

No end in sight

Iran war is escalating costs for the global economy

One month into the conflict between the United States (US)-Israel and Iran, there is little visibility on the endgame. Both sides have proposed conditions, which make it impossible for either belligerent to meet. The US' 15-point plan demanded from Tehran guarantees that would have emasculated the country's ability to defend itself against future attacks in a hostile region. Iran, in return, demanded counter-conditions such as lifting sanctions, ceasing assassinations of leaders, and guarantees against future US aggression.

This mutual intransigence — despite efforts by Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to broker a deal — is likely to inflict progressively heavier economic costs on the global economy. Countries in Asia heavily dependent on West Asian fossil fuel are already struggling to contain the inflationary impact and hardships of fuel shortages with adverse long-term consequences for their economies and government finances. For example, slashing the special additional excise duty on petrol and diesel by ₹10 per litre — to provide relief to oil-marketing companies, which are taking the hit — could pare Indian government revenues by between ₹1.2 trillion and ₹1.7 trillion on an annualised basis. More pain for the global economy is on the cards with the resumption of retaliatory attacks and the unanticipated escalation by Yemen's Houthis against Israel. This new front could threaten another key global trade route via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea.

Until now, the Iranian mining and blockading of the Strait of Hormuz, which accounts for a quarter of trade in seaborne oil and gas and is the main outlet for West Asian fossil-fuel producers, have caused oil prices to soar from \$73 per barrel (for benchmark Brent crude) to \$110-119, along with heavy shortages. Eastern Asia has been particularly hard hit as it sources 80-90 per cent of crude oil and natural gas via this route. Saudi Arabia sought to adjust to the blockade by increasing oil flows through its east-west overland pipeline to the Red Sea port of Yanbu, which eased pressure on prices of crude oil. That outlet, too, is now threatened along with trade between Asia and Europe. The Suez Canal/Red Sea accounts for a third of world container traffic, and the world has already experienced the impact of Houthi disruption in 2023 and 2024. Ships were forced to take the longer route down the west coast of Africa and around the Cape of Good Hope, causing a sharp rise in shipping costs, including insurance premiums, and adding to global inflationary pressures and disrupted supply chains.

It is increasingly evident that the US and Israel have seriously miscalculated Iran's responses and capabilities. The assassinations of Iran's political and security leaders have not compelled Tehran to surrender. On the contrary, it has deployed a range of weaponry, which has wrong-footed its opponents time and again. Despite a month of pummeling Iran with the world's most sophisticated weaponry, US intelligence agencies reportedly reckon that only about a third of its missile arsenal and drone capability has been destroyed. They are unsure of the status of the rest. For a country that has planned for just this contingency — and has experience of prolonged warfare and hardship — a long-drawn asymmetric war of attrition is not seen as a disadvantage. But with a face-saving exit eluding the US and Israel, the prospect of lasting peace in West Asia appears increasingly remote.

Reducing energy vulnerability

A tenfold increase in the share of renewables in the total energy supply is needed

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY KUMAR MOHANTY



The external environment has given us fresh concerns about our domestic vulnerabilities. The conflict involving Iran disrupts energy markets and alters the calculus of risk. For India, the macroeconomic implications of oil-price shocks have been a problem since the early 1970s. The structural weakness is visible in the data. Imported crude oil constitutes 21.7 per cent of the total energy supply. Imported natural gas accounts for an additional 2.6 per cent. These add up to a vulnerability of 24.3 per cent. The strategic literature in India has long documented the risks of this dependence, upon a politically unstable region. The intellectual consensus favours a transition. There is a ready answer: We are blessed, the Indian landmass receives abundant solar radiation. Modern technologies for renewables offer the foundations for energy independence.

Where are we in this journey? Over the past decade, modern renewable generation in India, measured in terajoules, grew by 8 per cent per year. This figure suggests motion. A growth rate of 8 per cent over a decade doubles absolute output. But with all this growth, we are really not in a good place. Modern renewables account for just 3.2 per cent of the energy supply. The achievement of decades of energy policy reduces to one number: Modern renewables at 3.2 per cent of the energy supply.

Modern economic growth is energy-intensive. Expanding gross domestic product (GDP) requires a commensurate expansion in energy supply. Demographics, urbanisation, and industrialisation guarantee that energy demand will scale up. The composition of this supply must undergo a structural transformation. At present, traditional biomass constitutes 20 per cent of the total energy supply. Economic modernisation implies the displacement of biomass. It involves deep electrification of industrial processes, transport logistics, and household consumption. To alter the macroeconomic profile and

achieve energy security, the role of renewables cannot grow incrementally. The system requires an order of magnitude expansion. What is the path to renewables at 32 per cent of the total energy supply?

We took 20 years to get to a 3.2 per cent share. This won't go to 32 per cent quickly within the present paradigm. It requires foundational changes in energy policy. Incremental adjustments to subsidies or public-sector mandates will not bridge this gap. Three structural shifts are necessary to mobilise capital and align incentives.

The first element is the transformation of the electricity sector. The prevailing architecture operates on central planning. State entities design procurement, determine quantities, and administer prices. This institutional arrangement misallocates capital, deters risk-taking, and deters innovation. Central planning cannot process the complexity of a modern, decentralised grid dominated by intermittent sources of renewables. The system must transition to the price mechanism. The design of electricity markets must allow prices to clear based on supply and demand in real time.

Market prices and profit rates are the mechanisms that correctly organise economic activity. When the price system functions, it attracts private investment in renewables generation, transmission infrastructure, and energy storage. Capital flows toward solutions that resolve grid constraints. Akshay Jaitly and I have termed this deeper energy-sector transformation as "the lowest hanging fruit of the coconut tree" (<https://bit.ly/4vsw1ib>). Central planners attempt to have a political-bureaucratic selection of the right technologies. Markets take risks and discover the lowest-cost solutions. The state must build the market framework within which millions of private agents optimise their energy production and consumption decisions based on unhindered price signals.



SNAKES & LADDERS
AJAY SHAH

Restricting social harm

US verdicts expose design flaws in social-media platforms

Two recent jury verdicts in the United States (US) seem to have redrawn the legal map for holding social-media companies accountable. In California, a jury found Meta Platforms and YouTube liable for harm caused to a young user, not because of specific posts but because of how their platforms are designed. For years, such cases ran aground on Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, 1996, which shields platforms from liability for user-generated content. This time, the claim was carefully reframed. Jurors were directed to examine the platform architecture: How feeds are structured, how engagement is sustained, and how users are repeatedly drawn back. The legal question was whether the harm flowed from third-party content, which would trigger Section 230 immunity, or from the companies' own design choices. By placing the case in the realm of product liability, the court arrived at the landmark decision.

This distinction could open the door to a wave of similar lawsuits. In a separate case, a jury in New Mexico reached a different but equally consequential conclusion against Meta Platforms. The case, brought under consumer protection law, centred on child sexual exploitation and whether the company had misled the public about the safety of its platforms. The trigger was internal communication around Meta's 2019 decision to expand end-to-end encryption on Facebook Messenger. Evidence presented in court showed that employees had warned such changes would reduce the company's ability to detect and report child sexual abuse material. In the years that followed, such reports fell sharply. Clearly, here the issue was the gap between public assurances and internal risk assessment by the big tech companies.

Taken together, the two verdicts shift scrutiny from what users post to how platforms are built and governed. They also bring the role of internal knowledge into sharper focus. Material presented in the California case suggested that concerns around compulsive use and harm to younger users were known within companies even as viewer engagement remained the organising principle. Features such as infinite scroll, algorithmic amplification, and constant notifications are engineered to maximise time spent, creating feedback loops that reward repetition and elevate emotionally charged content because it travels further. For younger users, this can translate into patterns of compulsive use, not by accident but by design.

The policy response to such findings is already tilting towards restriction, particularly for minors. In India, proposals to limit or ban social-media access for children are gaining ground. However, blanket restrictions risk addressing the symptom rather than the cause. Experience elsewhere shows that enforcement is uneven, with users finding ways around age barriers. Definitions of social media remain fluid, while adjacent platforms like gaming and chatbots replicate similar engagement dynamics. If the courts have established anything, it is that the problem lies in design. Regulation, therefore, must engage with the architecture of platforms, including safer defaults for minors, limits to autoplay and endless scroll, and greater transparency around recommendation systems, rather than rely solely on blunt prohibitions. Regulatory design should no longer just focus on who uses these platforms, but how they are designed to be used.

Modernising Indian corporate law

The Corporate Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026, is a welcome step in the ongoing evolution of India's corporate regulatory framework. Introduced in the Lok Sabha on March 23, it proposes wide-ranging amendments to the Companies Act, 2013, and the Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) Act, 2008, to further ease of doing business while strengthening governance. Emphasis is on practicality — removing friction from corporate action, making enforcement proportionate, modernising internal governance workflows, and concentrating regulatory discipline where it matters most.

