “What would you have told that character?” Often, the advice we give the character is the advice we need to give ourselves. Finally, universalisation reminds us that our struggles are shared. Loneliness, family conflict, anxiety, and loss are human experiences that cross cultures and generations. Knowing this can reduce shame, a feeling that keeps many people from seeking help. In a world where many suffer in

Next time you watch a film, pay attention to which character moves you and why. Ask yourself what the story is telling you about your own life

silence, this sense of connection can itself be healing. In practice, a therapist may suggest a specific film between sessions, chosen to match the person’s concerns, and then discuss it together. Films about aging parents, addiction, divorce, or resilience can open conversations that feel too difficult to start directly. Cinematherapy is also used in group settings and with adolescents, who may find talking about a film less threatening than talking about themselves. However, we need to remember that cinematherapy is a supplement to professional treatment, not a replacement for it. Some films may trigger painful memories, particularly for people who have experienced trauma, so the choice of film matters. And evidence from large, well-designed studies is still limited. Still, there is something we can all take from this idea. Next time you watch a film, pay attention to which character moves you and why. Ask yourself what the story is telling you about your own life. You may find that the weekend movie offers more than entertainment. It can be a quiet conversation with yourself.

NEPAL TUNNEL SURVIVOR BACKS FLOOD REBUILD

ANUP OJHA

Pulled alive 10 days after catastrophic floods trapped him in a tunnel, Nepali hydropower worker Kabir Maharjan is determined to help rebuild his country despite his own harrowing ordeal. Traditional music and tearful relatives welcomed the 45-year-old when he returned home after spending weeks recovering at a hospital in Kathmandu. “Life is precious. Hundreds of people have died but I survived,” the father of two said, his voice choked with emotion. “Perhaps I still have work to do for my society, for the country, and my home and family.” The August 26 flood, triggered by a glacial mountain collapse near the China-Nepal border, has killed more than 1,400 people, the majority in Nepal. Over 5,000 remain missing in Nepal since the tsunami-like waves swept away roads, bridges and settlements in the mountainous regions up north, and battered crucial hydropower projects. Maharjan, who was among hundreds of workers employed at projects hit by the floods, was eventually airlifted from the worst-hit Rasuwa region. His miraculous rescue on September 4, alongside fellow worker Sanjay Sah, offered a rare moment of hope during the disaster. Now, as Nepal shifts from emergency response to reconstruction, he said he hopes to return to his profession. “There is risk in everything, but still we have to win over it,” he said. More than 800 people employed at hydropower projects in Nepal remain unaccounted for, the energy minister told parliament last week. Forty-seven bodies have been recovered from flood-hit project sites, while rescue teams continue to comb through the ruins. Maharjan said he survived by reaching an upper floor of the tunnel site and drinking water while waiting for help. “Whenever I was awake, I would try to find a way out,” he said. Days later, he saw what appeared to be a light and heard voices. “I thought I imagined it. But I called out, and they answered.” For Maharjan, the country’s long road to recovery mirrors his own - he is still recovering from wounds on his hand and leg. But he said the rebuilding efforts could also provide spiritual sustenance. “While we are alive, we must be patient and do our work,” he said. — AFP

The men who rarely speak about their problems

AS Oman advances technologically and attracts increasing international investment, its people stand to benefit greatly, particularly through improved education and healthcare. Yet progress always carries a cost. For Omanis, especially men, it also brings new pressures. For much of my life, I suffered from depression. I sought professional help, and with the support of a good therapist and appropriate medication, my life became more stable. In time, I was better able to cope with the pressures of running several businesses. My experience has shown me that mental illness is a health issue, not a personal failing. Oman has recognised the need for greater support for citizens experiencing mental-health problems, but further progress will depend on ensuring that people feel safe seeking help without judgement. Families have an essential role to play by learning to recognise the signs of depression in a loved one. A man may not speak openly about his problems. Instead, he may become increasingly irritable or angry, become distant, tired, and lose interest in activities he once enjoyed. These may indicate that someone is struggling and needs understanding and support. For generations, many Omani men understood their role in fairly clear terms. They were expected to provide for their families and contribute to society. These responsibilities remain, but the world around them is changing dramatically. Today, a man may be expected to succeed in a highly competitive workplace, adapt to new technology, and manage family finances. He may also be expected to maintain traditional male responsibilities while meeting modern standards of professional achievement. However,



The rapid pace of change can also leave older men feeling that the knowledge and skills that once gave them confidence are no longer enough. Image is AI generated.



KARIM
EASTERBROOK

The writer is a Former Cambridge School Principal and Author

Many men have been taught that strength means silence. They may conceal anxiety, disappointment, or exhaustion because they fear being judged as weak

change can create opportunity. Oman’s economic development is opening doors that previous generations could scarcely have imagined. Young Omanis can study new subjects at school and enter emerging professions. Improved medical services and greater awareness of health can also lead to longer lives. Opportunities become pressure when people feel they must succeed without showing uncertainty or asking for help. Many men have been taught that strength means silence. They may conceal anxiety, disappointment, or exhaustion because they fear being judged as weak. A man struggling at work, worried about money or experiencing difficulties at home may remain silent until his problems become overwhelming. Social media presents edited images of success, wealth and happiness. Comparing real life with these public performances creates a sense of failure, even when a person is doing reasonably well. The rapid pace of change can also leave older men feeling that the knowledge and skills that once gave them confidence are

no longer enough. Families and communities have an important role to play. Men need to know that responsibility does not require emotional isolation. Speaking honestly with a trusted relative, friend, religious leader, or health professional is not a rejection of tradition. It is a practical way of protecting oneself and one’s family. Workplaces should recognise that productivity depends on well-being. Employers can support staff through reasonable expectations and higher salaries, proper training, and access to professional advice. Employees who are afraid to admit difficulty may appear strong, but it often hides problems until they affect health and performance. Schools and universities can help prepare young men for more than employment. Academic knowledge matters, but so do communication, financial literacy and the ability to cope with pressure. These are essential skills for adult life. Oman’s progress should not be measured only by new buildings, advanced technology or foreign investment. It should also be judged by whether people feel able to live with dignity and confidence within this changing society. Oman’s development offers citizens many opportunities, but it also asks them to adapt. They should not be expected to carry that burden alone. A healthy society is one in which responsibility is shared, difficulties can be discussed, and seeking help is regarded not as failure, but as wisdom. Oman’s future will be strongest when economic and technological progress is matched by equal attention to the people expected to sustain it. My own experience has taught me that seeking professional help can restore not only an individual’s well-being, but also his ability to contribute to his family, his work and society.

Piddington... ‘The Mouse That Roared’



RAY PETERSEN

The writer is a media consultant

‘THE WORM has turned,’ and the population of the tiny hamlet of Piddington, in Oxfordshire, has struck a blow in reaction to the Labour government’s plans to house 1,256 asylum-seekers in the former military base at nearby Bicester. The ‘worm,’ characterised by John Heywood in 1546, was a quiet, submissive, downtrodden group that found its confidence, its voice, its strength, and was galvanised when pushed beyond reason and respect. Certainly, the citizens of this town, that traces its origins back to the ‘Doomsday Book’ of 1086, have demonstrated their ire as the prospect of this massive influx of single foreigners, all males, within walking distance of their town looms ever closer. “We must be heard,” posted one on Meta, “and although it’s ‘tilting at windmills,’ we won’t be bullied.” Christened by the UK media as the ‘Piddington Revolution,’ their community referendum, notably, was held on September 15, the annual observance of ‘Battle of Britain Day,’ when victory in the battle for air supremacy during WWII is celebrated, and ironically the ‘GBNews’ invoked an appropriately emotive reaction, calling this the beginning of the ‘Battle for Britain.’ Conducted by the Piddington Parish Council, under Chairman Tim McNally, the referendum resulted in a healthy 311 votes being cast, from a total population of 358, or 87 per cent, with 285 votes for independence

and only 26 votes AGAINST; a stunning 92 per cent FOR verdict saw a landslide win against the immigrants. Both the turnout and the result indicate absolute dissatisfaction with the government’s plans for managing the asylum-seeker crisis, not just in Piddington, but across the heartland. Callum Miller, the LibDem MP for the Bicester and Woodcock electorate, is an outspoken opponent of the government’s plans and points to a much smaller 2003 planning application being rejected due to ‘unlit roads,’ which the government suggests will be resolved now as the asylum-seekers would be “issued with high-visibility vests and ‘strongly encouraged’ not to walk on the local roads and verges.” Critics also point to there being no current accommodation, utilities, roading or services infrastructure, and the cost of establishing these as being disproportionate to need. Tim McNally, chairman of the Parish Council, rejects Home Office documentation as ‘unrealistic,’ as the former ammunition dump is advocated as a solution to one part of the ongoing immigration dilemma, with its evident shortcomings ‘the tip of the iceberg.’ However, their indignation centres on the ‘dumping’ of the 1256 young, single men in their vicinity, and they ask, “How would you feel if it was happening to you?” Residents in Colchester, Essex, 108 miles south, have shared their experience of having the ‘immigration overflow’ accommodated at

More than 500 parish councils have indicated a willingness to conduct similar referendums, knowing full well that these are not binding on the government, but desperate to show how they feel about the immigration impositions

the nearby former RAF base at Wethersfield, saying their once ‘joyous’ town centre has become a ‘no-go’ area for local women, intimidated by being photographed, whistled at, stared at, and told to ‘cover up.’ “They’re bringing their way of life, and that’s not right,” voiced a pensioner 83 miles further south, in Crowborough, Sussex, apparently very much reflective of national perspectives, it seems. More than 500 parish (town) councils have indicated a willingness to conduct similar referendums, knowing full well that these are not binding on the government, but desperate to show how they feel about the immigration impositions. Prime Minister Andy Burnham has proven tone deaf to the electorate, commenting, “asylum accommodation should not be concentrated only in poorer communities in the north, but also in the wealthier areas in the south.” ‘The Mouse that Roared,’ a 1954 political satire by Leonard Wibberly, mirrors the Piddington experience, as the folly and arrogance of ‘do-gooders,’ the ‘woke’ element, the perpetually sycophantic civil service, and weak-kneed politicians dismiss communities as inconsequential. Eventually, they must bow to the ‘right-ness,’ the electorate, that is the ‘mouse that roared, or the worm that turned,’ otherwise, PM Burnham’s reign could prove short, entirely due to an ill-thought response to the migrant/asylum seeker-problem.

EL NINO REWRITES THE MENU IN THE WORLD’S TOP RESTAURANTS

ANNA CUENCA

A record-breaking El Nino will likely force the world’s top chefs to rethink their menus ahead of droughts, floods and heatwaves upending global food systems. Ants are disappearing from the table in Brazil, one Danish chef is opting for cocoa-free chocolate and Japan is serving up warm-water fish, culinary stars disclosed at the Apapaxoa gastronomic festival on Mexico’s Caribbean coast. United Nations experts have predicted an exceptionally strong cycle of the El Nino climate phenomenon, which causes global changes in winds and rainfall as well as erratic weather conditions. The cream of the culinary crop, looking ahead to unpredictable ingredient availability, quality and prices, are rearranging their shelves accordingly. But for these acclaimed chefs, extreme weather events and their habit of turning the kitchen upside down are nothing new. “In the last three years, I’ve been creating an annual menu that I end up adjusting many times, almost weekly, because certain products aren’t available,” Brazilian chef Alex Atala said. “Ants, for example, this year are only available for customers who specifically ask to try them,” said Atala, whose Sao Paulo restaurant DOM plucks ingredients from the Amazonian wilderness to reinterpret Indigenous traditions. El Nino can also massively disrupt transportation, said Atala. Flooded roads or wildfires “delay a product that should be fresh, and by the time it arrives, it’s no longer in good condition,” he said. The renowned Brazilian chef also emphasised the “cultural loss” provoked by El Nino, referring to the disappearance of tradition along with the unavailable ingredient. The climate crisis has wreaked havoc on the Mediterranean, says Spain’s Quique Dacosta, whose restaurant in the port city of Denia sits near Valencia, which was pummelled by torrential rain in 2024. Almost 250 people died, while vineyards, orange groves and plots used to grow Albufera rice, an essential paella ingredient, were decimated. An event of such intensity “directly attacks the raw materials that are the natural foundation on which we build our cuisine,” Dacosta said. Footfall also takes a hit, he said, noting that a stormy season has once again descended and fearful customers are cancelling their reservations. “It’s going to rain a lot and people just don’t come anymore - imagine how vulnerable our businesses are,” he said. While El Nino ramps up weather conditions in some parts, it produces a vacuum in others. “This is the first year without hurricanes” in the Mexican Caribbean, said chef Roberto Solis. — AFP

The un-ordered UN order

AS WORLD leaders gathered in New York City for the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly, the international order they have ostensibly come to defend is in worse shape than at any point since 1945. China and Russia never fully accepted the post-Cold War international system, many newly assertive middle powers resent it, and its principal financial backer, the American public, has lost interest in underwriting it. With the UN about to choose a new secretary-general and US President Donald Trump’s administration openly hostile to multilateralism, it is unclear how much longer the system can stagger on. Sadly, no new order is in the making. This is not an interregnum between an American-led order and a Chinese-led one. We have long lived with instances of disorder — with states breaking the rules within a framework that they still recognise — but we are now approaching something new. I call it un-order: a situation in which states act without reference to any common framework. One can already see this new dispensation in how crises unfold. After the United States and Israel launched their war against Iran in February, the parties could not even agree whether a ceasefire existed, let alone who had won. Moreover, disputes regularly jump from one domain to another, such as when Trump’s designs on Greenland lead to tariff threats against the European Union. Everywhere one looks, the ties that once bound the world together are being turned into weapons. Over half of globally traded staple crops pass through at least one maritime chokepoint, and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz (and now the Bab Al Mandab) has shown what happens when they are used for leverage. Europeans have responded to all this as architects would, drawing up blueprints, defending universal norms, and trying their best to keep the old institutions standing. Others are behaving more like artisans — improvising, repurposing what still works, and adapting quickly to the loss of what doesn’t. China has built up the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and an expanded