The Bill has been referred to a joint parliamentary committee (JPC) for scrutiny and stakeholder inputs before it returns for final consideration.

A key feature is making compliance more proportionate to size while retaining governance discipline. The proposed expansion of the "small company" thresholds (paid-up capital from ₹10 crore to ₹20 crore; and turnover from ₹100 crore to ₹200 crore) could bring more entities in the growth stage into a lighter compliance regime without lowering baseline standards. Additional fees for delayed filings are to be rationalised (including overall caps) and timelines for charge registration extended (the overall window up to 180 days), reducing punitive outcomes for procedural delays and supporting timely regularisation. Compliance requirements have been eased for small/one-person/dormant companies (one board meeting per year), and disclosures of director interest (under Form MBP-1) moved from the annual filing to a change-based trigger.

It also aligns corporate law with modern capital and talent realities. Recognising contemporary shifts in reward structures beyond traditional equity (employee stock-option plans) reflects how companies structure incentives today. Buyback provisions have been proposed to be modernised: Expanded eligibility (including ESOP/sweat equity and similar schemes), flexibility for prescribed classes to undertake up to two buybacks a year (subject to a minimum gap), clearer computation mechanics, and removing affidavit-based solvency verification. With

safeguards built through rules, these changes can reduce interpretational disputes and improve capital-management agility, particularly where companies are returning surplus cash or managing dilution from incentive plans.

A third theme is digital-first governance with checks intact. Annual general meetings (AGMs) and extraordinary general meetings (EGMs) may be held in physical mode, through videoconferencing/audiovisual means, or in hybrid form (subject to conditions), enabling hybrid meetings if requested, where thresholds are met. At least one physical AGM every three years preserves periodic in-person shareholder interaction. EGMs through videoconferencing may be convened on shorter notice (at least seven days or as prescribed). An electronic service becomes the default for prescribed classes, governance emphasis shifts from dispatch to proof of service integrity, record-keeping, and stronger internal standard operating protocols.

Rationalising corporate social responsibility (CSR) aims to align obligations under this with capacity and reduce procedural slippage. The net-profit trigger rises from ₹5 crore to ₹10 crore (or as prescribed), the timeline for transferring unspent CSR amounts for ongoing projects has been extended from 30 to 90 days from year end, and the threshold for constituting CSR committees are proposed to be increased (₹50 lakh to ₹1 crore, or as prescribed). An enabling provision allows prescribed classes to be exempt from CSR subject to conditions, creating room for a more fact-based approach over time.

On corporate action and exits, several proposals can reduce procedural drag and improve predictability. Fast-track mergers/demerger become more workable through a 75 per cent "present and voting" approval threshold, and the jurisdiction of one Bench of the National Company Law Tribunal for schemes based on the transferee/resultant company can reduce multi-Bench filings. Restricting schemes for companies already in liquidation address overlap risks with insolvency processes. Strike-off grounds expanded for inactive/non-filing companies, restoring prescribed categories shifts to regional directors, and

summary liquidation is clarified, including the appointment of an official liquidator or a registered insolvency professional — supporting quicker, more proportionate exits for low-risk closures.

The Bill proposes to streamline IFSC (International Financial Services Centre) compliance by moving IFSC entities to a foreign currency NDR for share capital and financial records, with INR presentation allowed only where the International Financial Services Centres Authority permits.

Finally, the move from criminalisation to proportionate enforcement is a welcome evolution. Routine defaults shift from fine/prosecution to civil penalties; adjudication matters by regional directors are expanded, freeing up NCLT time and enabling expediter resolution; and settlement and recovery mechanisms strengthen enforceability while reducing fear-based compliance. Pre-deposit requirements for certain appeals and higher compounding thresholds at the level of regional directors should encourage administrative closure over prolonged tribunal paths, while preserving remedies for genuine disputes.

Where the government can add disproportionate value is by sharpening last-mile mechanics so that intent translates into real experience. In incorporation, issues are often operational rather than legal: Wider acceptable address proofs/validity windows for cross-border execution, and a more responsive escalation mechanism at the processing stage would improve transparency and predictability. On exits, enabling a controlled mechanism to repatriate surplus funds during strike-off (after filing but before final order), expanding the practical reach of summary liquidation through thresholds and digital first mechanics and considering a fast-track administrative exit for non-operational distressed entities (with safeguards) would strengthen capital recycling and investor confidence. Overall, the Bill is directionally strong, but the starting point is low and sharper when the public interest is high. With last-mile refinements incorporated, it can deliver a more predictable and business-aligned corporate framework in practice.

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The destructive miracle of capitalism



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In 2003, the literary theorist Fredric Jameson wrote that it was "easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." Trevor Jackson seems to agree, but only to a point. In *The Inevitable Machine: How Capitalism Conquered the World*, Jackson says that the prevailing economic system has already gone a long way toward destroying our "finite planet." He argues that if we don't find a way to change course, the end of the world won't be something we have to imagine; it will actually arrive.

Such is the grim foundation of Jackson's book, which offers a compact

and vivid account of several centuries of capitalist expansion. Jackson, an economic historian at Berkeley, is a critic of capitalism, which he defines as a system that turns things like labour and land into assets for market exchange. But he adds that the reasons for capitalism's dominance are far from simple, and not all damning. Colonialism and violence are part of the story, yes — but so is a tenfold increase in average living standards. Capitalism made the world, transforming the Earth and reconfiguring social relationships. The Industrial Revolution opened the old assumption that population growth would necessarily cancel out any economic growth. That the eight billion people alive today are, on average, richer and healthier than their ancestors three centuries before is, he allows, "a miraculous outcome."

What it wasn't was inevitable. Unlike boosters who insist that capitalism is the inescapable result of a propensity for competition and trade, Jackson wants to draw attention to how strange his history

is. "Instead of, say, observing that Britain had the Industrial Revolution and asking why other places did not," he writes, "it makes more sense to recognise that the Industrial Revolution was a weird thing to have."

Many elements had to fall into place, and some were accidental. Individual actors made all kinds of decisions without any intention of changing the world. They weren't driven just by greed, he says; they were motivated by survival. With the advent of capitalism, traditional modes of enduring scarcity, like custom and kinship, were replaced by accumulation. The consequence has been what he calls "a new and specific form of social warfare." Consider the billionaire class, whose members seem to be getting ever more defensive and pitiless: "Even the richest and most powerful capitalists are themselves subject to the same struggle for survival in the markets as everyone else."

The Inevitable Machine begins with Portuguese and Spanish explorers in the

15th and 16th centuries and ends in the years after World War I, when capitalism seemed as if it could very well collapse. Jackson briskly connects the creation of a global monetary system and the development of financial instruments and institutions to the growth of chattel slavery, industrialisation and imperialist expansion. Along the way, he zooms in on three individuals who lived through key points in this turbulent history: Martin Luther in 1517, Isaac Newton in 1717 and Vladimir Lenin in 1917.

Comparing Newton's milieu to Luther's shows how radically transformative capitalism was. In Luther's pre-industrial subsistence economy, most people ate a monotonous diet and kept only two sets of clothing. Contrast this with the labourers in Newton's London, who — while not rich — could regularly consume soft wheat bread and beer. The nexus of imperialism and capitalism also brought them tropical treats like tobacco, tea and

sugar. New habits of escalating consumption linked the labourer regime of wage work in Europe to the plantation system in the Americas. This "industrious revolution" created a novel consumer culture.

These new earners weren't responding only to the supply of goods. Jackson shows that in England many of them had been forced into wage work by the process known as enclosure, in which common

lands — previously the means of subsistence — were privatised. The full force of capitalism's links to slavery is necessarily intricate. Jackson has written a smoothly readable account while sacrificing none of its complexity. Capitalism, in Jackson's telling, is reflexively voracious: "It owns the dumb, inhuman logic of its own unthinking operation. It cannot stop

growing or expanding."

Still, the capitalist machine was "made by people," Jackson says, "which means it can be unmade by them." It's a strikingly humanist assertion, even if after other arguments, Jackson seems hard pressed to believe it. He compares owners of capital to "gut flora" — "necessary for the metabolism of the whole entity" but "individually unimportant." He states that the burning of fossil fuels has already pushed the climate past the point of no return, and that "it is too late to stop the catastrophe."

Whether intentional or not, Jackson's overall message is that the system becomes so self-reinforcing that it pushes individual humans into insignificance. Luther, Newton and Lenin are included in this book merely because they provided snapshots of their economic worlds: "The people themselves are not important, which is exactly the point."

The reviewer is the nonfiction book critic for *The Times*. ©2026 The New York Times News Service



Neighbours first

India must invite Nepal's new Prime Minister, Balen Shah, to revive ties

In an exchange of early messages, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Nepal's newly-sworn-in Prime Minister Balendra "Balen" Shah said they look forward to "working closely" to take forward bilateral ties. Delhi and Kathmandu are prepared to begin a new chapter in relations, united by familial bonds, a shared culture, open borders, and intertwined politics. Landlocked Nepal has depended on trade and transit through India, with India's plans for an energy grid in the region an important channel for Nepal's hydropower exports and revenues. Like many former leaders of Nepal, Mr. Shah studied in India. Familiarity aside, it would be a mistake to assume that his ascension will chart a well-worn and predictable course between the two countries. At 35, he is Nepal's first Madhesi leader, and upturns the old dominance of the Brahmin-Chhetri Pahadi elite. New Delhi must have a greater understanding of the priorities of this new Gen-Z movement that brought down the K.P. Sharma Oli government in 2025. This is a new leadership that has not inherited the old foreign policy understandings of the past generations of leaders that came through the panchayati movement, Congress and Communist parties, or the Maoist movement that overthrew the monarchy. In that sense, the Shah government's foreign policy, including its ties with China and the U.S., as well as the overarching relationship with India, is yet to be formalised. In the past decade, India has increased its development assistance to Nepal, but it also strained its ties over the constitution, the long blockade on border trade, and territorial issues. As Mayor of Kathmandu, Mr. Shah was known for his overt nationalism, and rejection of the "hegemony" of India and other powers, while his use of a map of "Greater Nepal" had been read with some concern in New Delhi.

The Modi government should tread lightly, and positively, as the Shah government finds its feet, but offer India's full support in dealing with Nepal's immediate challenges. Among those are the impacts of the war in West Asia where Nepal will need help with fuel and fertilizer imports. Approximately 14% of Nepal's population (about 3.5 million) work abroad, and the country is dependent on remittances and tourism revenues. New Delhi could also reconsider requests from previous Nepali governments to allow overflight for new Nepali airports, reduce restrictions on purchasing Nepali power produced with third-country assistance and to update the bilateral friendship treaty. Differences delayed New Delhi's invitation in 2024 to Mr. Oli, upon his election — he eventually visited Beijing first. It is time to quickly invite Mr. Shah to visit Delhi at the earliest, and for Delhi and Kathmandu to move forward, putting "Neighbours first" in South Asia.

On a wing

Subsidies will not create demand for air travel to small towns

In a bid to revive the regional aviation sector, the Union Cabinet has signed off on a 'Modified UDAN' scheme, with a shifted higher outlay. The scheme had first been launched to expand aviation to interior areas, using scheduled commuter airlines. Even then, industry analysts and experts had complained that UDAN did not make a viable business case for small regional airlines due to a lack of supporting infrastructure, low or unpredictable passenger demand, insufficient coverage of operating costs, and lack of awareness. In Modified UDAN, the subsidy period for tier-II and tier-III routes has been increased from three years to five years, an extension at least one of the small carriers had sought under UDAN before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The exchequer will also fund the subsidies directly rather than having airlines levy an additional charge from passengers, with the government setting aside ₹10,043 crore over the next decade to this end. The government will also spend ₹12,159 crore to redevelop a hundred unused air strips, ₹3,661 crore to build 200 helipads in remote areas, and purchase aircraft and helicopters for state carriers to boost last-mile connectivity to better match the mode of transport to actual demand and geography. The scheme will also pay for ongoing costs such as staffing and maintenance of low-traffic airports.

Regional aviation in India is structurally fragile and unlikely to become widely self-sustaining due to the unyieldingly high cost per passenger, price sensitivity, competition from rail and road transport, and operational inefficiencies. UDAN did not address them adequately and, sadly, Modified UDAN carries that failing over. The foremost one is weak underlying demand, with UDAN often picking routes with insufficient economic activity even as leisure and occasional travel could not sustain regular flights. Extending the subsidies, even if they are eased from the third year onwards, could keep routes alive for longer but will not of itself create demand. In this sense, the government's reluctance to revisit how it identifies and nurtures routes, and how different transport modes might substitute for air travel in low-density regions, seems inexplicable. The emphasis on last-mile connectivity and better planning also appears only partially incorporated as the details the Civil Aviation Ministry shared did not mention ground transport links or integrated scheduling, among others. Whether the decision to sustain connectivity using sustained government support, rather than cultivate a market that can stand on its own, will lead to lasting changes depends on whether route selection and integration with broader transport and economic networks improve in practice.

A missed opportunity to guarantee minimum wages

There has been a lively debate in the last few months about the rescinding merits of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Viksit Bharat: Action for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, or VB-G-RAM G Act for short. Absent from this debate, however, is a critical issue that haunts both Acts: wage rates.

A key parameter

The wage rate is a critical parameter of employment guarantee. A relatively high wage rate can create a lot of enthusiasm among workers, as it happened in the early days of MGNREGA. And, enthusiasm is important for the success of the programme. Conversely, wage suppression can easily be used to restrain the programme or even phase it out over time. Wage rates, in any case, also have a strong influence on programme costs.

The wage rates of MGNREGA workers are determined under Section 6 of the Act. This section has two parts. The first part, Section 6(1), empowers the central government to notify MGNREGA wage rates. Different rates can be notified for different "areas", and in practice, this has come to mean different States.

Section 6(2) states that until such time as the central government notifies wage rates under Section 6(1), State-specific minimum wages apply. More precisely, MGNREGA workers are entitled to the minimum wage notified by the State government for agricultural labourers.

MGNREGA came into force on February 2, 2006. Until 2009, the central government abstained from notifying wages under Section 6(1). Therefore, State-specific minimum wages applied. In many States, minimum wages for agricultural labourers were higher than market wages at that time. This is one reason why MGNREGA was so popular in those days.

In some States, there were significant increases in minimum wages between 2006 and 2009. The most notable instance was a sharp increase in the minimum wage in Uttar Pradesh in 2007-8 (when Ms. Mayawati was Chief Minister), from ₹58 to ₹100 per day. Some observers argued that State governments were indulging in unrestrained increases in minimum wages because MGNREGA wages were fully paid by the central government. Others countered that State governments had to pay the same wage on their own public works, and that this would be a restraining factor. They also argued that, except in Uttar Pradesh, there was little evidence of sharp increases in minimum wages.

The jury was still out on this when, in late 2009, the central government pressed the panic button and notified MGNREGA wage rates under Section 6(1). In the short term, this led to a further increase in wages, as the central



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government notified ₹100 per day in most States, with a top-up in States where the minimum wage was above that norm. This was sold as a pro-worker move, in pursuance of a promise made by the Congress Party in the run-up to the 2009 general election. Over time, however, this move enabled the central government to moderate the growth of MGNREGA wages. In fact, the central government froze MGNREGA wages in real terms from then on. To this day, wages are raised State-wise every year to the extent of price increases (based on the Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers), but not more.

Real-wage freeze consequences

This real-wage freeze rapidly led to two serious issues. First, MGNREGA wages started lagging behind minimum wages in many States, as minimum wages rose in real terms but MGNREGA wages did not. By 2025-26, the MGNREGA wage rate was lower — often much lower — than the minimum wage of agricultural labourers in most States, according to a recent analysis by Laavanya Tamang. This defeats an important purpose of MGNREGA: sustaining minimum wages. It also raises the question whether it is at all legal for the government to pay MGNREGA workers less than the minimum wage (this matter was taken up in the Supreme Court of India but was not clearly settled).

The other issue is that MGNREGA wages also started lagging behind market wages. Between 2009 and 2014, real wages were rising quite rapidly in rural India, partly because MGNREGA was tightening the labour market. By 2014, the ratio of MGNREGA wage rate to agricultural wage was around 60% for men and 75% for women at the all-India level, according to Labour Bureau data. The gap maintained itself from then on, as rural wage rates stagnated in real terms.

The real gap is actually much bigger than it looks. The reason is that market wages are not only higher than MGNREGA wages but also (generally) paid on time — often the same day. MGNREGA wages, by contrast, are often paid after long and uncertain delays. The central government keeps denying this, but the evidence is clear, notably from recent studies by the LiTech group. In fact, not only are there delays, sometimes, MGNREGA wages are not paid at all, for example due to technical failures of the Aadhaar-based Payment System or National Mobile Monitoring System. The result is a tremendous "discouragement effect" — many rural workers have lost interest in MGNREGA.

The absence of any marked decline in MGNREGA employment generation levels may seem to contradict this. A recent analysis of Periodic Labour Force Survey data, however, suggests that MGNREGA employment levels are in fact much lower today than they were in the early

years of all-India implementation, contrary to official statistics. The growing gap between official statistics and actual employment seems to reflect a major increase in leakages in the same period.

The discouragement effect and the resurgence of corruption are integrally related. When workers lose interest, there is no vigilance. Worse, workers may be tempted to cooperate with corrupt elements instead of working by the rules.

Continuing policy failure

Unfortunately, the VB-G-RAM G Act is all set to perpetuate this crisis. For one thing, it does not contain any new, constructive provisions that might help to ensure the timely payment of wages or to curb corruption. For another, it continues to empower the central government to determine wage rates (under Section 10), even as the rationale for this has vanished.