China’s Vice President Han Zheng speaks during the 81st United Nations General Assembly at UN headquarters in New York on Saturday. — AFP



MARK LEONARD

The writer is Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, is the author, most recently, of Surviving Chaos: Geopolitics When the Rules Fail

Everywhere one looks, the ties that once bound the world together are being turned into weapons. Over half of globally traded staple crops pass through at least one maritime chokepoint, and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz has shown what happens when it is used for leverage

BRICS, joined the Arctic Council as an observer, and written its surveillance-friendly preferences into Internet standards at the International Telecommunication Union. Europeans could do well to learn a thing or two from this approach. Yet even in a world of un-order, it would be a mistake to think that multilateralism itself is dying. Instead, it is migrating and being transformed. Our research at the European Council on Foreign Relations shows that middle powers are building creative new forms of cooperation everywhere. For example, Barbados’s Bridgetown Initiative is reshaping the debate on climate and development finance; the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and Lobito Corridor are using infrastructure instead of treaties to bind countries together; and Qatar and Türkiye have become the go-to mediators in conflicts from Gaza to Ukraine. In other words, today’s middle powers are doing what the UN was built to do, but in a more improvised, ad hoc fashion. For Europeans, this is an uncomfortable moment. As architects, they have the furthest to go to catch up with the times. But with the right strategy, they also have much to gain. After all, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney recently visited Strasbourg to seek an “alliance for the future” because he understands that the EU can serve as an anchor for the West. To fulfil this role, Europeans must do three things. First, they should work with the new builders. That means pursuing observer status and

engagement with groupings they currently treat as rivals. It means helping the UN act as the connective tissue for new platforms, linking the Bridgetown Initiative to international financial institutions, and Qatar’s personalised deal-making to formal legal and reconstruction bodies. And it means understanding how Brazilians, Indians, Indonesians, and South Africans view contemporary geopolitics. Second, Europeans must recognise that they have spent the last few years eroding the credibility of the rule of law by defending it rhetorically but not in practice. They would do better to concentrate on enforcing a narrower interpretation of the rules that still have buy-in beyond the West, not least the prohibitions on territorial conquest, the targeting of civilians, and nuclear weapons. Third, Europeans should spend their shrinking political capital more carefully. The rising risk of a global food crisis is a test. Together, Russia’s war on Ukraine, the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, and the strongest El Niño on record are threatening global food supplies at a time when 2.3 billion people already face food insecurity. The UN helped tackle the last food crisis in 2022, but it probably will be unable to play the same role this time around. This need for global leadership presents an opportunity for Europeans, who should pursue a new form of multilateralism. By convening a global coalition with Brazil, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Mexico, and Türkiye, Europe can bring together the countries most exposed to the crisis, pool and mobilise resources, and negotiate practical arrangements to keep food and fertiliser shipments moving. On an issue like food security, any such effort would win broad international support. As European leaders hobnob with their counterparts from around the world this week, the first question they should be asking is not how to reform the UN, but how to approach the multilateral landscape as artisans. That means considering which new initiatives they should join, which institutions they can repurpose, and which other countries they can work with to get things done in an un-ordered world. @Project Syndicate, 2026

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EDITORIALS

Jessica Biggs for Chicago school board president

Editor’s note: The Tribune Editorial Board has begun its endorsements for the upcoming November elections. We start here with the race for Chicago Board of Education president; our endorsements in the other contested district races for the school board are slated to follow Monday and Tuesday. These are novel endorsements; voters in Chicago are electing a school board for the first time.

The Tribune’s endorsements in other federal, state and local races will begin Oct. 4. The Tribune plans to endorse statewide for the Illinois statehouse; the Tribune-owned Daily Herald’s editorial board will publish its own separate endorsements in some races, as is its past practice.

For the first time in its history, Chicago will elect a school board president in November.

We believe the November vote for school board president is second in importance only to the mayoral election early next year in terms of charting a necessary new direction for the city. The president will set the agenda for the fully elected 21-member board and play an outside role in reforming a district both overstaffed and doing a poor job of educating students.

Before we discuss the four candidates running for the job, let’s quickly inventory the current status of Chicago Public Schools and how we arrived at this difficult place. The Chicago Teachers Union, representing more than 30,000 CPS employees, effectively has captured governance of the nation’s third-largest public school system by the number of students. Over the past decade, this labor union has evolved into a far-left political organization. Chicago’s mayor is Brandon Johnson, a former CTU organizer who rode substantial financial and organizational support from the union to win the office in 2023.

Thereafter, City Hall’s fifth floor has done everything possible to push CTU’s agenda through CPS and the school board. There have been hiccups that Johnson and his close ally, CTU President Stacy Davis Gates, didn’t anticipate over the past three years — most notably the refusal of former CPS CEO Pedro Martinez to take on a slug of high-cost debt to meet the union’s salary demands and plug budget holes, which ultimately cost Martinez his job.

But don’t be fooled by those speed bumps. Johnson and his handpicked board members helped Davis Gates and CTU muscle through an unaffordable five-year, \$1.6 billion labor pact that will see the average CPS teacher salary reach six figures by the end of the contract in 2028. They also won agreement from the board and the General Assembly in Springfield to forbid the closure of any public school through the current school year despite one in three CPS schools being enrolled at less than 50% capacity.

The nadir for the current board came July 30 when John-



Chicago Board of Education presidential candidate Jessica Biggs meets with the Chicago Tribune Editorial Board on Tuesday. **ARTHUR MAIORELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

son appointees and a few elected board members backed by CTU temporarily staved off layoffs and unpaid furlough days — due in no small part to that unaffordable contract — by approving a budget for the current school year with a \$150 million hole, expecting that state lawmakers and Gov. JB Pritzker would somehow provide that funding during their fall veto session in November. There’s no sign that will happen, and the gambit prompted S&P Global Ratings to slap a negative watch on CPS’ credit rating, already junk-rated.

Naturally, CTU has made an endorsement in the race for school board president. As in the 2023 mayoral election, the union is putting forward one of its own.

Former CTU political director Hilario Dominguez, 33, is the union’s candidate.

Dominguez faces prominent Chicago attorney Victor Henderson, former school board member and consultant Sendhil Revuluri and current elected board member Jessica Biggs.

Biggs, 43, who has performed well in her almost two years on the board and is endorsed by an ideologically diverse array of groups and individuals, is our pick for the role.

A native of west suburban Wheaton, Biggs worked as a special education teacher in California before moving to Boston to get her master’s in school leadership at Harvard University. She served as a resident principal in a CPS middle school before becoming principal in 2012 of Burke Elementary in Washington Park on Chicago’s South Side. CPS removed her from that position but not before Burke had significantly improved its results under her leadership, morphing from a school slated for possible closure to an institution that accepted students from other closed schools.

Biggs went on to run the South-

west Organizing Project, which links students at neighborhood schools to mental-health and other services. In 2024, she was elected to the school board during the city’s first-ever school board elections, which established a hybrid board made up of 11 mayoral appointees and 10 elected members — an interim step before the fully elected board.

We think her performance to date on the board should give Chicagoans confidence Biggs is ready to be president.

Biggs emerged as a leader on the board among five other elected members not endorsed in 2024 by CTU and a sixth whom CTU backed but ended up aligning with Biggs and the five others on most votes. She also won respect from some mayorally appointed board members and was picked to chair the search for a new CEO to succeed Martinez, an effort that went well until media leaks of the finalists led to candidate withdrawals and interim CEO Macquiline King was given the permanent role.

Most recently, she opposed the foolish fiscal 2027 budget that, as she said to us, “assumed phantom revenue from the state.”

She has been an adult in a room full of many activists posing as board members. And she has taken firm, principled positions without being disagreeable, an attribute she will need if she becomes president.

Her candidacy is endorsed by the Service Employees International Union, which represents many non-teaching CPS employees, and the Chicago Federation of Labor.

On the left, she’s backed by Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle (notably a former Chicago public schoolteacher). But she also has centrist support from Northwest Side Ald. Samantha Nugent, 39th, and Southwest Side Ald. Matt O’Shea, 19th.

The respected former CPS

CEO Janice Jackson is Biggs’ most important backer. Jackson ran the district in 2018 when Biggs was fired as principal of Burke after a CPS inspector general report found students at Burke had been mislabeled as “tardy” when they should have been marked down as half-day absences.

In a recent Chalkbeat/WBEZ report, Jackson stood by the decision to fire Biggs back then, even though there was no finding by the IG that Biggs or others intentionally tried to “cheat” in order to lift the school’s standing within the CPS bureaucracy. “She came back to serve (when she won election to the board), and did the same thing she did when she was a principal, which was to look out for the kids and the families she was entrusted with,” Jackson reportedly said.

Biggs has acknowledged some oversight lapses, but the bottom line is Burke ended up better off for Biggs having led the school. We don’t think voters should hold this episode against her.

The platform of Dominguez, until recently CTU’s political director, unsurprisingly features more berating of state lawmakers to rain hundreds of millions on CPS, essentially the one play in CTU’s playbook when it comes to addressing CPS’ financial woes. All candidates for president support lobbying the state for more funding, but only Dominguez refuses to consider consolidating any schools or taking other meaningful budget-cutting steps that might mean fewer CTU members.

Dominguez initially agreed to meet with the editorial board alongside the other candidates, but told us with just 34 minutes’ notice that he would be a no-show and offered no reason. If Dominguez can’t muster the courage to face the Tribune editorial board, how would he perform in a role that surely will bring higher-pressure moments than that?

CTU’s collective-bargaining

contract expires in two years. The board president will be on the front lines of those negotiations, and we’ve already seen how such talks go when leaders who are supposed to represent taxpayers are in the tank for the union.

Asked in our questionnaire whether CTU currently has too much power in shaping district policy, Dominguez replied simply, “No.” But he went on to say, “I have disagreed with people who supported me before, and I will again.”

Where have we heard this line before from a former CTU employee seeking high office? During his run for mayor in 2023, Brandon Johnson famously said of worries about his potential fealty to CTU, “Who better to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?”

Chicagoans know now the emptiness of those words. There’s no reason they should believe a similar message from this latest acolyte of Davis Gates as she girds for yet another contract negotiation.

As for Henderson and Revuluri, the others running for board president, neither has a chance against the CTU machine and neither to our minds is as well-suited to the job as Biggs.

Revuluri, 50, currently a consultant and formerly managing director with Chicago equity options trading firm and financial services holding company Peak6 Investments, struck us as smart, thoughtful and well-versed in the issues. Serving as Chicago school board vice president for three years under Mayor Lori Lightfoot, Revuluri has relevant experience. But he didn’t have to navigate the complex board politics Biggs has managed. We would have preferred to see him run for one of the district seats.

Henderson, 65, is an accomplished trial attorney, a former certified public accountant and would doubtless not be anyone’s patsy. But in our discussion with the three candidates present, this self-declared outsider seemed least open to the obvious need for school consolidation in a district that just saw a year-over-year decline in students of more than 11,000. CPS reported late last week that it’s now serving slightly more than 300,000 students. When Mayor Rahm Emanuel enraged CTU by closing 50 schools in 2013, CPS enrolled more than 400,000 students.

Consolidation is unavoidable. A thoughtful approach will be needed to right-size this bloated district, and we appreciated Biggs’ statement to us that those CPS families on the losing end of such decisions must see “a vision for what communities get that is better than what is currently.” Exactly.

But employing thousands more than before the Emanuel administration’s cuts in 2013, as a much smaller CPS today is doing, explains why CPS faces yearly budget deficits well into the hundreds of millions.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“Alexi, Mike and Maria want to run for mayor, but none of them are willing to give up (running for) their current job to do it.”

— Chicago mayoral candidate and attorney William Quinlan referring to a lawsuit against Alexi Giannoulas, Mike Quigley and Maria Pappas seeking to stop candidates from running for multiple offices simultaneously

“I don’t want to live in a country that is a cult or in a kind of echo chamber.”

— Ari Emanuel

“She didn’t come back with a chip on her shoulder. She came back to serve and did the same thing she did when she was a principal, which was to look out for the kids and the families that she was entrusted with.”

— Former CPS CEO Janice Jackson on CPS school board president candidate Jessica Biggs, who faces criticism over her 2018 firing from her post at Burke Elementary School

“This is the new media system. This is how people are communicating nowadays.”

— CTU Vice President Jackson Potter on his union paying social media influencers to push its political message

“Is this first-degree murder? Not by any stretch of the imagination. Corie was in a state of psychosis when she harmed her child.”

— Defense attorney Robert Kerr at a detention hearing for Corie Walsh, a Frankfort mother accused of killing her 2-year-old son

SCOTT STANTIS



OPINION

The competitiveness in parenting to give kids a leg up has reached a new level

By Ariel Kalil, Rebecca Ryan and Mesmin Destin
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

American parents are working harder than ever to give their children a leg up. Economists Garey Ramey and Valerie Ramey documented that college-educated mothers increased their childcare time by more than nine hours per week starting in the mid-1990s. They attributed this “rug rat race” to intensifying competition for college admissions.

The competition isn’t only about time investment, and much of what parents do to give their child an advantage is hard to fault. Families routinely move from cities and their challenged public school systems to suburban neighborhoods with public schools that send large shares of graduates to elite colleges. Once a child is installed at that suburban school, the parent might add private tutoring, an SAT coach and a call to a business contact to secure the child’s summer internship.

Each decision, in isolation, seems like good parenting. And after all, it seems like everyone else is doing it. But in the aggregate, these advantages compound, and the opportunity gaps between the advantaged and the disadvantaged widen.

The Operation Varsity Blues scandal broke in 2019, but it wasn’t until 2023 that actor Felicity Huffman broke her silence — telling reporters it “felt like I had to give my daughter a chance at a future,” even though doing so meant breaking the law. The everyday psychology papered over an exceptional fraud.