Remember, the argument for an early switch from Section 6(2) to Section 6(1) under MGNREGA was that, when wages are fully paid by the central government, they should not be determined by the State government. Under the VB-G-RAM G Act, however, wage costs are shared 60:40 between Centre and States. There was every reason to drop MGNREGA's Section 6(1) from the VB-G-RAM G Act and revert to the principle of Section 6(2): guaranteed payment of minimum wages. Instead, the central government did the opposite: it dropped Section 6(2) and retained Section 6(1), giving itself perpetual powers to set the wage rates of MGNREGA workers.

There is another issue here. Section 6(1) of MGNREGA began with a non-obstacle clause ("Notwithstanding anything contained in the Minimum Wages Act, 1948") that acted as a kind of legal fig leaf for overriding minimum wages. Oddly, there is no equivalent of this clause in the VB-G-RAM G Act. But, then, how can the central government justify paying anything less than minimum wages?

A way forward would be for the central government to notify wage rates equal to (or higher than) minimum wages in all States (under MGNREGA or the VB-G-RAM G Act, as the case may be). This would feed many birds with one crumb. It would put wage payments on a sound legal footing. It would lead to a much-needed increase in real wages. And, it would also produce a simple rule for updating wage rates over time.

More likely, the central government will prolong the real-wage freeze and use it as a means of ensuring that employment generation under the VB-G-RAM G Act declines over time. If so, the wage freeze should be challenged in court. Indeed, with the non-obstacle clause removed, the payment of anything less than minimum wages is patently illegal.

The VB-G-RAM G Act is a missed opportunity to correct serious anomalies in the determination of wage rates for MGNREGA workers

A Bill that secures IPS officers' role in deputation

On March 25, 2026, the central government introduced the Central Armed Police Forces (General Administration) Bill, 2026 in the Rajya Sabha to regulate the general rules governing the recruitment and conditions of service of 'Group A General Duty Officers' (GAGDO) and other officers in the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs). This Bill provides that 50% of Inspector General posts, a minimum of 67% of Additional Director General posts (ADG), and all Special Director General (SDG) and Director General posts shall be filled by deputation from the Indian Police Service.

Applies across CAPFs

By implication, deputation to the rank of the Deputy Inspector General and below, shall continue to be regulated by the prevailing rules. The Bill also saves any financial benefits granted to the GAGDO (Group A officer of the rank of Assistant Commandant and above) issued before. This Act shall apply to the five CAPFs — Central Reserve Police Force, Border Security Force, Central Industrial Security Force, Indo Tibetan Border Police and Sashastra Seema Bal. While the Bill aims to institutionalise the historical contributions and representation of the IPS in the CAPFs, it is seen by some as an instrument to undo the directions issued by the Supreme Court of India in *Sanjay Prakash and Others vs Union of India and Others* (May 2025).

The Court ruled mainly on two issues; to complete the pending cadre review and undertake the review of service rules in a given time-period; and to progressively reduce the number of posts earmarked for deputation in the CAPFs up to the level of Senior Administrative Grade (SAG) i.e., Inspector General rank, within a period of two years. It is thus clear that the recognition of the CAPFs as Organised Group 'A' Services (OGAS) was subject the provision of



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deputation of IPS officers to various CAPFs.

The Court noted that there are various issues connected with the deployment of CAPFs, including coordination with the State Governments and the State police force. The appointment of IPS officers in each CAPF is vital to maintain the character of each CAPF. This is a policy decision manifest through the service rules of the CAPFs. The question of who shall head these forces was never contentious. It was not even a case that the petitioners' service conditions had worsened since they joined the service.

A 'unifying link'

Most of the senior operational posts in States are held by ADG or SDG rank officers. Therefore, the appointment of IPS officers to the CAPFs at senior ranks is essential for smooth relations with the State forces. Their selection process and training, along with field experience, give them a broader vision and an edge in leading forces whose main aim is to assist or work in tandem with State forces. Those who use the term 'parachuting IPS officers into CAPFs' seem unaware of Sardar Patel's vision, which envisaged the IPS as a unifying link between the Union and the States. The IPS officers have lived up to his dreams for decades, upholding the constitutional mandate.

The Ministry of Home Affairs, in January 2026, modified the empanelment guidelines of IPS officers at the Centre and made a minimum two-year stint at the Centre mandatory for empanelment at the rank of Inspector General. Therefore, the appointment of IPS officers in the Superintendent of Police (SP)/Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) ranks in the CAPFs will further cement their camaraderie with the cadre officers.

As far as reducing the posts of deputation is concerned, the Court seems to have ruled on the

policy matter which exclusively falls within the domain of the legislature and executive. While the Court clearly stated that the matter of taking IPS officers on deputation is a policy matter and the central government in its wisdom had taken a view that the presence of IPS officers in each CAPF is vital, it erred in directing the central government to reduce the posts of deputation.

Judiciary's role

The duty of the court is to interpret law. Courts may fill gaps in certain spheres, but they are not to plunge into policy making by adding something. The court is not expected to sit as an appellate authority on an option it feels wise to. The Court has previously held that "the wisdom and advisability of the policies are ordinarily not amenable to judicial review unless the policies are contrary to statutory or constitutional provisions or arbitrary or irrational or an abuse of power".

The Court, in *Guzala Dasaratha Rama Rao vs The State Of Andhra Pradesh & Others* (1960), held that "the service provisions under ... the Constitution do not enshrine any fundamental right of citizens; they relate to recruitment condition and tenure of service of persons, ... appointed to a Civil Service or to posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or any State". Rightly so. The Court, in *Indian Ex Servicemen Movement and Ors. Vs. Union of India and Ors.*, held that it did not find any constitutional infirmity in the 'One Rank One Pension' principle.

The service conditions of CAPFs can be enhanced through regular intake and timely cadre reviews. The appointment of IPS officers on deputation to the CAPFs, being a policy matter beyond the scope of adjudication, is rightly being codified, leaving no room for divergent interpretations in the future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Global silence continues

The President of the U.S. Donald Trump is speaking and acting not like a democratically elected leader of a democratic country, but like an autocratic leader of a medieval country talking about which country he is planning to conquer next (Inside pages, "Trump declares 'Cuba is next,' denies losing MAGA support", March 29). The

real tragedy of the times is that the rest of the world is almost silent. When Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was captured by the U.S., ostensibly termed as a law enforcement operation "against an illegitimate leader" by the U.S., only a few countries have either condemned or expressed deep concern. And that was it. The reaction of world leaders has not been much

different in the ongoing Iran war. Now, Mr. Trump says "Cuba is next", almost as if it is a football match or some such thing against another country's team. It is high time that the U.N. and sensible world leaders initiate some concrete and collective action to make Mr. Trump to realise that we are living in an era defined by an international order. **Kosaraj Chandramouli, Hyderabad**

American media report

If reports of U.S. business tycoon Elon Musk attending the private conversation between U.S. President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi are true, it would constitute a serious breach of standard protocols governing such sensitive discussions (Inside Pages, "It was solely a conversation between Trump, Modi", March 29).

Since the U.S. has not issued any rebuttal, the Union government needs to clarify what took place. **V. Jahan Dhanakumar, Chennai**

A good beginning

Royal Challenge Bengaluru (RCB) won the IPL opener against Sunrisers Hyderabad in Bengaluru on Saturday in style. That it chased the target of 202 runs with six

wickets in hand and 26 balls to spare is a case in point. Virat Kohli and Devdutt Padikkal are the main reason for RCB registering a phenomenal win. Of course, RCB's bowlers did their bit well too. All said and done, RCB has started this IPL edition on a good note. **S. Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai**

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

How to secure India's supply chains

India's manufacturing ecosystem is deeply embedded in global supply chains. From energy and fertilizers to chemicals and pharmaceuticals, several sectors rely heavily on imported raw materials and intermediates. The recent geopolitical developments in West Asia has shown how quickly supply disruptions can ripple through the economy, underscoring a stark reality that while global interdependence is beneficial, it also amplifies vulnerability. As the country navigates ongoing supply chain disruptions, the events have reinforced the need for building long-term resilience through reducing import dependence.



Anant Goenka
President of the FICCI

reliant on imported oil and gas. Even as the country steps up renewable energy adoption, expanding domestic oil and gas exploration is necessary to ensure long-term energy resilience. Strengthening buffers by expanding strategic petroleum reserves can help the country withstand short-term supply disruptions. India has already started to diversify oil import sources, which is a positive step.

Securing food security
Even as India has emerged as a net exporter of several agri-commodities such as cereals and marine products, some of the most critical segments of the food value chain are deeply import-dependent. India's high import dependence on edible oils, pulses and fertilizers is a key concern as any supply disruption can have direct consequences on inflation and rural livelihoods.