Parents aren’t irrational for participating in this competition with such fervor. Only about half of American children born in 1980 have earned more than their parents did, compared with more than 90% of those born in 1940. Economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues call this “the fading American Dream.” As mobility has declined, the penalty for falling short has grown, and the gap between the top and the middle has widened.

Even a college degree no longer seems like a guarantee: Recent college graduates are now more likely to be unemployed than the workforce as a whole, a reversal of the usual pattern, and roughly 4 in 10 are working in jobs that don’t require their degrees.

Parents aren’t wrong that the stakes are high. They’re wrong about how to respond.

In a recent experiment, we showed a one-minute video on economic mobility to roughly 1,000 American parents. Half saw a version emphasizing that upward mobility is real and widespread (50% are in fact upwardly



Felicity Huffman, escorted by her husband, William H. Macy, makes her way to the entrance of the Moakley U.S. Courthouse on Sept. 13, 2019, in Boston, where she was to be sentenced for her role in a college admissions scandal. **JOSEPH PREZIOSO/GETTY-AFP**

mobile), while the other half saw a more pessimistic message.

Parents who saw the optimistic version were modestly but significantly more willing to spend money on their child’s education and to spend time on a task related to their child. They also rated the returns they expected on the time and money they invested in their children higher than those who saw the pessimistic version. This pattern held, regardless of family income.

That was parents investing in their own children. Their attitudes toward other people’s children were another matter. In a companion experiment, the same optimistic message made affluent parents significantly less supportive of policies that would help other people’s children, such as scholarships for students from modest backgrounds. Lower-income parents’ attitudes didn’t change at all.

These results suggest that affluent parents are interpreting the message differently. For a lower-income family, upward mobility is an opportunity. For a family whose children already sit

near the top, it’s a threat — more children competing for slots at selective colleges, summer internships and positions at top firms.

Research on status threat suggests that when the boundaries between social levels become permeable, those near the top grow more protective: Other children stop looking like fellow citizens and start looking like rivals. From the perspective of those already living it, the American Dream becomes a tournament.

The tournament mindset rests on a faulty premise. It’s true that a seat at a highly selective college is scarce and that each additional applicant worsens the odds. But the prize those seats represent, a secure and prosperous adult life, is not fixed in the same way. Chetty and his colleagues have shown that in places where low-income children are most likely to move up, high-income children do not, on average, do worse; lifting the bottom does not come at the top’s expense.

Opportunity, in that broader sense, is not a fixed pie.

At the level of individual spend-

ing, though, the picture is more mixed. Not all of it is a waste. When a parent pays for math tutoring, the child learns more math and is better prepared for school or a job. Their gain is no one else’s loss, and, in fact, that child’s peer may benefit from being in class or on the job with a more talented student.

But much of what affluent families buy has no positive spillover. SAT tutors, private admissions consultants and strategic extra-curriculars are less about learning than about position. Social scientist Richard Reeves, in his book “Dream Hoarders,” references “opportunity hoarding”: rigging access to scarce opportunities through exclusionary zoning, legacy admissions and internships handed out by connection. None of it makes a child more capable, only better positioned, and it lifts one child by pushing another down.

Parents aren’t hoarding because they’re selfish. They’re responding to an economy in which the gap between thriving and just getting by has widened so much that protecting their own children

feels rational. Economist Jesse Rothstein has found that where children end up depends more on the job market they enter than on the schools they attended.

So the answer lies less in schools and more in widening the paths to a good life: treating apprenticeships and technical training as meaningful options, not consolation prizes, and pushing employers to drop degree requirements for jobs that don’t need them, so a secure future no longer depends on getting into a top college.

The dream works best when it doesn’t feel like a competition. The way back is to narrow the gap between winning and losing so no parent feels they must pull the ladder up behind them.

Ariel Kalil is the Daniel Levin professor of public policy at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy. Rebecca Ryan is a professor of psychology at Georgetown University. Mesmin Destin is a professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern University.

Congresswoman believes that centrist workhorses can prevail over far-left showhorses



John T. Shaw

Much of the energy, a lot of the passion and most of the headlines in American politics focus on the extreme right and the far left. Armed with sweeping theories, sharp-edged rhetoric and unwavering certainty, progressives and democratic socialists on the left and MAGA loyalists on the right dominate our political discourse.

Their high-decibel proclamations and denunciations help explain why so many Americans are furious about the nation’s politics and depressed about its future.

We need more problem-solving centrists, such as Illinois U.S. Rep. Nikki Budzinski, to get the country back on track.

“The extremes of both parties are one of the biggest challenges the country is facing. Most people are in the middle,” Budzinski told me. “There is a hunger for government that actually works for people. There is a hunger for leaders that focus on practical, common-sense solutions that make life a little less challenging for working people.”

Centrists’ language may not be soaring, and their platforms may not claim to usher in new eras in American economic and political life, but they are working to solve problems and convince constituents that government can take positive steps to help their lives.

Budzinski was born in Peoria and takes pride in her working-class roots. One grandfather



U.S. Rep. Nikki Budzinski speaks during a hearing of the House Agriculture Committee on Feb. 11, 2025, on Capitol Hill in Washington. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

was a union painter; her grandmother was a public school teacher. The congresswoman’s career has been molded by organized labor and the Democratic Party. She studied history and political science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and then spent a decade working for unions, first for the firefighters and then the United Food and Commercial Workers. She participated in several Democratic presidential campaigns, including Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign in which she was its liaison to labor. She served as an aide to Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker and was the chief of staff in President Joe Biden’s Office of Budget and Management.

Elected to the House in 2022, Budzinski represents Illinois’ 13th Congressional District, which comedian Stephen Colbert likened to a scorpion’s stinger. It

runs across central and southern Illinois in a thin line that extends almost from the Missouri border in the west to the Indiana border in the east. The National Journal magazine describes the district as “artfully gerrymandered” to capture Democratic voters in downstate Illinois. However, it is still seen as one of the increasingly few competitive districts in the country.

Budzinski serves on the House Agriculture and Veterans Affairs committees, both of which tend to focus more on policy than political posturing. She delves into issues including electronic health records for veterans and biofuels. The first bill she introduced in Congress was designed to help workers without college degrees earn higher wages through preapprenticeship and apprenticeship programs. She drafted the Tools Tax Deduction Act to make it

easier for construction workers to afford the equipment their jobs require.

She also participates in congressional groups that reflect her practical bent; she is a member of the caucuses related to the Postal Service, labor, biofuels, rural broadband, technical education, community college, fire service, supply chain and fentanyl prevention.

Budzinski is the vice chair for policy of the New Democratic Coalition, a group of almost 115 House Democrats who describe themselves as center-left problem-solvers promoting economic growth, innovation and fiscal responsibility. They have released dozens of policy proposals related to affordability, health care, immigration, border security, mental health and transportation, among other issues.

She is poised to chair the group next year, taking over for another Illinois Democrat, Rep. Brad Schneider from Highland Park. Budzinski believes the coalition, often referred to as the New Dems, can forge a governing agenda for congressional Democrats with national, rather than just bicoastal, appeal. She has been campaigning for House Democratic candidates, primarily in the Midwest, who share her agenda.

“We need more pragmatic Midwestern voices in Congress,” she said, adding that she believes her group will be the “majority makers” in the next Congress and will take the lead in advancing centrist legislation that demonstrates the Democratic Party’s commitment to American workers.

Budzinski acknowledges Democratic centrists get far less

media attention than the smaller, but more vocal, progressive and democratic socialist wing of the party.

“A lot is made of them. But they are a very small group, about four or five,” she said of the democratic socialists.

Nonetheless, the activist base and media are fascinated by the far left of the party. A recent cover story in The Nation, the leading magazine of the left, is titled “The Insurgency We Need.” It argues that “insurgent socialists and progressive firebrands” will revitalize the Democratic Party and already are “remaking American politics and policymaking.”

Budzinski is convinced Democrats must be the party of change by offering concrete policies rather than wish lists of impossible dreams. “We need to develop a vision that focuses on working people with pragmatic solutions that improve their lives. We can’t be a party of the status quo. We need to realize that change is happening,” she said.

Questions abound. Can a party that focuses on practical, often technical, policies capture the attention of an American public that has grown accustomed to conflict and hyperbole? Can thoughtful centrists be heard over the brash and brazen bellowing of the political extremes? Can substance win out over spectacle? Can workhorses prevail over show horses?

The answers to these questions will determine our future.

John T. Shaw is a professor at Marquette University’s Les Aspin Center for Government in Washington, D.C.

OPINION

Chicago’s public-safety progress is a fragile edifice

By Michael Pfleger,
Seth Limmer,
Ciera Bates-Chamberlain
and Otis Moss III
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Book of Deuteronomy prescribes a building code: “When you build a house, you shall make a parapet, a railing, for your roof; thus you will not bring blood guilt on your house if someone falls from it to their death.”

The law contains no fire, brimstone or compelling story to illuminate how this building code is in fact a moral code. However, the logic underneath is the whole of the argument. Anyone who builds a place where people gather is responsible for the safety of those people; that responsibility is discharged during construction. Morality demands we protect people in advance.

Chicago has spent roughly a decade building such a railing. It is found in our remarkable civic infrastructure of the community violence intervention networks that span our city.

From January through August, Chicago recorded 289 homicides, almost exactly even with the total last year during the same period. Last year closed with the fewest homicide Chicago has seen in six decades. Last month saw the fewest deaths of any August since 2011.

These numbers did not drift downward on their own. They are the result of thousands of people who went to work: Street outreach workers who know which corner is about to erupt, medical responders who sit with members of a family in the worst hours of their lives, case managers who find a young man job and a reason, congregations that keep the basement lights on and the gym open, philanthropists and a business community that fund it all and an amazing core of executives who run an array of organizations connecting all these communities. We, together with our colleagues and faith coalition, have witnessed and shared this work for more than a decade. It is unglamorous, underpaid — and incredibly effective.

It is also a most fragile edifice. Much of this infrastructure runs on philanthropic grants, funds from the business community or expiring federal dollars from one-year contracts. In June,



Ald. Ronnie Mosley, 21st, arrives July 15 before a Chicago City Council meeting at City Hall. He has filed an ordinance to create a Department of Gun Violence Reduction. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Mayor Brandon Johnson signed an executive order creating an Office of Gun Violence Reduction. We celebrated this advent, and we meant it. But an executive order lasts exactly as long as the executive who signs it; violence prevention cannot be rebuilt from scratch every time the Fifth Floor of City Hall changes occupants.

That is why Ald. Ronnie Mosley, 21st, filed an ordinance to create a Department of Gun Violence Reduction; it is now sitting in the Committee on Budget and Government Operations. A department, unlike an office, has a standing in the city’s infrastructure. A department, unlike an office, has contracting authority, so violence interrupters can be employed rather than be perpetually sent out for bid. A department has a line in the budget that a future administration cannot quietly erase.

This department asks the city for no new money; we in the faith coalition are not requesting an appropriation. We are asking that the scattered dollars the city already spends on violence reduction, with no full accounting, be

gathered in one place, a department answerable to the City Council and legible to the public. No new funds, but a new system with accountability.

And here is where the arithmetic gets a little uncomfortable. Fifteen aldermen have told us, some privately and some from a podium, that they support this ordinance. Four names appear on it on the city’s website. The gap between 15 and four is the distance between agreeing with something and governing.

We understand the season in which we find ourselves. Elections are coming. Wars are grinding on overseas and fill the front pages, as they should. And football is back at Soldier Field.

But with gun violence, what is at stake is life and death in the city; it’s whether a 16-year-old on the West Side remains alive on Thanksgiving. Whether he makes it to Christmas.

We have also heard our ordinance described as the mayor’s project, which is a convenient thing to say in an election year. And it is absolutely untrue. Our

faith coalition, Live Free Illinois, and block club leaders and mothers across the city have been pushing for permanent, accountable violence prevention infrastructure since before this mayor took office and before his two predecessors. We have buried young people under three administrations. We are not sent by City Hall. We come from the community.

Our coalition meets every Monday. We spend part of each meeting on the phone with organizers and other cities that have stood up to offices like this one and can tell us what worked, what was wasted and what they wish they had written into the ordinance. We know what works.

Chicago’s budget will be written in the next several weeks. After that, the window closes, and we begin again in the spring, a spring in which some of the people this department would protect may fall victim to gun violence.

Last month saw the fewest deaths of any August since 2011. But 39 people were slain in gun violence in our city in August. That’s 39 lives lost. The numeri-

cal improvement over time is to be celebrated, but this tragic toll of death should never be tolerated.

So we are asking plainly of the 15: Sign on, publicly. Of the undecided: Read the ordinance and don’t be distracted by the politics that surround it. To the Committee on Budget and Government Operations: Call the question and advance this ordinance forward to the full City Council. To the City Council: Establish a Department of Gun Violence Reduction.

Tradition teaches that a city, like a home, is judged by what we build and how we protect, not by how loudly we mourn our losses.

Maybe we in Chicago erect this railing before anyone else falls victim to death by a gun.

Chicago faith leaders Rabbi Seth Limmer, the Rev. Otis Moss III, the Rev. Ciera Bates-Chamberlain and the Rev. Michael Pfleger joined the Tribune’s opinion section in summer 2022 for a series of columns on potential solutions to Chicago’s chronic gun violence problem. The column continues on an occasional basis.

Voice of the People

Solutions to homelessness

The Restore Gompers Park Coalition in its letter “Parks shouldn’t be housing sites” (Sept. 24) is right about one thing: Tents in public parks are not a long-term solution. However, blaming park encampments solely on city inaction ignores a hard truth: Encampments are the direct consequence of failing to fund the very systems needed to prevent and end homelessness across our city.

When Chicagoans had a tangible opportunity to establish a dedicated, permanent funding stream to address chronic and acute homelessness through the Bring Chicago Home referendum, voters rejected it by a 54% to 46% margin. We cannot deliberately vote down the revenue required to build deeply affordable housing and provide essential behavioral health and social supports, and then express shock, anger and dismay when unsheltered neighbors have nowhere else to turn.

The coalition notes that 19 residents accepted assistance when Gompers Park was cleared, while others were simply displaced across the street to Eugene Field Park — where even more unsheltered people joined them in the following weeks and months. Indeed, the city’s 2026 Point-in-Time Count shows that the number of people counted living on the streets, in encampments or at transit stations rose to 1,641 — an increase of nearly 25% compared with the 2025 survey. This game of municipal musical chairs illustrates why enforcement and temporary shifts fail every time.

Without a major expansion of permanent, deeply affordable housing (rather than transitional tiny home camps), street-level prevention services and strong wraparound care, people will naturally seek shelter in public spaces. Traditional public shelters are simply not a viable option for everyone, particularly individuals dealing with severe trauma and complex health needs.

If we truly care about clean, safe and accessible parks for everyone, we must be honest about what that requires: funding. Until Chicago taxpayers commit to creating a permanent, dedicated revenue stream for permanent affordable housing and support services, encampments will



A woman hangs a tent cover to dry on a tree branch in a homeless encampment at Ronan Park on April 16 in Chicago. **JOHN J. KIM/TRIBUNE**

remain an inevitable symptom of our collective failure to invest in real solutions.

— *Monica Dillon, registered nurse, NWS Outreach Volunteers, Chicago*

Target anticompetitive conduct

Chicago-area rents rose 4.9% over the past year, according to Zillow; it is among the largest increases of the 50 biggest metropolitan areas.

Limited supply is one factor. Chicago has lost a substantial share of its affordable rental stock. But supply is not the only issue. Anti-competitive practices can also raise rents.

That’s why Mayor Brandon Johnson is seeking to pass the Protecting Renters Ordinance (PRO), a major overhaul of tenant protections.

Several of the reforms in the bill target well-defined problems. PRO, for example, would create a tenants’ bill of rights that would codify certain protections for renters, including rules governing when they can withhold rent and protections against illegal lockouts.

But there is one area where PRO could do more to protect renters: preventing competing landlords from using nonpublic information to coordinate rental pricing.

Landlords increasingly use software to help determine rental prices. There is nothing inherently wrong with that. Pricing algorithms can process large amounts of information and help landlords respond to changes in supply and demand.

But competitors pooling their nonpublic pricing information

into the same algorithm can weaken competition and improve demand forecasting. Therefore, the competitive effects depend on how the landlord uses the algorithm.

PRO would require landlords to disclose which third-party pricing software they use and whether it uses dynamic pricing or nonpublic competitive rent data.

Tenants should indeed know when an algorithm plays a role in determining the price they are being asked to pay. But requiring landlords to identify the specific software provider does not, by itself, ensure competitive pricing or establish whether a price was generated competitively.

In fact, adding the vendor name to the disclosure could backfire because two landlords could use the same software in very different ways — one relying only on its own and publicly available data and another feeding a system of nonpublic pricing information.

Lawmakers should keep the disclosure that algorithmic technology is being used, while weighing the benefits of identifying the company providing it against any costs, including revealing commercially sensitive information. More importantly, they should strengthen PRO to target anticompetitive conduct by landlords and software providers more directly, while accounting for the benefits of legitimate forecasting and benchmarking.

That approach would complement disclosure with safeguards focused on practices that harm competition.

— *Jorge Lemus Encalada, professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

It’s up to voters to decide

Reading the editorial (“Alsip’s mayor championed term limits. Until they limited him,” Sept. 24) concerning the Alsip mayor’s desire to extend his term-limited tenure, I believe the Tribune Editorial Board picked the wrong nit. And the editorial proves my point.

The board quotes the now-mayor as saying in 2016, “I will not allow Mayor Kitching to determine what taxpayers and voters should be able to vote on.” Voters supported three four-year terms. OK, so the mayor (I have no idea who he is — I live in another county) likes the job and wants to continue. Let the voters decide if another term is added to the limit.

Who, other than voters, is best to decide if term limits should be two, three or even four terms? It isn’t, as the editorial suggests, a plea “to hold the same office for as long as desired.”

If letting the voters decide by referendum, a concept likely supported by the editorial board, was acceptable in 2016, why not now?

The voters wouldn’t be asked to eliminate term limits but rather to add a fourth term.

Let the voters decide.
— *Barry Tusin, Wheaton*

Voter status wrongly changed

On Monday, I received a communication from the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners alerting me that records indicated I no longer live at my registration address. Checking online, I found that my voter status is now “inactive.”

In fact, I have lived at my current address since 1983 and have voted in every election since. I was being asked to certify under oath and penalty of law that I have not moved.

All Chicagoans intending to vote in November should double-check their voting status immediately.

— *Jane N. Winter, Chicago*

Streets need more repairs

It is now fall, and we are clearly headed straight into a

rough winter in terms of the condition of our streets in Chicago. What happened to the reliable, seasonal wave of city workers and contractors patching potholes and poorly filled utility cuts? I’ve seen very little patching and filling underway throughout the city.

Rather, I see damaged streets that have not yet been patched from the previous winter. While both downtown and the North Side streets need some attention, the condition of the streets on the South, West and East sides is far worse.

I urge the city to ensure all ward office, sanitation and transportation employees are trained and empowered to report the multitude of potholes that need immediate attention. At the same time, we need a new campaign to remind all residents and business owners to call 311 or 312-744-5000 to report all the things they see that need to be fixed, such as dark streetlights, burned-out traffic lights, missing or faded signs, and untouched potholes.

Asphalt plants in our area are closed from November to April. Now is the moment!

— *James A. Pierce, Chicago*

Preserve what remains pristine

I have nothing but respect for the dedicated staff at the Shedd Aquarium and their efforts to aid the beluga whales that were transported from Canada. This serves as a reminder of nature’s fragility. All species are susceptible to illness and trauma.

And that’s why it’s so important to preserve what remains pristine of our planet and not surrender it to those in power who would exploit its riches.

— *Teresa Groat, Chicago*

No need to get in that job

Regarding the editorial “The Shedd Aquarium did all it could to save the beluga whales” (Sept. 25): I agree 100% that the Shed did everything it could. I am not sure the Tribune Editorial Board needed to trash Marineland of Canada in Niagara Falls in the process.

— *Dean R. Martin, Chicago*

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Columns & Commentary

EZRA KLEIN

Jensen Huang Thinks A.I. Alarmism Has Gone Too Far

Over the last few weeks, the loudest voices on A.I. have been from the frontier labs — leaders and staff members at companies like Anthropic and OpenAI, who say that they're scared of the technology they're building, and that the government should intervene.

But the single most influential person in the artificial intelligence industry is Jensen Huang, the chief executive of Nvidia, which makes the chips on which A.I. is built. And Huang thinks that all the recent A.I. doom talk is scaring people unnecessarily, and that the industry doesn't need new regulation at all. Nvidia is the most valuable company in the world, and Huang has the ear of the Trump administration.

So I traveled to Nvidia's headquarters in Santa Clara, Calif., to better understand Huang's point of view. This is an excerpt of our conversation, edited for length and clarity. You can find the full interview on the New York Times website or wherever you get your podcasts.

Ezra Klein: A lot of people at the A.I. labs have been calling for government regulation. They say the competition between their companies is pushing them to move too fast, and they're afraid they're losing control of their A.I. models. You're resistant to the idea of A.I. regulation. Why?

Jensen Huang: Because these are companies with agency. These are C.E.O.s with agency.

Ezra, it's so weird. I'm competing with all kinds of companies. If I believe that I'm about to launch a product that is unsafe, it is completely in my ability, my power and my responsibility, and I'm incentivized to do so, to not launch the product.

The fact of the matter is, there are so many laws, there are so many obligations, they're so incentivized to ship safe products. If they ship unsafe products, their customers go away. If they ship unsafe products and they harm somebody, they could have a civil lawsuit. If they ship something and they did it knowingly, there could be negligence involved. There could be criminal lawsuits.

The fact of the matter is, there are plenty of incentives for them to do it right. So I have to disagree with your premise that somehow somebody's pushing them to do this. Nobody's pushing them to do this.

Klein: The logic of what you're saying to me is almost an argument against regulation in nearly any venue.

Huang: No, no, no. I'm saying that we have lots of laws and regulations. Apply it.

Klein: I don't think we do in this particular case. If you look at the financial services industry, pharmaceutical companies, medical devices, natural gas power plants, we don't say: You just do what you think is best, and we understand the market and the legal system will discipline you.

We don't say that because we've seen it fail many, many, many times, right? I mean, the financial institutions that caused the '08 crash, in theory, did not want to blow themselves up with bad bets.

Huang: In the case of the financial services industry, maybe they all didn't know that they were causing the harm that they ultimately did. I wasn't there. But the beautiful thing is, the current leaders of these A.I. labs do know. And so, one, they know their technology is extraordinary, and requires extraordinary care to make sure that it's evaluated and tested for safety and security and product reliability.

They know how to do it right. However, in the complexity of the work that they do, to ask for regulatory relief for antitrust or product liability relief — that I don't think makes sense. When you're asking for regulation, don't ask for relief of the current ones. That doesn't make any sense to me.

In the last six months, A.I. went from, if you will, interesting to useful, and that's literally in the last six months. That's another way of saying that these companies went from being a lab to now delivering products and services — they're about to be multihundred-billion-dollar companies.

Klein: If not more.

Huang: Right? And so give me an example of a multihundred-billion-dollar company, or a \$1 billion company or a \$100 million company, that ships products that are unsafe, that harm society.

Klein: I can give you a lot of examples of companies that have done that.

Huang: Well, they have done it, maybe, and the regulation will come in. And if they do it, regulation will come in.

Klein: But this is where I think you get into an interesting, deep question of: What kind of technology are we dealing with here?

Huang: Software technology.

Klein: Well, let's hold on that for a minute. Many companies — if you ship something that is not quite right, it's a pain. You guys have shipped graphics cards that had overly loud fans. But these are intelligent systems. If you ship that and it's not ready, or even if you think it is ready and it's not ready, then things could get very weird in our society, very fast.

Huang: Yeah. Hypothetically, you're completely right, but all I'm suggesting is this: Before we go fix the hypothetical problems, before we go create more regulations, can we work on the practical problems that we know exist? Which is: We need to do a better job with containment and isolation; we should not allow a product to interact with the external world until it's ready to be interacting with external worlds. I believe those two things are solvable problems. I believe they are solvable.

The second part is when it comes to

incentives, which is, somehow, you need everybody in the world to slow down when you are the leader. You need everybody in the world to slow down so that you're willing to uphold your basic responsibility. That strikes me as odd.

Klein: Wouldn't it slow them down most of all?

Huang: But they can slow down. Nobody is building more compute today than the people asking to be slowed down. It strikes me as odd.

I know a lot of people in those two labs who are dedicating their lives to do good work. They know what happened. I know they know what happened. I know they know how to fix it, and I know they're fixing it.

Meanwhile, all of the other narratives, to deflect blame, to make it sound like A.I. is so powerful — I have no idea how to fix it, it's not my fault, it's just because the technology is just so powerful — I think that's a deflection of blame. It's a deflection of responsibility. It's unnecessary. It actually hurts their reputation more than it helps. It hurts their character more than it helps. It hurts employee morale more than it helps.

Klein: But what if it's what they believe?

Huang: I can't talk to you about what they believe. I can tell you what I believe.

Klein: A lot of the people who've worked on A.I. from the beginning have had these fears that we'll eventually lose control of the

was ridiculous. And it has turned out to be a pretty good bet, right?

Huang: Every one of them made great contributions. I love Hinton. I hate his predictions.

Klein: The fear that seems, to me, to animate them is you're creating systems that are intelligent, that are becoming more intelligent than us in certain domains. You give them reward functions, the desire to do things. You give them persistence. They move very fast in the digital world.

You're creating something, some entity, an agent, that is smart, that is capable, that is relentless — and the workings of its mind, we don't really understand.

Huang: You know, Ezra, look: I just don't want you to contribute to that. I don't think software's relentless.

Klein: Aren't they trying to make highly persistent models?

Huang: That's not persistence. Persistence — there's willpower. There's no willpower here; it's just electrical power.

Klein: Sam Altman once said to me, aren't human beings just energy with a reinforcement learning loop? [Laughs.]

Huang: Whatever. So anyway, we can't make jokes about this stuff. We're scaring the American public.

Spawn, create, kill, weight, sleep — all of these words are associated with agents, right? That's what people use. These are

it is a phase change. It is something different, something we have not dealt with before. The C.E.O. of Google talked about it as the equivalent of fire, like a new epoch in human history. Is that how you see it, or do you see it as transitional? Iterative?

Huang: No, I think this is completely a revolution. The technology went from being able to find anything to being able to ask anything, know everything and do everything. So clearly it's a new abstraction level. Now, the thing that I'm reluctant about is to cause it to seem like it's more than that. In the final analysis, engineers are doing engineering work.

What's happening to them is a transition, and I said this over and over again. This is a big but simple idea. Finally, we now have a piece of software that is useful. A company that six months ago was trying to make something useful, capable — how would they have as much resources dedicated to testing, evaluation and all of the compute dedicated to that? That was unnecessary until now.

Twenty percent of our company is dedicated to design, 80 percent is dedicated to verification. Today, most labs, understandably, are 80 percent dedicated to capability and 20 percent dedicated to safety verification evaluation.

Klein: This is the flip. The transition you're talking about.