Pulses and oilseeds need assured procurement, price support, and region-specific crop diversification. Scaling and accelerating the existing missions on oilseeds can reduce the current import gap, where domestic output meets barely 44% of demand. The government must also work towards buffering and holding strategic reserves for edible oils and pulses to meet any contingency requirements. Fertilizer sector reforms must focus on the diversification of suppliers mix, enhancing the domestic production of phosphatic and potassic fertilizers, and the introduction of alternative bio-fertilizers that can be adopted at scale.

Supply chain risks in manufacturing (raw materials and intermediates) can also have a deep impact. India's imports account for nearly 19% of GDP. Of this, raw materials make up 34%, intermediates 31%, and capital goods 24%. Consumer goods account for just 12%. India dominates downstream manufacturing but is exposed to imports in upstream and

midstream inputs such as APIs, electronics, and industrial intermediates, amongst others.

The need for diversification
On the raw material front, copper, lithium, cobalt and other rare earth minerals remain globally concentrated, making India vulnerable given their centrality to electronics, electric mobility, and advanced manufacturing. On intermediates, India imports nearly 65-70% of its pharmaceutical intermediates from China despite being a global leader in generic drug exports. Likewise, with respect to electronic imports, India has a high dependence on semiconductors, display units, and components from East Asia. Limited domestic capability in high-end industrial machinery constrains India's manufacturing competitiveness and reinforces reliance on external ecosystems. These are not easily substitutable inputs. When they are disrupted, production stops.

The first and most critical priority is thus deepening domestic manufacturing in intermediates. While current policy frameworks have largely incentivised final assembly, the next phase must target overall domestic ecosystems such as strengthening the manufacturing of APIs, and semiconductors. Diversification must also continue, with long-term supply agreements and strategic partnerships across regions, including in the markets of Africa and Latin America. Re-engineering of industrial processes can also help reduce import intensity. Encouraging industry to adopt direct conversion technologies, alternative materials, and input-efficient production methods will gradually lower structural vulnerability.

Supply chain resilience cannot be built through isolated interventions. It requires an integrated, forward-looking approach involving government, industry, and global partners.

Supply chain resilience cannot be built through isolated interventions. It requires an integrated, forward-looking approach

Ensuring flow of energy

Energy is the backbone of any economy, powering manufacturing, transport, agriculture and services. India imports about 85% of its crude oil and over 50% of its gas, making it highly vulnerable to geopolitical shocks. Price spikes transmit quickly across sectors, raising input costs across manufacturing; increasing logistics expenses; and even pushing up consumer prices via diesel and fertilizer linkages. It is estimated that every \$10 per barrel hike in crude prices can cause a \$3-\$4 billion rise in the import bill, 30-40 bps rise in consumer inflation (with complete pass through), and could even lower Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth by 0.2-0.3 percentage points. Long-term energy security is, therefore, critical and must be anchored in diversification, domestic capacity, and technological transition.

Accelerating renewable energy is central to reducing import dependence on oil. India's progress towards the target of 500 GW of non-fossil capacity by 2030 is noteworthy. However, resilience requires significant investments in RE storage to manage intermittency. The National Green Hydrogen Mission offers a pathway to decarbonise industries

A sidetracked railway in Visakhapatnam

The delay in the functioning of a Railway zone has led to anxieties flaring up

STATE OF PLAY

B. Madhu Gopal
madhugopal@thehindu.co.in

The Visakhapatnam-headquartered DBK Railway executed three prestigious Railway line projects without any time or cost overruns over 50 years ago. Now, even after seven years since Visakhapatnam was chosen as the headquarters of the new South Coast Railway (SCoR) zone, there has hardly been any progress on the ground.

The failure of the Railway Board to issue a Gazette notification on the SCoR so far has created doubts in the minds of the public about the Centre's intentions. Though Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has stated that the new zone would start "soon", he has remained silent on the issue of the Gazette notification, which is crucial for the zone to start functioning.

The Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government had announced the creation of the SCoR, with its zonal headquarters in Visakhapatnam, ahead of the general elections in February 2019. After the elections, there were hardly any steps taken to get the ball rolling. An Officer on Special Duty was appointed and a Detailed Project Report submitted, but concrete decisions have been inordinately delayed. Though Mr. Modi had visited Visakhapatnam on a couple of occasions between 2019 and 2024, and had the foundation stone laying ceremony included in his schedule in one of these visits, it was withdrawn at the eleventh hour. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders had then claimed that the operationalisation of the SCoR would be



being created with headquarters in Visakhapatnam, Odisha stakeholders claim over the entire Kottavalasa-Kirandul (K-K) line, which is the lifeline of the Waltair division. This is in contrast to the earlier proposal to bifurcate the K-K line.

Andhra Pradesh BJP president P.V.N. Madhav, when he was BJP MLC, had written to the then Railway Minister stating that the revenue from the Waltair Division was more than the combined revenues of Vijayawada, Guntur, and Guntakal divisions put together. He had noted: "We are willing to part with the Odisha portion of the K-K line between Koraput-Kirandul, Kumeru-Theruvalli, and Koraput-Rayagada, as they belong to Odisha. But how can the backward regions of Uppanadra (region in northern Andhra) be transferred to Rayagada Division?" However, the BJP-led NDA government is now in favour of transferring the entire K-K line to the Rayagada division in Odisha to further its political interests in that State.

Interestingly, on the other hand, some BJP leaders, including Union Minister Kishan Reddy from Telangana, have expressed concerns over the injustice done to Visakhapatnam and the north Andhra region by the Bhubaneswar-headquartered East Coast Railway (ECOR) over the last two decades. While this includes the delay in extending highly patronised trains terminating at Visakhapatnam junction to Bhubaneswar, and the failure to start new trains originating from Visakhapatnam, it also has to deal with an issue involving the Waltair division.

At the time of the creation of the ECOR, in 2003, a large portion of the Waltair division (originating in Andhra) was given away to create the Sambalpur division in Odisha, while the remaining part was merged with the ECOR. At present the Waltair division, under the ECOR, extends over a length of 1,106.44 km, covering three States — mainly Andhra, Odisha and Chhattisgarh.

Even then, as the SCoR was

Delayed progress

The lack of a gazette notification has effectively meant no work happening across any fronts. At a meeting about a decade ago, top officials of the DBK Railway Project recalled that all three major line expansion projects were completed on time because DBK Railway had full powers to take decisions, preventing procedural delays in obtaining sanctions. Now, though a General Manager has been appointed for the SCoR, Railway sources say that without the issuance of the Gazette notification, he has no powers to take major decisions. It is high time that Visakhapatnam — the growth engine of Andhra Pradesh — is given a better deal by the 'double-engine sarkar'.

The rise of temporary teachers in West Bengal

The State has not been able to expand its institutional capacity in line with rising demand

DATA POINT

Arbab Chakrabarti
Anwasha Basu

West Bengal's higher education system is increasingly being defined by an unusual feature: an exceptionally high reliance on temporary teachers. While contractual and ad-hoc faculty are not uncommon across Indian universities, the scale observed in West Bengal is far beyond the national norm. Evidence from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reveals that this is not a short-term administrative adjustment, but a persistent structural feature of the system.

Chart 1 captures the magnitude of the issue. Over the past decade, the share of temporary teachers in West Bengal has consistently remained above 15%, far exceeding that of any other major State. In 2021-22, while Rajasthan (1.25%), Tamil Nadu (2.84%), and even Uttar Pradesh (6%) reported relatively modest shares, West Bengal stood at a striking 18%. In absolute terms too, the State leads, with over 13,200 temporary teachers — higher than Karnataka (11,300), which ranks second. The skew is even sharper along gender lines. Temporary appointments account for 22.5% of all female teachers in the State, compared to 15.4% for men. The next highest share of female temporary teachers among major States is just 7.8%.

While the latest data from AISHE are available only up to 2021-22, the insights they reveal are still relevant. Structural features of higher education systems such as institutional capacity, hiring practices, and workforce composition tend to evolve slowly. As such, the trends observed are unlikely to have reversed dramatically in the short span since, and continue to offer valuable insights.

A common explanation for the unusually high share of temporary

teachers in West Bengal could be that such reliance stems from a freeze in permanent recruitment. However, data does not support this claim. Growth in permanent teaching positions in West Bengal has fluctuated between 8% and 15% annually — neither stagnant nor unusually low relative to other States (Chart 2). Moreover, we see that the growth of temporary and permanent teachers in West Bengal has broadly moved in tandem.

An alternative line of inquiry is whether this pattern reflects a demand-side pressure, specifically whether a higher Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in West Bengal has outpaced the system's ability to expand permanent faculty. However, a comparison of GER across States suggests otherwise. West Bengal's GER (26.3% in 2021-22) is not particularly high; in fact, it lies toward the lower end of the spectrum, with States like Tamil Nadu (47%), and even Rajasthan (28.6%) outperforming by a margin.

The problem, therefore, lies elsewhere — on the supply side of higher education.