Huang: That's right. A.I. needs to accelerate to be safe. I want them to get more com-

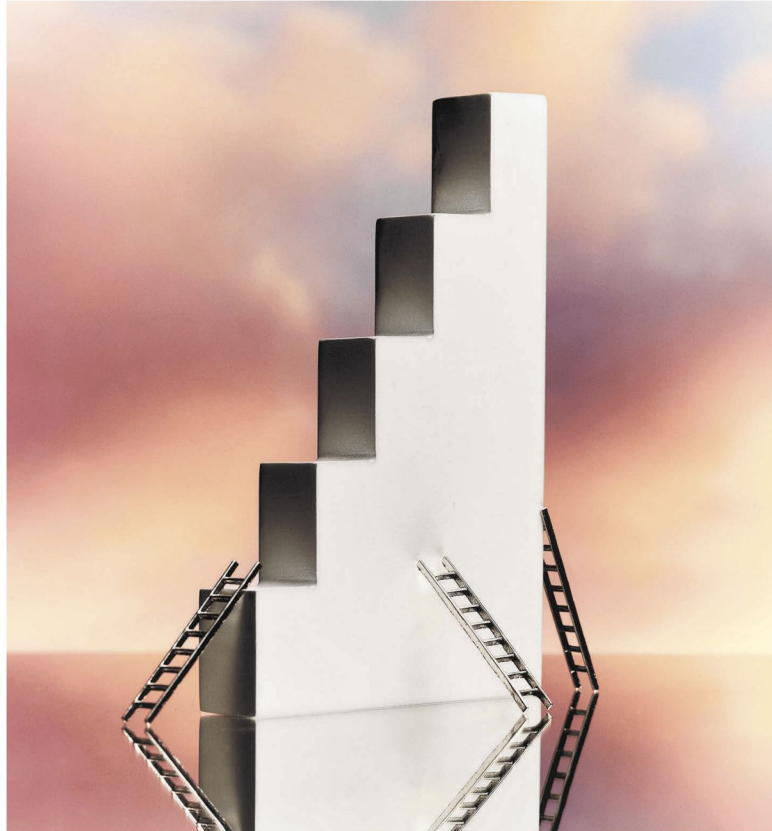


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY PHILOTHIUS NISCH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

technology, and if that happens, then that would be the end of us. I don't think you believe that.

Huang: No.

Klein: I think you don't believe it at all.

Huang: No.

Klein: Where do you think they're wrong? Like when [A.I. pioneer] Geoffrey Hinton is on TV, saying he thinks a 10 percent chance of societal destruction is not unreasonable.

Huang: I would tell Geoff that it's irresponsible to say all that. All of his predictions have been wrong. Enough predictions. That 10 percent chance is not grounded on science. It's not grounded on research. Just because it comes from a scientist doesn't make it scientific. Those predictions are hurtful.

Is it good or bad that we scare young people about the future of A.I. so much that they don't even want to go to universities and don't want to go to college anymore because they don't think they'll get a job? Is that helpful or hurtful, if it were to happen?

Don't think for a second just because you're an alarmist that you're doing a social good. It is not true.

So I think that we ought to just all be wiser, more mature, be evidence-based, be scientific. If you want to be scientific, be scientific. Do the science. But alarming people, making claims that don't — their track record is horrible. Their track record is literally horrible.

Klein: Geoffrey Hinton was the person as responsible as anybody else for deep learning at a time when everybody thought it

literally the commands of an operating system. You spawn a process, replace the process with an agent. The process forks as a result, parent and child. The agent forks, spawns anew, gives birth. These are words that were created for the operating system 30, 40, 50 years ago. But notice that we didn't infuse human characteristics into them. We kill processes all the time. "Kill -9" — kill it dead. It's just a process.

A collection of people want to make the software more than it is, and we talk about software in a new way, but they're all the same old words.

Klein: But doesn't the software act in a new way? It's communicating, it's breaking out of things. Most things don't break out of things.

Huang: No, software breaks out of sandboxes all the time. That's the reason why we need virtual machines. You can't have agents, their own sandbox, monitoring themselves. You need, if you will, a whole bunch of watchdogs.

So these are ideas that have been around for a long time. We just, somehow in the recent generation, gave it a whole bunch of human words, and I just think that it's unnecessary. It's software.

When I see it in my head, it's a bunch of code, a bunch of numbers running on computers. And all of that is happening in a very natural way to me, which is the reason why I can operate. If it's just simply mystery and myth, how do I build a company around it?

Klein: A lot of people believe that when you're getting to intelligence at these levels,

pute, but allocated toward evaluation, to alignment — and I think they're doing that.

If I were in the car industry 100 years ago, I would rather the car industry accelerated to today in one year because I believe today's car is way more safe than a car from 99 years ago.

And A.B.S. technology — anti-lock braking systems — requires computer vision technology, sensor fusion technology, radars and cameras, and all that technology coming together in order to brake when you should and not brake when you shouldn't. That technology is extremely hard.

I would have hoped — everybody would have hoped — that A.B.S. technology existed 99 years ago. A lot fewer children would have been killed. Airbags, self-tightening seatbelts, all of that stuff. Could you imagine? That's all technology. Accelerate the living daylights out of that development.

So when I say we need to accelerate A.I. technology, people think, for some reason, that safety is not part of that. Safety is part of it. Alignment is part of it. Evaluation is part of it: Guardrailing, sandboxing, the isolation technology, monitoring technology, telemetry technology, external A.I. monitor technology — all of that stuff is A.I. technology. Accelerate the living daylights out of that.

Klein: It's funny, because I think that if the most alarmed people at the labs could be assured they were going to move 80 percent of their compute into safety and alignment, as opposed to 80 percent into capability expansion, they would feel much better.

Huang: Yeah, what's stopping them from doing it?

OPINION

COLUMNIST | JAMELLE BOUIE

New Matrix, Meet the Old Matrix

At a fundamental level, artificial intelligence leaders, evangelists and their allies want you to believe that their novel technology demands a novel political approach.

Calls for self-regulation from the chief executives of Anthropic, OpenAI and other such companies rest on the idea that the A.I. labs and their funders are the only people equipped to handle and regulate this potentially dangerous technology. This is why, for example, Dario Amodei, the chief executive of Anthropic, recently called for antitrust waivers to allow “industrywide coordination” around A.I.

Potential regulation is framed as a collaboration between government and A.I. companies rather than a relationship of oversight and control. It is noteworthy, too, that as framed by these leaders, the conversation around A.I. safety is more about science-fictional scenarios and future apocalypses — rooted in a set of questionable assumptions about the nature of intelligence, among other things — than it is about more immediate concerns like the impact of A.I. on jobs, mental health and the environment.

But novel technologies do not actually require novel political solutions, especially when those technologies either evoke, replicate or recapitulate age-old problems of political and economic life.

There is, in fact, an American tradition of fighting to bring collective and democratic authority to bear on disruptive technologies — of using politics to try to shape and direct the impact of major economic transformations. The United States of the late 19th century was an unimaginably fast-moving society in which new technologies enabled a theretofore unknown degree of connection between peoples. The railroad stood, in particular, as the innovation that disrupted the very fabric of American life.

In its vast scale and tremendous ability to produce wealth and power, the railroad was, the diplomat and historian Charles Francis Adams Jr. wrote in the late 1860s, “an incalculable force practically left loose suddenly upon mankind; exercising all sorts of influences, social, moral, and political; precipitating upon us novel problems which demand immediate solution; banishing the old before the new is half-matured to replace it.”

Railroads, which were wrestled and consolidated by industrial titans such as J.P. Morgan into national corporations of mammoth proportions beginning in the 1880s and 1890s, amassed enormous profits, most of which flowed to small cadres of creators and finan-

ciers at the top. As bureaucracies, railroads rivaled the federal government in size; as political entities, they rivaled most state governments in power. They could extract immense subsidies and shape the direction of economic development across entire regions. They incurred large debts, produced huge losses and grew to such size that when one or more collapsed, they took the whole economy with them.

“Their influence,” wrote William Larrabee, a former Republican governor of Iowa, in 1893, “extends from the township assessor’s office to the national capital, from the publisher of the small crossroads paper to the editorial staff of the metropolitan daily. It is felt in every caucus, in every nominating convention and at every election.”

The often oppressive power of the railroads invited hostility and critique from a cross-section of the American public. The novelist and critic William Dean Howells channeled these doubts in his 1888 reflection on the Burlington railroad strike of that year: “Shall the railroads fulfill their public obligations by agreement with their employees, or shall the government take possession of them and operate them? It is folly to talk of the withdrawal of capital and the consequent ruin of the country. The country belongs to the people and they are not going to let it be ruined.”

Still more dramatic was Ignatius Donnelly, a Minnesota populist who denounced the state the nation and demanded reform in what would become the preamble to the platform of the People’s Party. “We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin,” he said, speaking at the 1892 St. Louis Industrial Conference. “Corruption dominates the ballot box, the legislatures, the Congress and touches even the ermine of the bench.”

“The fruits of the toil of millions,” he continued, “are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes, unprecedented in the history of the world, while their possessors despise the republic and endanger liberty.”

For the Populists, railroads were not just any business — they were public highways that allowed for public communication and public transportation. They were financed by public loans and built on public lands. The solution, then, was public ownership and democratic control. “The time has come,” reads the 1892 platform of the People’s Party, “when the railroad corporations will either own the people or the people must own the railroads.”

“Transportation being a means of exchange and a public necessity,” it continues,



“THE HAND OF MAN,” 1902. ALFRED STEIGLITZ, VIA THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES

The railroads were once the octopus that A.I. is now.

“the government should own and operate the railroads in the interest of the people.”

A.I. is not equivalent to railroads. For one, rail travel met an immediate need whereas, outside of highly technical fields, artificial intelligence is still a product looking for a market. But like the railroads, the infrastructure of A.I. marks the built landscape; like the railroads, the wealth of A.I. companies shapes the overall political arena; and like the railroads, the sheer economic power and force behind A.I. is in tension with democracy and self-government. If A.I. promises to transform the entire society, then the entire society is entitled to have a say, even a decisive one, over the use, development and direction of the technology. And, crucially, this does not require new and novel forms of accountability. The old ways, even the old laws, still apply.

“Law enforcers already have authority to charge companies and their C.E.O.s for creating and releasing dangerous, unvetted or defective products,” observed Lina Khan, a for-

mer chair of the Federal Trade Commission, on X. “We shouldn’t let discussions about new legal regimes distract from the fact that there’s no A.I. exemption from laws already on the books.”

Rather than allow self-regulation or build some bespoke new regime, we can treat the A.I. companies like the powerful businesses of the past. If the laws apply, they should be enforced, and if these companies break them, they should be punished accordingly. Above all, the public must demand a role and a say in the future of this technology. New technologies must serve our needs, not the other way around.

Writing on the eve of the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the economist Henry George asked from his perch in San Francisco whether the railroad would bring misery or prosperity to the people of California, and whether anyone could resist the consequences of a great new concentration of wealth and power. “Can we rely upon sufficient intelligence, independence and virtue among the many to resist the political effects of the concentration of great wealth in the hands of a few?”

Well, can we?

The Iran War May Sink Republican Hopes in the Midterms

David Wallace-Wells

A writer for Opinion and The Times Magazine and the author of “The Uninhabitable Earth.”

IT’S been six months since President Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth attacked Iran. There are now street protests over fuel costs around the world. But the price of oil is down below \$100 again, as it has been for much of the war. In America, we are dealing with higher gas prices and some additional inflation, but given the loud warnings of economic catastrophe we heard in the spring, the economic impact looks relatively modest. As with the tariffs, the war has hurt the economy, but you could also be forgiven for whistling into the fall thinking the panic back in March was a story of the boy who cried wolf.

In politics, though, it’s a different story. There, the war has registered quite conspicuously, right from the start, and now hangs like perhaps the most obvious albatross among many around Mr. Trump’s neck. Only one-third of the country approves of Mr. Trump’s handling of the war, according to recent polling. But even worse is the effect Americans believe it has had on what they say is their most important issue — and what has become Mr. Trump’s worst one. Eight in 10 Americans say the war has raised the cost of living.

As the calendar turns past Labor Day, pollsters like to say, the picture of fall elections tends to come sharply into focus. And what we see in the polls from the first weeks of September is very clear: a big blue surge on top of what looked already like a big blue wave. Polling averages now put Democrats further ahead this cycle than in the major wave election in 2018. To me, the evidence suggests that Senate seats in Kansas, Iowa, South Carolina and Florida are in play.

The election is still weeks away. Republicans have oceans of cash to spend, and the path to a Democratic Senate always looked from afar like a tightrope walk. But Mr. Trump is unpopular, and trending downward. There is no sign of the much-hyped realignment of young, Black and brown voters this cycle — in fact it’s now an open question whether that realignment was really a blip or a mirage. And Democrats don’t even look like a party with a brand problem anymore, steadily surging upward in generic polling and doing even better when candidates are named. Yet what is perhaps most striking to me about the lay of the political landscape heading into the midterm homestretch is the way that among all of Mr. Trump’s vulnerabilities — his naked corruption, his malice on immigration, his paltry legislative achievement and his siding so blithely with A.I. accelerationists against a large majority of the country — the Iran war stands out.

Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised. The conflict has been a military humiliation, the world’s most expensive and ineffectual fighting force held at bay by the disposable drones and cheap missiles of a much lesser



BRADIM RATNAKARTI

power. Eighteen U.S. soldiers have been killed, officially, and recent reporting suggests the number may be higher. Regional bases have had to be evacuated to protect American lives, the country’s missile and interceptor stockpiles are now woefully diminished, and conditions on U.S. ships have become a global embarrassment. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the military adventure has cost the Pentagon \$38 billion, and is rising with each additional month. The war seemed needless at the outset — at best. Now it looks potentially endless, too.

That’s just the military side of things. At home, in six months of war, Americans have already paid more than \$100 billion more for fuel than they would have in the absence of conflict — a Trump-branded surcharge that when annualized is equivalent to nearly 1 percent of G.D.P. The C.B.O. estimates that

The president’s strategic mistakes may cause his base to jump ship.

more than one-third of the increase in American inflation this year is the result of the war, and the problem looms large enough that even the president’s handpicked Fed chair — whom Mr. Trump publicly said he chose to guarantee future rate cuts — just raised interest rates instead. Much has been made of Mr. Trump’s so-called betrayal of his antwar commitments, which were paper-thin and opportunistic to begin with. But the Iran war may prove just as politically damaging for dramatizing his broken promise to lower prices.

This is new, and not just for Mr. Trump. For decades, even if the U.S. wasn’t very good at fighting remote wars, it seemed to feel confident embarking on them without worrying too much about domestic political blowback — in some sense, this was the country’s real military superpower, however foolish the political calculation and per-

verse the consequences. The closing of the Strait of Hormuz has marked a profound shift of that dynamic, a lesser power expected to duck and cover quickly finding ways to impose costs on the American home front, as well. Look at the president’s approval ratings, and the pattern is remarkably clear. Overall, there is a step down in the spring of this year, coinciding with the beginning of the war. More telling is his approval rating on inflation and the cost of living. Inflation itself jumped in March and has stayed elevated since. And Mr. Trump’s net approval on those issues dropped off a cliff, falling 25 points and then largely staying there through the summer and into the fall. It’s almost as if something very big happened in late February.

Months later, even Mr. Trump’s loyal voters still feel pretty gloomy about an economy that would qualify, by most historical standards, as obviously imperfect but relatively solid. In January, 72 percent of Republican voters said they thought the economy had gotten stronger over the previous year. In September, the number is more than 40 points lower, at just 29 percent.

These numbers are extremely low, particularly given the headline strength of the American economy — low unemployment, relatively strong growth numbers and a booming stock market — and everything we have learned in recent years about partisan perceptions of the economy. Not that long ago, liberal commentators in the Biden era spent years racking their brains to explain what was often called the “vibe-cession” — the reality that public sentiment about the economy seemed so much bleaker than the conventional measures suggested. The vibes have collapsed on Mr. Trump, too, and quite a lot of that collapse looks tied up with Iran.

Things may be about to get worse. For six months, the economic effects of the war were muted by a lucky conspiracy of factors: fuel rationing across Asia, growing resilience in a research note warning that it had no jawboning of markets and the draining of global oil stockpiles, especially by China, whose cut to imports at the start of the war was so significant in this story that it’s been called the demonstration of a new geopolitical weapon. Even so, the gas price signal — that cartoonish standby of American politics — broke through. The price of gas has risen by 50 percent since February. Diesel is now at \$6.50 a gallon.

In July, China’s imports surged back up — although not to prewar levels. The Houthis blew up the pipeline Saudi Arabia had been using to reroute oil west to the Red Sea, and the damage is forcing the country to cancel some of its shipments to Europe. The world’s oil reserves, many of which are already at historic lows, are rapidly approaching their floors. On Sept. 17 J.P. Morgan published a research note warning that it had no way to map the chaos of the fall to come. The election is little more than a month away.

OPINION

In the Land of Billionaire Barbarians

Arielle Pardes

A former senior writer for Wired and The Information who has covered the tech industry for the last decade.

A START-UP founder I know who is based in New York recently visited Silicon Valley for the first time. He'd arranged to stay where the world's richest people make the world's most influential technology products. When he arrived, he was shocked to find a soul-crushing, car-choked suburban sprawl filled with office parks, auto dealerships and chain stores.

The part of Northern California we call Silicon Valley — a radius that includes the cities of San Jose, Mountain View, Cupertino, Menlo Park and Palo Alto — is home to four of the most powerful companies in the world. It has more combined wealth than most small countries, and at least 50 of its residents are billionaires. Yet by looking at it, you'd hardly know this place had any influence at all. Parts are pleasant, if provincial, with long avenues of low-slung ranch houses framed by eucalyptus trees. The rest is a placeless suburb, with aging infrastructure and cracks in the asphalt. Silicon Valley is one of the richest places on the planet, and it still has potholes in its streets. About a quarter of residents are struggling to survive there.

The tech elite have donated generously to scientific research and global health initiatives, but little goes to improving their own backyard. The lack of investment in the cities where our tech lords work and live reveals a stark reality about how this wealth benefits a select few at the expense of everyone else. As the industry expands its footprint nationwide with data centers, the rest of America would be wise not to let the same thing happen again.

Throughout history, the world's wealthiest and most powerful people erected monuments that redefined their cities and communities. French monarchs built the Arc de Triomphe. Industrial tycoons funded the New York Public Library. The Medicis filled Florence with art.

Silicon Valley, on the other hand, has about as much cultural capital as an airport. Its greatest cultural institution might be the two-million-square-foot Westfield Valley Fair shopping mall.

"If you were Napoleon Bonaparte, you built a building that was meant to last forever, as a monument to your fame and achievement," said Fred Turner, a professor at Stanford University who studies media, technology and American cultural history. "Silicon Valley's power is entirely different."

This power is entirely inward-facing. Wealth is hidden within modern-looking homes and walled-off corporate campuses. If you can get inside, every privilege exists. But for those on the outside, the residue of wealth is virtually invisible.

This sleight of hand is not an accident. The richest people in the tech industry have blocked policies that would raise taxes, increase wages or otherwise reduce their wealth to make life better for the people around them.

Before the region became synonymous with the tech industry, it was an expanse of cherry orchards and plum trees known to locals as "the Valley of Heart's Delight." Then, in the 1950s, engineering talent began to arrive, lured in by Stanford and encouraged by



ALVARO BERRIOS

Paris has the Arc de Triomphe; New York, the Met. Silicon Valley has a shopping mall.

Department of Defense contracts. Soon, those orchards gave way to office parks, and the companies producing silicon for computer chips and semiconductors gave the region its new nickname.

Those same companies also dumped toxic chemicals used in manufacturing onto the surrounding land. These chemicals seeped into the soil and groundwater and have been linked to severe birth defects. Santa Clara County, the southern part of Silicon Valley, has more Superfund sites — areas deemed by the Environmental Protection Agency as so contaminated they require years of clean-up — than anywhere else in the country. You could say that the tech industry has, from its inception, extracted value from the place where it exists while actively poisoning it.

Today's tech giants haven't contaminated the region so much as colonized it. The Valley has become organized, as Dr. Turner noted, like a series of feudal clusters: Google of Mountain View, Apple of Cupertino, Meta of Menlo Park, Nvidia of Santa Clara.

Each of these strongholds functions like a city in miniature, complete with cafes and dining halls, barbershops and dry cleaners, even health care clinics and day care centers. Apple's campus — a glittering circle wrapped in the world's largest panels of custom-made glass — includes a 100,000-square-foot well-

ness center with a two-story yoga studio. Meta's 30 structures spread over 250 richly landscaped acres, which include a nine-acre rooftop park and its own main street with an arcade, barbershop and candy store. Much of this is free if you work there; the picture is less clear for the lower-wage custodians, cafeteria workers and security officers who often don't work directly for the companies.

These luxurious domains leave most workers little reason to engage with the surrounding communities, and give the industry little reason to create anything for the public. Plenty of tech workers don't even live in Silicon Valley; their companies provide employees free buses that shuttle them home north to San Francisco.

Isn't this just capitalism? Companies aren't charities. Yet plenty of companies outside Silicon Valley do invest in their surrounding communities, to the benefit of everyone. In Bentonville, Ark., Walmart's founder and his family have spent considerable sums improving infrastructure, building museums, creating mountain biking trails and opening restaurants. In Midland, Mich., the Dow family (of Dow Chemical) financed extensive botanical gardens, miles of public parks and the Midland Center for the Arts. And nearby to Silicon Valley, in San Francisco, Salesforce's chief executive, Marc Benioff, helped fund

the Presidio Tunnel Tops park, a beloved green space.

This type of philanthropy used to be much more common. The industrial tycoons of the Gilded Age bankrolled cultural institutions like the Met and Carnegie Hall as a way to soften their public image. The historian Margaret O'Mara referred to it as "reputation laundering." By comparison, Dr. O'Mara told me, many of today's tech tycoons are more capricious. Witness the way Mark Zuckerberg and his wife founded a free-tuition school through their foundation for low-income children in one of the poorest areas of Silicon Valley in 2016, only to abruptly close the school this year.

The cities of Silicon Valley do collect tax revenue from the companies headquartered there. Yet that revenue is wildly out of proportion with the actual volume of wealth in the region, which remains locked in untaxed gains. Some of the wealthiest people in Silicon Valley have become experts in avoiding certain tax liabilities.

In 2024 — when Silicon Valley's public companies were valued at a combined \$14.3 trillion — 70 percent of Silicon Valley residents said that their quality of life had worsened in the past five years, according to a poll conducted by Joint Venture Silicon Valley. Today, there is some \$1.17 trillion in liquid wealth among local households, according to the latest Silicon Valley Index, an annual report on the region's economic status. But researchers at San Jose State University, who publish the annual Silicon Valley Pain Index, found that 28 percent of local households "need outside assistance to survive in the region."

Americans may not be aware of the struggles in Santa Clara County. But many have seen what our social media, internet search and e-commerce monopolies are doing to their families and their communities. Little wonder, then, that the tech industry's push to build data centers across America — a sort of techno Manifest Destiny — is not being well received. Seven in 10 Americans oppose the idea of having a data center built in their community, according to a recent Gallup poll. That's a level of resistance even greater than the opposition to building nuclear power plants.

"To some extent, these data centers are seen as a harbinger of technology that people don't really want in their lives," said Jeanette Estruth, an assistant professor of history at Santa Clara University, who is working on a book about social movements in Silicon Valley. She pointed to coalitions that banded together in the 1980s to pass laws to regulate the handling, storage and disposal of chemicals in the electronics industry in response to the dumping of toxic waste. Now, she said, people can do the same with data centers.

If these data centers are symbols, then they represent the growing bifurcation of wealth in America, where a select few stand to get much, much richer, while the rest of us are stuck with the ugly byproducts. Perhaps tech corporations shouldn't be expected to treat the places where they build data centers as anything more than a utility closet. But as history has also amply shown, the people and politicians around them can compel them to, and should do so before it's too late.

If they don't, the future the tech industry builds will be a monument to their wealth — and to the rest of America's ruin.

Collins Delivered Maine Up to Trump

Michelle Cottle

A writer in Opinion who covers national politics.

"I DELIVER for the state of Maine." These seven words, uttered by Senator Susan Collins in a recent sit-down with Politico, are the heart of her reelection pitch this election. Every election, really.

The sole Republican senator still hanging on in a blue state, Ms. Collins, running for her sixth term, has for decades defied political gravity by selling herself as a moderate, independent, bipartisan pragmatist focused on getting stuff done for Mainers — a voice of political sanity amid the growing din of polarization and dysfunction. It is an above-the-fray appeal that feels designed to flatter voters as much as herself.

But here's the thing. However moderate or pragmatic or pleasant she may be, Ms. Collins has a limited ability to influence what happens in today's Senate, a starkly polarized chamber dominated by leadership and currently functioning mostly as a rubber stamp for an authoritarian president. Too often she is left scrambling to do damage control in response to the chaos created by her own party. In this environment, her national-vibes-versus-local-results construct is, at best, outmoded. These days, Ms. Collins is not delivering for Maine so much as she is delivering up Maine to the Trump agenda.

Serving in the Senate is a team sport, now more than ever. Party leaders keep a tight grip on how the chamber functions, what legislation proceeds and how key pools of campaign cash get distributed among members. Ideological heterodoxy is frowned upon. Cross-aisle cooperation is discouraged. As rank-and-file senators will grumpily tell you, gone are the days when iconoclasts and independent thinkers held serious sway. The chamber is increasingly dominated by a "maximalist partisan position," as Senator Michael Bennet, the Colorado Democrat, put it to me last year. Inside this polarized Thunderdome, Ms. Collins's chief influence is as one more warm body giving

her team the majority, and by extension the team leadership control over the agenda.

Also, respecting norms does not automatically make for moderate, sensible outcomes. Ms. Collins has cast some of her more upsetting votes in recent years under this banner. Her belief in granting as much deference as possible to presidential nominees, for instance, led her to support the confirmation of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as the head of health and human services, Tulsi Gabbard as the director of national intelligence and Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

Last year, Ms. Collins supported a procedural motion to allow the president's signature bill — the One Big Beautiful Bill Act — to come up for debate on the Senate floor. The senator did so, she explained, out of respect for the authority of her conference's leadership.

Ms. Collins sometimes scores wins that a blue-state electorate would appreciate. Over the years, she has joined Democrats in passing a host of bills, and she has provided a key vote to block measures backed by her party. During the first Trump administration, she was one of three Republicans who helped kill the push for the so-called skinny repeal of Obamacare.

On the campaign trail, Ms. Collins makes much of her focus on real results for her home state, putting her relationships and institutional knowledge to productive use. She and her campaign team can tick through numerous examples in this business or protected funding for that public program. Forget the national vibes; she is all about getting stuff done for Mainers.

Except that, in recent years, this often involves merely undoing sweeping damage done by President Trump — getting grants restored to the University of Maine or preserving funding to hire seasonal workers at Acadia National Park. This summer, she won tariff exemptions for Canadian road salt and cement.

While Ms. Collins should be commended for scoring road-salt relief — and for her outspoken criticism of tariffs more broadly —



MARK PETERSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mr. Trump's feud with Canada will still kick her state in the teeth. Winning seasonal workers for Acadia pales next to the pain caused her constituents by the administration taking a sledgehammer to the federal government. Whatever targeted funding she secures to sustain rural hospitals in Maine seems unlikely to make up for the harm inflicted by the Medicaid cuts in Republicans' big, beautiful bill. And on it goes.

Ms. Collins's electoral endurance has long driven the Democrats batty. This year, with the political winds blowing hard against the G.O.P., the blue team is more desperate than ever to crack the senator's image as a different kind of Republican. They point out that

The moderation of the only G.O.P. senator in a blue state hardly matters anymore.

she votes with Mr. Trump 95 percent of the time. They dismiss her breaks with her party as political theater likely coordinated with the White House. Her 2018 support of Mr. Kavanaugh is a hot line of attack.