Strained numbers

West Bengal has not been able to expand its institutional capacity in line with rising demand. Between 2017-18 and 2020-21, the number of institutions grew by just 10.83%, well below other States with relatively weaker educational infrastructure, such as Rajasthan (23.5%), Madhya Pradesh (21%), and Uttar Pradesh (19%). This limited expansion has resulted in a heavy burden on existing institutions. With roughly 1,100 students per institute, West Bengal ranks second in the country, behind Delhi, and far above most other States.

This strain is further reflected in teaching capacity. The pupil-teacher ratio in the State ranges between 29 and 35 — among the poorest in India (Chart 3). Compared to many other major States, the number of permanent faculty per one lakh students is also low in West Bengal (257). These indica-

tors converge on a single conclusion: there are simply not enough institutions or permanent teachers to meet the demand for higher education.

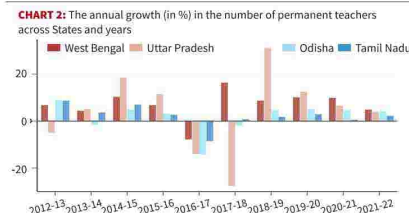
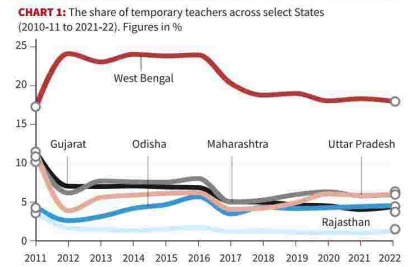
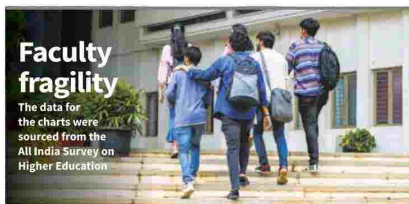
In this context, the proliferation of temporary teachers appears less a policy choice and more a coping mechanism. An excessive reliance on temporary teachers may have a fiscal incentive from the State's perspective in the short run, but it has certain long-term consequences on the health of the higher education system. By design, such positions offer limited job security, lower pay, and little scope for research or professional development. This can adversely affect teaching quality, as instructors juggling multiple appointments may have less time and lower incentive for student engagement or curriculum development. A system that depends heavily on precarious employment risks disincentivising individuals from pursuing academic careers altogether. Moreover, since temporary positions are disproportionately filled by women and early-career academics, existing inequities are deepened.

The implications of this structural imbalance extend beyond the higher education system itself. In recent years, the policy focus of the West Bengal government has increasingly leaned towards cash transfer schemes aimed at immediate welfare gains.

While such interventions help vulnerable households, they cannot be a substitute for long-term investments in human capital.

Addressing the underlying structural constraints — expanding institutional capacity, improving student-teacher ratios, and strengthening the base of permanent faculty — is essential. Without these reforms, the State risks undermining its ability to generate a skilled and productive workforce.

The authors are Assistant Professors, FLAME University. With inputs from Ridhima Mittal, UCG student, FLAME University.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 30, 1976

Space dept. posts out of UPSC purview

New Delhi, March 29: Though the Union Public Service Commission is not in favour of excluding from its purview technical and administrative posts, it has finally made an exception in the case of the Department of Space and the Space Commission in "national interest".

The Commission's view had been that certain Ministries and departments had the tendency to seek exemption from the requirements of Article 320 (3) of the Constitution in regard to large categories of posts under them. Several proposals for the exclusion of posts, mainly scientific and technical, had been referred to it, and the Commission had advised against them. It considered that proposals of this nature raised fundamental issues of national importance, the precise impact of which on the role and functions of the Commission, on the standard and quality of public services and on the morale of officers manning these services needed to be clearly understood. As an instance, it has pointed out that the Government had referred to it for reconsideration the proposal for exclusion of technical and administrative posts in the Department of Space and Space Commission from the Commission's purview. While appreciating the fact that the work in the Department and Space Commission was of a highly technical nature, the UPSC said that it had already explained that special arrangements had been made for obtaining the best technical advice for making selections to these posts.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 30, 1926

Calcutta commercial institute

Calcutta, March 29: Presiding over the prize distribution ceremony at the Government Commercial Institute, this afternoon, the Hon'ble Mr. J.W. Bell, President, Bengal Chamber of Commerce, said that in a conservative country, like India, it was always difficult for a comparatively new institution to find its way into public confidence. This Institute filled a want in the educational system of India; but it was desirable in a great industrial country, which India was becoming, that there should be an institution in which education was imparted, along strictly commercial and industrial lines.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Death toll due to extreme weather in Afghanistan

17 Severe flooding, a landslide and thunderstorms in parts of Afghanistan have left 17 people dead and 26 injured over the last 24 hours, authorities said on Sunday, the latest casualties from extreme weather in the country this season. AP

Artificial water harvesting structures in India in 11 years

50 in lakh. Nearly 50 lakh artificial water harvesting structures have been created under the 'Jal Sanchay Abhiyan' and 70,000 lakes were made under the 'Amrit Sarovar Abhiyan' in the last 11 years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Sunday. PTI

Worth of deals secured by Ethiopia at investment conference

13 in \$ billion. Ethiopia has secured \$13 billion worth of investment deals, the state investment commission said. Like other frontier economies in Africa, the East African nation has been seeking to boost foreign direct investment. REUTERS

Maosists surrendered before Odisha Police since January 2025

77 Odisha DGP Y.B. Khurania on Sunday said 77 Maoists have surrendered before police in the State between January 2025 and March this year. He also said 27 Maoists have been killed in exchanges of fire with security forces since January 2025. PTI

Stolen mobile phones recovered by Delhi Police

100 The Delhi Police said on Sunday that the Crime Branch has traced and returned over 100 lost or stolen mobile phones to their rightful owners in a coordinated drive. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On Maharashtra's anti-conversion Bill

How does the 60-day notice requirement work? Who can file a complaint under the law? What penalties does the Bill prescribe for violations? When can a marriage be declared null and void? Why have civil rights groups raised concerns? How has the State justified the need for the law?

EXPLAINER

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

The story so far:

The Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Bill, 2026, was passed by both Houses of the Maharashtra Legislature a few days ago. The Bill has been opposed by several civil society organisations, which have expressed apprehensions about the State encroaching on the personal liberty of its citizens. They claim that the Bill violates the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution.

What is the Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Bill?

The Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Bill, 2026, has been defined as "a Bill to provide for protection of right to freedom of religion and prohibition of unlawful conversion from one religion to another, and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto." It aims to prohibit conversions carried out through allurement, misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, or any other fraudulent means.

It lays down an elaborate procedure for conversion, including a declaration of intent with a 60-day prior notice. A post-conversion declaration is also required.

What are the key provisions?

Under the proposed Act, it is mandatory for the police officer to register a complaint even if the relatives of the converted person approach them. The complainant may be the converted person, or their parents, siblings, or any other person related by blood, marriage, or adoption.

Any marriage solemnised solely for unlawful conversion shall be declared null



Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis says conversions causing disturbance to public order in the State. PTI

and void by the court, on a petition filed by either party. Any child born out of such a marriage or relationship belongs to the religion of the mother before such a marriage or relationship. The child will have succession rights to the property of both parents as per the prevailing laws. Maintenance will have to be given, and custody will remain with the mother unless decided otherwise by a court.

What punishment is proposed under the Bill?

Punishments for violation include imprisonment of up to 10 years and a fine of up to ₹7 lakh. Offences under the Bill will be cognisable and non-bailable.

The offence of unlawful conversion is punishable with up to seven years' imprisonment and a fine of ₹1 lakh. If the person converted is a minor, a woman, a person of unsound mind, or belongs to the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes, the punishment increases to seven years' imprisonment and a fine of ₹5 lakh. Mass conversions will attract similar penalties. Repeat offenders may face

imprisonment of up to 10 years and a fine of ₹7 lakh. Institutions found guilty of forced conversions may face cancellation of registration and withdrawal of government aid or grants. Office-bearers may also face imprisonment of up to seven years and a fine of ₹5 lakh. Victims will be entitled to rehabilitation, maintenance, and custody of children.

What are the concerns raised?

Concerns have been raised on several grounds, including the lack of empirical evidence to justify such legislation, the social implications of the 60-day prior notice requirement, the curtailment of the individual's right to freedom of religion, and administrative overreach into personal matters.

Last year, the State government appointed a seven-member special committee under the Director General of Police to study legal issues related to religious conversion. Its report has not yet been made public, though the government has said that the committee recommended enacting a special law.

Opposition leaders have termed the Bill 'regressive' and alleged that it targets a particular community.

Since offences under the Bill are non-bailable, civil rights activists have expressed concerns that it may target interfaith marriages and minority religious practices. They also fear the intervention of families and vigilante groups in pressuring consenting adult couples.

"In any case, this places State surveillance over deeply personal decisions related to faith and marriage," a civil rights activist said.

Bureaucrats have also raised administrative concerns. "There is no established certification system for religions right now. We will have to develop a system. This is an administrative concern. We will have to look into the models that other States have developed. An entire gamut of administrative mechanisms will have to be created," a senior IAS officer said, adding that the revenue authorities will now come into the picture for matters of marriage and personal laws, which were managed by the civil courts so far. "Personal law is increasingly becoming a matter of administrative authorities. This creates a complication for marriages out of free will, too," an IAS officer said.

How has the State government addressed these apprehensions?

The government has said that the right to freedom of religion is not absolute. It has also been said that the cases of forcible religious conversions have been increasing in the State, and that the government does not currently have effective laws to tackle the law and order issues arising out of them.

"These instances are causing disturbance to public order in the State and are affecting social harmony," Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis has said.

THE GIST

The Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Bill, 2026, seeks to prohibit unlawful religious conversions and mandates procedures such as a 60-day prior notice and post-conversion declaration, with violations attracting imprisonment, fines, and non-bailable offences.

The Bill has drawn criticism from civil society and Opposition leaders, who argue it curtails personal liberty, enables State interference in faith and marriage, and may target interfaith relationships, while the government defends it as necessary to address forcible conversions and maintain public order.

Pak. as U.S. mediator with Iran recalls Nixon's China outreach

Washington's decision is shaped by Pakistan's proximity, its ties with Tehran, and its lack of ties with Israel

WORLD INSIGHT

Suhasini Haidar

Pakistan's emergence as Washington's choice as a mediator in talks with Iran can be explained in a number of ways. Since Operation Sindoor in May 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump has been flattered by Pakistan's description of him as a "peacemaker", and he has reportedly built a personal rapport with Pakistan's Field Marshal General Asim Munir and Pakistani PM Shehbaz Sharif, meeting them several times.

In particular, Mr. Trump hosted General Munir to lunch at the White House in June last year, amidst the latest U.S.-Israeli strikes, in an effort reportedly to ensure that Pakistan would not support Iran militarily.

Pakistan's offer of a critical minerals deal to the U.S. and decision to join the Gaza Board of Peace (BoP) have also helped forge the relationship.

For Iran, Pakistan's advantage over many other possible mediators is not only its proximity but also the fact that it does not recognise Israel, and thus is not

amenable to concerns or inputs from the Benjamin Netanyahu government. This may suit Mr. Trump as well, who has reportedly conveyed a 15-point proposal to the government in Tehran, which it hopes will lead to a ceasefire.

Cold War precedent

However, Washington's decision to engage Pakistan as a facilitator for talks may also be rooted in history, given Islamabad and a different General's role in facilitating U.S. talks with China 55 years ago, at the height of the Cold War. At that time, U.S. President Richard Nixon had begun to work on his plan to open up relations with Beijing (the U.S. still formally recognised Taiwan as the Republic of China), but direct Sino-U.S. Ambassadorial talks had floundered. Pakistan was not the first option, as he and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, considered others.

Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC), turned down the idea of France as he wanted a "non-Western" channel. The Warsaw track fell apart after two rounds of talks between U.S. and Chinese officials, as Mr. Mao protested U.S. attacks on Cambodia,

which were part of a U.S. Army effort to cut off supplies to Vietnamese troops.

While Mr. Nixon's need for partners in Asia, as the Vietnam War drained the U.S., drove him to seek China, Sino-Soviet tensions gave Mr. Mao a reason to engage with Washington.

The U.S. tried Romania, working through President Nicolae Ceausescu to reach out to the Chinese government, but hit an unexpected block. "We went to the Romanians, thinking they were most independent of the East Europeans and they were communists and therefore the Chinese would like that. Turns out the one group the Chinese didn't trust were Communists," Mr. Kissinger told journalist Tom Brokaw decades later, explaining that Beijing feared Romanian officials would divulge details to the Kremlin, which would attempt to sabotage the process.

By then, Mr. Nixon had also established a secret channel to the PRC's leadership through Pakistani President General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan. "In Nixon's view, Khan was an attractive intermediary since he had good relations with the leaders of the U.S. and the PRC, and he provided a means to circumvent the U.S. Department of State, which Nixon feared

might oppose or publicise his initiative," records the U.S. Office of the Historian, in a note about the China opening.

According to one account, the White House sent two identical notes, one through President Yahya Khan and another through President Ceausescu, but it was Pakistan's Ambassador to Washington, Agha Hilaly, who returned with a response first, a whole month before his Romanian counterpart did. In July 1971, Mr. Kissinger travelled to Pakistan, where he feigned an illness and was taken to Nathiagali (near Murree), away from the eyes of the press corps and even his own diplomats in Islamabad. Gen. Khan had arranged for a commercial PIA flight 707 to take him from Rawalpindi to Peking (Beijing) for talks.

Mr. Kissinger, who had been hosted by Indian officials a day before, reportedly used "Delhi belly" as his excuse to ensure a 64-hour getaway that included meeting Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and others in China for the first time. Planning for Mr. Nixon's visit to China in February 1972, which he referred to as the "week that changed the world", had begun.

Cost of back-channel diplomacy

The event had deep and lasting impacts on South Asia as well. Mr. Nixon's preoccupation with his back-channel to China and deep-seated rancour against India led him to turn a blind eye as Pakistan's troops unleashed a genocide on Bengalis in East Pakistan. On March 25, 1971, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight, killing an estimated three million over the next nine months, according to the Bangladesh government.

On April 28, 1971, Mr. Kissinger sent a

memo to Mr. Nixon detailing options before the U.S.: (1) support Pakistan militarily; (2) maintain neutrality; (3) help "Yahya achieve a negotiated settlement".

Mr. Nixon's instructions, despite desperate telegrams from the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka about the violence, were clear: "To all hands, don't squeeze Yahya at this time," he wrote, checking option (3).

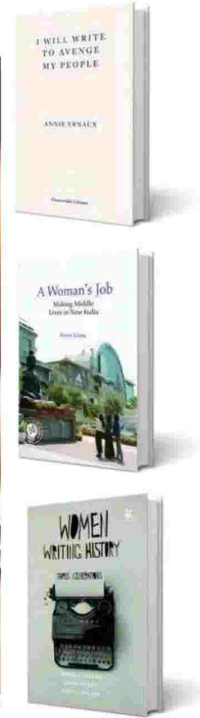
The crackdown led lakhs of refugees to flee to India, spurring India's support to the Mukti Bahini movement led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had won Pakistani General elections in December 1970 but was imprisoned. The India-Pakistan war followed, where the U.S. even attempted to threaten India by dispatching a naval fleet, but ultimately, Bangladesh was formed by December that year. India's perspective was shaped by the 20-year Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation signed in August 1971.

Pakistan has played the role several times. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reminded opposition MPs at an all-party meeting last week, when they criticised the government's failure to play a bigger role in the crisis. Since 1981, Pakistan has represented Tehran through its Embassy in Washington's "Iran Interests Section". During the two-decade-long U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, Pakistan also acted as a mediator with the Taliban. Islamabad was the venue for Quadrilateral talks between Egypt-Pakistan-Turkiye-Saudi Foreign Ministers on Sunday, and could host a U.S. delegation this week. Much depends on whether the Iranian leadership, which accused the U.S. of planning a ground invasion, will join the talks.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



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KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Opposition calls report hogwash

Minister accused of playing gooseberry in tense alliance talks

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of 'hogwash'? (Bikram Das, Cuttack)
'Hogwash' has been a part of American English since the 15th century. Over the years, the word has undergone a change in meaning; today, it is mostly used in informal contexts to suggest disapproval. When you refer to someone's talk as being 'hogwash', what you are suggesting is that the individual is speaking nonsense; what he is saying is utter rubbish. The word can also be used to refer to one's terrible style of writing. 'Hogwash' comes from 'hog' and 'wash'. 'Hog' is mostly used to refer to a castrated pig, and 'wash' refers to the kitchen leftovers used to feed animals. For a long time, farmers mixed the leftovers from the kitchen with water and fed them to the hogs. This was the original meaning of the term. Since the food given to the animals had no nutritional value, any form of communication (speaking and writing) that lacked substance began to be called 'hogwash'. With the passage of time, the word began to be used to refer to cheap or worthless liquor as well.

What is the plural of 'antenna'? How is the word pronounced? (Dilip Nayar, Kannur)
The word 'antenna' consists of three syllables; the first is pronounced like the word 'an' and 'Ann'. The second sounds like the word 'ten', while the vowel in the third sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. The word is pronounced 'an-TEN-e' with the stress on the second syllable. The word has two possible plurals; one is to add the plural suffix 's'. The word is then pronounced 'an-TEN-as', and the stress continues to be on the second syllable. It is also possible to add the Latin suffix 'ae' to the word to make it a plural – in this case, it will be spelt 'antennae'. The first two syllables are pronounced like the first two syllables in 'antenna'. The final syllable 'ae', however, is pronounced like the 'ee' in 'fees', 'bees', and 'knees'. In this case, the word is pronounced 'an-TEN-ee'.