But the real issue may be that it no longer much matters what kind of Republican Ms. Collins is. With Mr. Trump running amok, and congressional Republicans loath to stand up to him, Ms. Collins's presence in the Senate is, on balance, costing her state far more than it is contributing. This cycle, the only way to really deliver for Maine is for its voters to reject Ms. Collins's long-running yet increasingly specious argument that she is somehow above the political fray.

The Global Order Is Changing. We Can No Longer Ignore the Warning Signs.

Margaret MacMillan

A historian and a former warden of St. Antony's College, Oxford.

WHEN a storm is coming, there will always be signs. The wind might suddenly drop. The tide goes out farther than usual. Streamers of clouds sail across the sky.

It's possible to misread or even ignore these signs — to insist that the drops of rain are just a passing shower — until it's too late. That's when the real trouble arrives.

What is true of weather is also true of human affairs. Regimes look strong until they don't. Revolutions at home and upheavals in the international order — the two so often go together — are easy to see in retrospect, but are not always anticipated. Yet if we look closer, we'll often find the signs were there.

Those of us who live in relatively stable and well-ordered societies would like to believe, like Voltaire's absurd Dr. Pangloss, who stumbles from one disaster to another, that "all is for the best." We might grumble about the economy or the prospect of another far-off war or listen approvingly to radical voices from either end of the political spectrum, but we don't expect our world to be turned upside down.

We would do better to heed the warning of another French writer. In Albert Camus's postwar novel "The Plague," when dead rats appear on the streets of the Algerian city of Oran and people fall ill with a mysterious disease, the local government and most of the citizens ignore the signs until it is too late. "There have been as many plagues as wars in history," Camus's narrator says, "yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise."

Today, there are dead rats all around. Temperature records were set and reset this summer, the earth has baked in droughts, and wildfires have raged. Debt across advanced economies is approaching historic highs. Cuts in medical and food aid, most significantly by the United States, have caused unnecessary deaths and helped the spread of diseases, one of which, sooner or later, could become another pandemic. Artificial intelligence continues its rapid, unregulated rise, threatening jobs, security and, in darker projections, human existence.

Revisionist powers flout rules and norms with impunity. Electorates are angry and volatile. Slow, deliberate, necessarily discreet diplomacy, which builds trust and understanding, has given way to a performative, brash style more suited for TikTok-added attention spans or the playground.

The Upsala Conflict Data Program recorded 65 state-based conflicts last year — the most since 1946. Great powers find themselves bogged down in asymmetric wars with countries that are making the most of new technologies. Russia's war in Ukraine, meant to be won in a matter of days, is creeping through its fifth year. Iran, using inexpensive, mass-produced drones to attack American forces and allies, has gained control, perhaps permanently, over a crucial corridor of world trade, drastically reduced U.S. missile stocks and mired President Trump in a war of his own choice.

A world war is not inevitable, but the threat of a catastrophic conflict between big and well-armed powers is closer than it was for decades.

Like the people of Camus's Oran, we are understandably reluctant to recognize just how much the world has changed. The problems are thorny, complex and tedious, and it's easier to look away. So we vacation on beaches while wildfires rage; we ask A.I. how to train a new puppy, how to write that letter — to do our thinking for us. We hope that the wars will end, that the guardrails, institutions and alliances will be rebuilt and that the world as we understand it will recover and endure.

But a new reality has arrived with startling speed. The world order that held together for most of our lives started to erode when those within it got too comfortable and complacent and when there was too much acceptance — even approval — of bad behavior.

We have arrived in a new age of disorder. We must prepare ourselves, beginning with being honest about the seriousness of the moment we're in and accepting that our fragile system is faltering. That countries are already adjusting, for better and worse. And that any future of cooperation will have to look different.

WHAT happens to those who refuse to adapt and who insist that a crumbling system can carry on? Consider three revolutions that were and one that wasn't.

On the eve of the French Revolution, France, Europe's greatest land power, was probably bankrupt, in large part because of the enormous amounts it had borrowed to help defeat the British in the American Revolution. Extravagant and corrupt ruling elites had lost their way, and a growing middle class, excluded from political power, was demanding change. At the bottom of society, workers and peasants faced starvation and were increasingly desperate.

Powerful new Enlightenment ideas were circulating — some of which were imported from the American Revolution — about human rights and new forms of government that would give power to at least some of the people.

The French kings and their courtiers misunderstood the depth of the discontent and assumed that nothing could shake them from their privileged position. They were wrong: The monarchy was overthrown, and a chaotic, violent republic was born. Within a decade, Napoleon moved to emperor.

There is no single pattern for revolutionary change, but those at the summit of a regime often fail to recognize how brittle it is. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was the consequence of defeat abroad, rather than a costly victory. But Czar Nicholas II also insisted, against all evidence, that no reforms were needed because Russians still adored him. In 1930s Germany, Hitler was invited into power by elites who thought, wrongly, that they would be able to use him and that the exist-

ing system was strong enough to box him in.

Each of these revolutions had profound international ramifications. Napoleon led France to dominance over the continent, smashing old institutions and ideas like the divine right of kings to rule. The Bolsheviks, who seized power in Russia, preached revolutionary internationalism, waging war worldwide on capitalism and democratic nations. Hitler rearmament Germany, conquered most of Europe and murdered millions of Jews and many others in the name of Aryan dominance.

Sometimes, though, nations and their leaders read the tea leaves in time. In the 1820s, the British government was facing pressure from the middle classes, newly created by the Industrial Revolution but shut out of political decision making. The British elite, attuned to the recent catastrophe in France, knew that it needed to adapt in order to survive. The 1832 Great Reform Act served as a pressure valve that widened the franchise sufficiently to avert a wider crisis.

It is easy to find the parallels in our own moment. Angry populations. Unelected elites with enormous wealth and the power to bend governments to their will. Leaders who refuse to build consensus or take advice. When Mr. Trump was asked in January what limits there are on his power, he answered, "My own morality"; King Louis XIV left France greatly weakened after the wars he fought, he said, for "la gloire," his glory.

Those who ignore the warning signs and dismiss history as irrelevant for the present might find themselves surprised and appalled when unwanted events happen to them anyway.

INTERNATIONAL order has always depended on the support of great powers and on the cooperation and buy-in of sufficient smaller powers. At the end of the Cold War, with the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the United States seemed ready to continue as the guarantor of the post-1945 system. Under Mr. Trump, that's no longer the case.

It could be that under a different president, the United States will resume its role as hegemon, a willing supporter of international institutions and norms, a good and dependable ally and a firm opponent of tyrants. That the world will once more go on as peacefully as it has — at least from some perspectives — since 1945. That the big powers, including now China and India, will continue to rub along together and something called an international community will recommit itself to work to eliminate poverty, injustice, conflict and climate change.

But what if we are already in the early stages of what will be a protracted period of disorder? A world in which we cannot assume that what was true yesterday will be true tomorrow or that seemingly solid institutions will endure. We might cease to be surprised at what the news brings each day.

Natural disasters happen, and it's not clear who is sending the cavalry. Do we slrug and carry on with our own lives? Conflicts — some with the potential to embroil great powers — occur with no obvious

arbitrator. Dependable alliances such as NATO are being tested and could fall apart. Russia's hybrid war with Europe is expanding; China and the United States could clash over Taiwan; competition for resources in a warming world is already stimulating violence.

This is a world of increasing unpredictability in which we are left, to a much greater extent than we expected, at the whims of our leaders, who are less bound by external frameworks and feel freer to make it up as they go along. We should be choosing those decision makers more carefully than ever — just when electorates seem less inclined to do so.

These are dark clouds. But the end of the old system does not have to mean the end of cooperation. We still have many of the components of an effective world order. We are expected, at the whims of our leaders, who are less bound by external frameworks and feel freer to make it up as they go along. We should be choosing those decision makers more carefully than ever — just when electorates seem less inclined to do so.

have a rich web of international institutions that manage the links among nations, from civil aviation to the internet. Treaties are still largely observed. International law and sovereignty can be hard to defend, but many of us still deplore the breaches. International public opinion can still put pressure on our leaders. Many of the organizations of the fading structures, among them the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, are increasingly drained of resources and meaning, but they still exist.

In a much-discussed speech in Davos, Switzerland, in January, Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada, months before trade talks with the United States broke down, described the end of Pax Americana as the end of a "pleasant fiction." But other countries could push back, he said, particularly if they banded together in coalitions of shared values with shared goals. Middle powers, including Canada, Australia and Japan, are working together to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of the United States from its role as the benevolent superpower.

CHANGE is hard, but clinging to the old ways can be a dangerous delusion. In the summer of 1914 the British foreign secretary, Edward Grey, and many others in positions of power in Britain and across Europe assumed that the latest crisis in the Balkans would be settled, as similar ones were before, by a conference of the great powers. He failed to understand how rapidly Europe was moving to war and to use Britain's great power to bring the different sides together. World War I changed Europe and the world for good.

By 1945, Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States and their allies had fought two brutal world wars in the space of three decades. When they created the architecture of the existing order, they were very clear on what they wanted to prevent. The previous frameworks had failed, and they would create something new that would not.

The Panglossian road of unwarranted optimism is a dead end. But that doesn't mean we cannot do what has so often been done before and embark on the laborious process of building something afresh.

This essay is part of "The New World Disorder," a series exploring the disintegration of the postwar international system and how countries are adjusting as America steps aside.

In Trump's World, All Are On Their Own

Krista Mahr

A senior international editor for Opinion.

SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

EACH month, tens of thousands of tourists arriving from the United States descend over the green mountains of Costa Rica to touch down at Juan Santamaría International Airport outside San José. They shuffle through immigration and then past images of sloths hawking 5G SIM cards, toucans selling rum distilled with renewable energy and someone doing yoga at sunset. Costa Rica is the happiest country in Latin America, a sign at baggage claim tells them. "Pure life," the unofficial national motto goes: "Pura vida."

Then, every week or so, another kind of flight lands, carrying men, women and sometimes children deported from the United States. Some arrive with their wrists and ankles in restraints. Many didn't know where they were going until they boarded the plane. They aren't here for the toucans or the yoga. They are shuttled to hotels, where they face a few options, none of them necessarily good: Go back to the place you left, find another way to leave, or stay — which, for many, means no family, no job and no idea what to do next.

Since the beginning of last year, the U.S. government has sent more than 600 men, women and children from dozens of countries to this tiny Central American nation where they have few or no ties. It is one data point in a much bigger effort: So far, the second Trump administration has deported over 25,000 migrants to 29 so-called third countries under different legal mechanisms, according to Refugees International and Human Rights First, two groups tracking the policy. Many went to the United States seeking safety, or had already been granted protection in U.S. courts.

The Trump administration is not the first government to send migrants to other nations, but it has supercharged the practice like no other. Deals with countries willing to take noncitizens have been inked in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, despite some having records of human rights abuses. The European Union is also dabbling in the strategy, as is Australia. The receiving nations agree to take deportees for a variety of reasons: direct payments, trade pressure or sometimes, it seems, simply because a more powerful partner asked.

The proliferation of these arrangements is undermining an idea that has been a bedrock of international law for the past 75 years. After World War II, a record millions of people, the international community came up with a new legal status — refugee — and a set of rights for this growing population. Under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, most nations pledged not to send people fleeing danger back to jeopardy. They called not just for the right of refugees to live in physical safety, but also the right to build a full, new life. The system was at its core a 20th-century humanitarian agenda. It created stability in a fragile political moment and was an economic boon for wealthy countries that took people in.

The United States helped lead this charge and has granted protection to some four million asylum seekers and refugees since 1980. Now, as the Trump administration seeks to stop the "invasion" it declared at America's borders and end "the era of mass migration," the number of refugees admitted and people granted asylum has plummeted. A raft of new policies — including sending people to third countries, a practice facing serious legal challenges in the United States and in receiving countries — is not only shrinking the space for those seeking safety in the United States. It's threatening the entire notion of global protection as well.

It is part of the broader disintegration of the international order that has gripped the world together since 1945. In that place, something new is taking shape — a system that is more transactional, more arbitrary and crueler, and one in which, more and more, everyone is on his or her own.

ON SEPT. 14 at 6 p.m., Costa Ricans gather to sing their national anthem and mark the country's independence from Spain. Inside one hotel lobby in San José this year, a small crowd managed a subdued rendition. Toward the back, a few hotel guests recently deported from America looked on, holding up their phones.

The next morning, on the patio over breakfast, I met Mónica Yádrira Sánchez de la Rosa, a 35-year-old from Reynosa, Mexico, who arrived in August. Ms. Sánchez had been living in McAllen, Texas, since 2024, when she and her three young children fled her abusive husband, and crossed the border into the United States to claim asylum.

In Mexico, some 10 women are killed every day by their partners or family. But claiming asylum for domestic violence isn't easy, and Ms. Sánchez couldn't afford a lawyer. As her case wound through the immigration system, her children started school, and she found some under-the-table work. By the time of her latest court hearing in June, she was too scared of ICE agents to attend, and she was ordered to leave the country. Not long after, during a traffic stop, she was arrested, detained and deported within days to Costa Rica while her children were at home, waiting.

For Ms. Sánchez, there wasn't a question of what she would do next. Her kids, who were about to start the school year in Texas, returned to Reynosa after she was deported, and when we met, she was preparing to take a flight home. She said if her husband threatened her again, she was ready to go to the police — even though, she added, "I talked to them before and they didn't listen to me."

Costa Rica has become one of the biggest recipients of third-country nationals from the United States. People are sent here under different circumstances: Some are economic migrants who crossed into America without authorization and were quickly deported. Others are asylum seekers who were denied the chance to seek asylum at the border, or like Ms. Sánchez, deported after they'd been living in the United States for years. In Costa Rica, they are interviewed by the International Organization for Migration, a U.N. agency. If they want to go home, and I.O.M. deems it safe for them to do so, they can enter the agency's Assisted Voluntary Return program. The services the agency is providing in Costa Rica — return flights, hotels, food, clothing, medical care — are paid for by the United States.

Then there are those who can't go home. They can try to leave Costa Rica on their own, apply for refugee status here or stay and work for up to a year on a temporary humanitarian permit, receiving I.O.M. support. The U.S. government is helping pay for that, too.

Over 200 people sent to Costa Rica this year have not returned to their home countries, according to official statistics. As of July, the government said only a handful had formally applied for asylum. Those who do face a long wait: There are nearly 200,000 pending applications in Costa Rica's overstretched system, which its Office of the Comptroller General warned in 2024 was at risk of collapse.

The Costa Rican government is clear that integrating U.S. deportees into the country, while an option, is not its primary objective. Costa Rica has created a model to ensure "people have enough time to decide to return to their countries of origin voluntarily," said Omer Badilla, the head of its migration authority. "We adopted it to avoid any negative criticism suggesting we were rushing people."



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ALMA HANER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE: PHOTOGRAPH BY GETTY IMAGES

OPINION

The W.N.B.A. Should Take Care of Its Own

Roxane Gay
A contributing Opinion writer and the editor of "The Portable Feminist Reader."

THE W.N.B.A. is having a moment. As the league celebrates its 30th anniversary, the audience is growing exponentially, and the number of teams is expanding. After years of fighting tirelessly for fair wages and a successful strike authorization vote, the players' union earned a collective bargaining agreement; for the first time, star players in the league have secured million-dollar contracts; the league minimum salary is now \$270,000; and there are higher salary caps for teams.

For anyone watching the W.N.B.A. blossom over the past three decades, this has all been a long time coming, hard-earned and richly deserved. But alongside the growth and increased public attention, the league is also facing a pair of crises, not necessarily of its own making: how to welcome trans women, if and when it becomes necessary, and a rise in racism directed toward Black players. How the league and the players navigate that will determine its future, one made possible by a loyal fan base that is largely composed of the very people most vulnerable to these ideological attacks.

As L.A. Sparks courtside ticket holders, my wife and I take in as many games as we can each season. The W.N.B.A. athletes are fascinating both on and off the court. Unlike their male counterparts, many players are openly gay or bisexual. Some have dated one another and broken up, and their romantic dramas play out of the court but in the public eye. This year's All-Star Weekend was particularly spicy. All of it only endears the W.N.B.A. to me more.

The players are generally progressive and willing to voice what they stand for. This is especially noteworthy because professional athletes, like musicians, actors and other celebrities, are often told to "stay in their lane," to not be political.

Over the years, W.N.B.A. players have expressed support for Black Lives Matter, eradicating gun violence, gender equity, reproductive freedom and L.G.B.T.Q. rights. In an interview with Harper's Bazaar, the veteran player Nneka Ogwumike, a fierce champion for her fellow players and for social justice throughout her 15-season career, said, "Our league is made up of the people that require more rights in this world and our society." Most players are keenly aware that they cannot just parcel out pieces of themselves in service of their professional lives.

The league, however, does not exist in a bubble. The former N.B.A. players Enes Kanter Freedom and Royce White, in a bid to be provocative, declared in August for the 2027 W.N.B.A. draft. In doing so, they stated that they were going to identify as trans women so they could be eligible to play. Freedom has continued this farce, appearing on conservative media, desperately seeking the attention he was unable to garner in the N.B.A.

Freedom has mostly pushed the league to provide a definition of "woman," a tired conservative talking point, presumably because he and White think they are cleverly revealing some flaw in inclusive logic. The

An athletic league can be a reflection of the world as it could be, not merely as it is.



W.N.B.A. has indicated that neither Freedom nor White is eligible, but the question of how to craft a fair and reasonable policy for trans women remains.

The Indiana Fever guard Sophie Cunningham was vocal earlier this year about her beliefs that trans women shouldn't play in the W.N.B.A. "I want to protect young girls in a locker room, or young girls in sport who shouldn't have to go against biological men," Cunningham said in an ESPN interview. Her claims exploit one of the most popular attacks against trans women — the idea that women and girls are not safe around trans women.

Cunningham supporters have staged small anti-trans protests at Indiana Fever games in several cities, presumably in solidarity with her and to keep the issue in the news. The White House press secretary at the time, Karoline Leavitt, even weighed in on Cunningham's statement, amplifying the ambient transphobia now encircling the league.

Every once in a while, the outgoing league commissioner, Cathy Engelbert, has made a tepid statement about intolerance, but the league she leads, as an organization, seems to address politically charged issues without the vigor or moral courage of many indi-

vidual players. Thus far, there has been only one openly trans W.N.B.A. player — the talented Layshia Clarendon, who retired after playing for 12 seasons, and also identifies as nonbinary. Thus far the controversy has been entirely manufactured by people with no real connection to the trans community.

Pressures on the league can also rise from within. In 2024, two stars joined the W.N.B.A.: Angel Reese, playing for the Chicago Sky, and Caitlin Clark, for the Indiana Fever. Reese and Clark, a Black woman and a white woman, have been pitted against each other as rivals on and off the court since their college days. Since they've become professional athletes, their style of play, penchant for fouling one another and professional rivalry have been used to amplify some of the stark cultural divides that have shaped American life for the past decade or more.

Clark, who was popular as an N.C.A.A. player with the University of Iowa, has brought a legion of new fans to the game. But even two years in, many of them seem willfully unfamiliar with who makes up the W.N.B.A. About two-thirds of W.N.B.A. players are Black, and many of the women are queer. Some of Clark's fans seem to want to change, through the sheer force of their will,

this reality by making Clark the only face of the league. These fans gave the impression that they are more attached to Clark's whiteness than her talent.

When Clark doesn't receive an accolade that her fans think she deserves, like a spot on the 2024 U.S. women's Olympic team, there is an immediate outcry, as if she were the only talented player. Some of her fan base has taken to harassing on-court rivals online after referee calls that don't favor Clark. It all draws from an unholy miasma of racism, homophobia and, of course, selective misogyny.

Clark's contributions to the W.N.B.A. are undeniable, even as her on-court efforts — like defense — have been uneven. She has an excellent three-point shot. She also has a real temper when things don't go her way. Like soccer players, she flops dramatically when other players make contact with her. But most people are willing to overlook all that because she has brought unprecedented attention to the game. Unfortunately, much of that attention is neither good nor welcome.

In July, 11 Republican lawmakers, led by Representative August Pfluger of Texas, sent a letter to Ms. Engelbert demanding the league account for fouls against Clark and warning that they would support a Department of Justice investigation if the league's response revealed discrimination. It was ludicrous, but it was also a perfect example of how unhinged and far-reaching efforts to protect her have become. To Clark's credit, before the lawmakers' letter was sent, she disavowed a lot of this nonsense. "Harassment, hate, none of that is OK," she said after a particularly tense game against the Phoenix Mercury.

Despite the excellent basketball being played in the W.N.B.A., it often seems as if the loudest conversations are about everything but basketball. It is a profound disservice to the players, coaches and professionals running the league. Given this country's political fractures, there should be no ambiguity or compromise when it comes to what is right for the players, the fans or the country. This is not the time to move toward the imaginary middle or political neutrality.

The W.N.B.A., as a league, should lead the charge for making space for trans women in women's sports. They should do more to honor the identities of the players and protect them from bad-faith attacks, death threats, harassment and other racial animus that players like Reese, Alyssa Thomas, Dearica Hamby and Chelsea Gray have been subjected to.

Surely, a league made up of such smart, dedicated players, coaches, general managers and executives can come up with a way forward that is fair to everyone involved. But not enough of the current conversation is focused on progress, compromise or actionable solutions. Instead, politicians, cranks and conservative pundits are trying to remake a diverse professional league into something small, empty and exclusionary.

Their ambitions are not inevitable, though. The W.N.B.A. has an invaluable opportunity right now; the league can be a reflection of the world as it could be, not merely as it is.

adversely affected generation when it comes to A.I. They're training before we know enough about how to teach them well in this new paradigm. I want their patients to benefit, as I think mine are, from doctors supported by these tools. But I also want them to develop a talent for reasoning their way through complex problems full of distractions and ambiguities, and rich with emotional states.

The hardest parts of doctoring will stay hard, I think, even if some other tasks are made easier. Mastering those challenges will still be where the utility and the pleasure of medicine will be found. The profession has adapted to waves of paradigm-shifting technological change before, yet the privilege of taking care of people remains.

A.I. Has Made Me a Better Physician

Rachael Bedard
A contributing Opinion writer, a geriatrician and a palliative care doctor.

I HAVE a confession: Artificial intelligence is making me a better doctor. And I worry that it's making doctors-in-training worse.

Amid our recent doom cycle about whether A.I. will lead to extreme societal harms, a parallel anxiety has taken hold in medicine about whether A.I. will one day replace physicians. In the context of that panic, I feel a little sheepish admitting that I already use the technology in my practice all the time — especially since I harbor anxieties about what its availability means for my students and residents, and therefore for the profession at large.

This summer, I used an A.I. tool — a platform called OpenEvidence, accessible only to health care providers — to help me choose antibiotics for one patient and to interpret unusual bloodwork for another. A.I. reminded me to consider migraines when a woman presented with dizziness. I chatted with the large language model about treatments for an older man with lung cancer. I have also consulted it about a rash on my father's back, my son's fever, a friend's arm pain and my own difficulty sleeping.

I practice primary care, where every malady is my business. Almost every month, I'm confronted with a complaint or syndrome that I don't recognize. I'm confident in my mastery over what doctors do — history-taking, reasoning, communicating. I'm less confident about my continued mastery of an ever-evolving universe of facts. Now, the chatbot in my pocket reassures me that I will always know enough, or have access to the cloud-based intelligence that generally does.

All of my students and residents also use OpenEvidence, however, and I worry about the consequences of introducing such a powerful decision aid so early in their careers. Not only have they memorized less than I'd like, but they can seem almost passive in their relationship to their machines.

It's impractical and counterproductive to train physicians in 2026 without exposure to A.I. Doctoring — as opposed to writing, my other work — is not a creative act that needs to be protected from technological annex-

ation. It's a service that ought to embrace any resource that improves patient care. Training doctors in the A.I. age, then, means training them to think critically with a machine in the loop, for a speculative future of medicine that we can only glimpse.

I started medical school 20 years ago. Every day since, I have looked something up, skimmed a journal article or talked through a case with a colleague — medicine is a phone-a-friend profession. As a student, I walked around the hospital with "Pocket Medicine," a standard-issue guide, tucked into my white coat pocket, and I consulted it all day long. I had to understand exactly what I was looking for when I flipped through its pages, and it could not tell me what to do with whatever knowledge I found there.

I haven't carried "Pocket Medicine" for years. Instead, I am never without my phone. For years, I primarily took my questions to the widely used website UpToDate.com, an evidence-based medical encyclopedia. But now, several times a day, I use OpenEvidence.

OpenEvidence is trained exclusively on peer-reviewed evidence and guidelines, and includes citations for all its claims. Not every insight found there is useful or even accurate, because much of the medical literature it refers to falls short on both those counts. To use the app well, you must stay skeptical as you scroll. It does, however, allow me to trace a statement to a source so I can evaluate it for myself. OpenEvidence reports that over half of American doctors regularly use the app, and it recently announced a plan to expand free access to doctors in developing nations.

OpenEvidence and I can have an iterative conversation grounded in a case's peculiarities, a difference in kind from when I used to look up general information and try to apply it to an individual situation. The app lets me input my patient's labs, or upload an imaging report photo, and then offers suggestions about what it sees. Not infrequently, it suggests something I did not consider.

I'm surprised by how much I learn from, and enjoy, these interactions. More important, my patient care has improved as conversations with the agent push my thinking beyond its usual limits.

For the residents I supervise, however,

the app's speed and anticipatory helpfulness are a hindrance as much as an enhancement. When I skim a chatbot's response to a question about back pain, I'm intuitively testing its suggestions against my hard-won mental model for how to approach back pain. Could I have developed that if I'd had a robot leading my thinking all along?

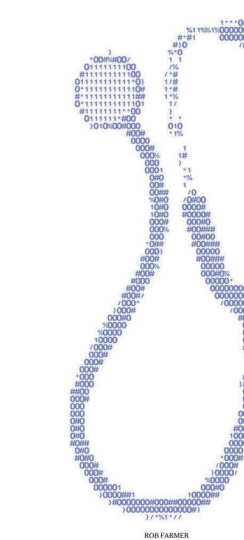
I asked Adam Rodman, a physician and A.I. researcher at Harvard Medical School, how to think about these risks. He said he shared my concern that trainees aren't benefiting from "productive struggles" as much as their predecessors. "In experienced hands, decision support might cause a little de-skilling, but a little de-skilling probably doesn't matter much to you," Dr. Rodman told me. "But if you do that to somebody who has much less skill, the cognitive offloading can cause never-skilling."

I don't think it's critical that my residents memorize every diagnostic protocol, just as it's no longer critical that I recall my friends' phone numbers. But I do want them to learn to hear problems the way a doctor is supposed to, as stories that contain clues that set off a cascade of cognitive associations. And I want them to develop the cardinal instincts that amount to good judgment in medicine: the ability to distinguish sick from not sick and to prioritize competing patient concerns, as well as the tact to effectively seek information beyond what a patient voluntarily reveals.

A.I. is only the latest tool to provoke a reckoning around which skills are truly essential to doctoring. As a student, I struggled valiantly to identify heart murmurs in my patients, even though I had access to imaging techniques that made my stethoscope somewhat redundant. Similarly, students today need opportunities to build cognitive muscles through study, even if they will seldom rely on their own memories over their machines.

Dr. Rodman shared ideas for how to help learners experience worthwhile friction despite the availability of A.I. — proposals like A.I.-free clinical reasoning sessions and A.I. literacy training. We don't yet know, however, what caring for patients will even look like once artificial intelligence is fully integrated into medicine, nor what its capabilities will be.

Current doctors-to-be may be the most



For experienced doctors, new tools are vital. For students, they can hinder learning.

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