What is the meaning of the expression 'play gooseberry'? (L. Vibha, Secunderabad)
This is a role that most sane individuals would be reluctant to play. When two people are in love, they would like to be left alone – an unwanted third person entering the situation would be most unwelcome. When you 'play gooseberry', you become the unwanted third individual in the situation.

In the past, unmarried women were never left alone in the company of men – they were always accompanied by someone to keep an eye on things. This individual acted as a chaperone; she had to make sure that she could overhear most of the conversation, and at the same time, maintain a distance from the couple. If the couple stopped and sat down, it was the job of the chaperone to pretend that she was picking flowers or fruit – sometimes, it was gooseberry, and sometimes, apples. The expression 'to play gooseberry' is seldom heard nowadays – the unwanted person is nowadays usually referred to as the 'third wheel'.
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From memory to archive, women's writing creates new ways to narrate the past

Using literature, memoir, and ethnography, women's stories challenge male-dominated narratives; they reclaim history by turning personal memory into a powerful record of lived experience and structural inequality

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

Over the years, women's writing has engaged in both creative expression and historical excavation. Probing the gaps and omissions in traditional historiography, it has produced new ways to narrate, archive, and comprehend individual and collective life. Weaving strands from history, literature, ethnography, and memoir, it unsettles the boundaries between the subjective and the analytical and challenges conventions long shaped by institutional archives and male-dominated narratives by bringing in lived experience, especially that of women.

In her Nobel Lecture, delivered in 2022, Annie Ernaux articulates this project with powerful clarity: "I will write to avenge my people." For Ernaux, writing is an instrument with which to strip off surface layers and reveal deeper truths about gender, class, and time. Reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, she came to recognise that the world was made "by men and for men." Searingly personal experiences – a backstreet abortion, her father's death, her mother's Alzheimer's, and the relentless weight of class – are crafted into narratives that go far beyond the individual. "All these factors," she writes, "brought me back...to my 'people', and gave my desire to write a quality of secret and absolute urgency."

Ernaux is sharply aware of the limits of writing as a corrective to injustice. Personal accomplishment cannot erase centuries of oppression and humiliation,

of being "the last in a line of landless labourers, factory workers and shopkeepers, people despised for their manners, their accent, their lack of education." Nevertheless, she can still bear witness. Going beyond memoir, her writing becomes a form of historical witnessing in which memory operates as an archive of loss and longing. Literature is her "continent," and her mission is "nothing less than the possibility of transfiguring reality."

Documenting individual histories

Contemporary ethnographic work similarly documents individual histories in everyday lived experience. Astiya Islam's *A Woman's Job: Making Middle Lives in New India* follows the lives of young lower-middle-class women through education and employment in cafes and call centres in globalising Delhi. At the crossroads of modern aspirations and traditional constraints, these young, educated, urban women move in an unstable middle space circumscribed by expectations about caste, class, gender, and sexuality.

Sheela, a café barista, has studied up to Class 12 but could not go further due to a lack of money. Her mother is a domestic worker in multiple homes; her father is unemployed. Knowing a few standard English phrases – "Good morning, sir/ma'am"; "What can I get for you?"; "Have in or take away?" – she is aware of her lack of options: "I'll continue here because I'm unable to get out of it. If I leave this, I'll have to sit at home."

Jahnavi's parents are *presswallahs*, like

her grandparents. She gets paid ₹9,000 per month but tells her family she gets less, saving the rest. Fired from her first job for "not talking nicely" to a male manager, she now works at a specialty tea café.

Ranjini juggles a 10-hour shift in a fast food chain, a distance BCom, and housework; she also wakes up early to prepare for Delhi Police selections.

In these narratives of young women in new India, ethnography makes visible what is overlooked by dominant narratives. These stories, while intensely personal, also point to the structural.

Studying and writing history

The question of who writes and interprets such histories remains key. This brings us to another dimension of women's engagement with history: studying and writing it. *Women Writing History: Three Generations*, by Romila Thapar, Kumkum Roy, and Preeti Gulati, brings together the voices of three Indian women historians across three generations.

Romila Thapar's entry into the field of history was accidental. Starting college in Pune, her education was interrupted by her family's move to Delhi – it was believed a young girl could not stay in a college hostel in the 1950s. At the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, she was taught by Arthur Basham. Reading de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was "a big milestone in terms of how it anchored me." Listening to Eric Hobsbawm made her question who writes history and why. London exposed her to currents of change in the ideas of

Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and others. She became curious about the role of the individual in history. This question led her to research Ashoka, and her first book was published in 1961. "There were no book launches those days, thank God."

Kumkum Roy grew up in Calcutta amid political discussions. College brought freedom. Moving to Delhi in the 1970s was different. The university included impressive women faculty – Thapar, R. Champakalakshmi, K. Meenakshi, Shereen Ratnagar, and Suvira Jaiswal. But a Sanskrit guru refused to teach Kumkum Vedic Sanskrit as she was a woman. Harassment was common on Delhi buses: "We learnt to use our shoulder bags as shields and our elbows as weapons... Carefree commuting was out of the question."

She also experienced harassment within the academic space. "I could not help thinking about how slowly things change, if at all they do."

Preeti Gulati, too, recalls harassment on the Metro. Within the family, too, gender norms were slow to change: "My Nani cried at the birth of every single girl child." Her interest in history began with silences around the Partition in her own family.

About her work as a historian, she reflects: "I think I subconsciously refuse to place gender at the forefront of my research because it occupies so much of my present and my everyday. Listening to Eric Hobsbawm made me realise that I might risk losing my mind if I give it more space."
(Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta is in the IAS)

THE DAILY QUIZ

Here is a quiz on IKEA and its founder Ingvar Kamprad on his 100th birthday being celebrated on March 30

V. V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

The name 'IKEA' is an acronym. What do the four letters stand for?

QUESTION 2

At what age did Kamprad start his first business activity by selling what common product to his neighbours?

QUESTION 3

In which year was IKEA founded and what was its first business model?

QUESTION 4

The LÖVET, a leaf-shaped side table, was the first piece of

flat-pack furniture sold by IKEA in 1956. What was the inspiration to go into such a concept?

QUESTION 5

In 1994, Kamprad publicly apologised to his employees for "the greatest mistake of my life." What was the issue?

QUESTION 6

At IKEA, product names follow a taxonomy based on Scandinavian geography, language, and themes. So, what are the naming categories for beds & wardrobes, rugs & children's products?

QUESTION 7

As of late 2025, how many IKEA stores were operating worldwide and in how many markets?



Visual Question:

This is widely regarded as IKEA's all-time best-selling product, with a unit sold every 10 seconds globally. Name it. IKEA MUSEUM

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. A cook from Ireland working in early 20th-century New York refused to believe she was making people sick because she herself never felt ill. However, the authorities detained her twice – the second time for life, on this day in 1915. She subsequently became a symbol of public health versus personal freedom.

Ans: Mary Mallon ("Typhoid Mary")

2. Gaëtan Dugas was a Canadian flight attendant who was diagnosed in the early years of a disease that later became a devastating epidemic. What's the disease in question? **Ans: HIV/AIDS**

3. At a religious gathering in Seoul in 2020, one attendee with mild COVID-19 symptoms sat through multiple services over several days. Name the church at the centre of this incident. **Ans: Shincheonji**

4. More than 90% of people who get this disease are asymptomatic yet also shed the virus, allowing the disease to spread silently. **Ans: Polio**

5. In 2002, in Guangdong province in China, a doctor named Liu Jianlun became symptomatic of a disease, but still travelled to Hong Kong and infected 16 guests at the hotel where he stayed. As a result, the disease spread to Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam. **Ans: SARS**

Visual: Name this U.S. health worker who was forcibly detained after attending to Ebola patients during an outbreak in West Africa. **Ans: Kaci Hickox**

Early Birds: Varghese Joseph | Anju Sharma | Prem Nath Tiwari | K.N. Viswanathan | Sadhan Panda

Please send in your answers to
dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Word of the day

Scurry: rushing about hastily in an undignified way

Synonyms: hurry, sprint, scoot

Usage: People scurried in a rush to the gate.

Pronunciation: newsh.live/scurry

International Phonetic Alphabet: /skʌri/

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

Secretive jungle cats need habitats outside protected areas: study

A new study's finding that jungle cats use agricultural landscapes aligns with previous knowledge of the species, in and around farms, these cats keep rodent populations in check, thus 'protecting' crops; however, these landscapes lie outside protected areas and harbour several threats, including fragmented habitats and speeding vehicles

Ananya Singh

Jungle cats (*Felis chaus*) are found across diverse habitats, from grasslands and wetlands to deserts. They are present across Asia, with large populations in India and Nepal, among others. The IUCN Red List lists the species as being of 'least concern'.

This has led to a "misconception that they are doing fine", Kathan Bandyopadhyay, a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, said.

Jungle cats' populations are in fact considered to be shrinking. In India, they are protected under Schedule II of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, which means hunting or trading them is illegal.

Despite being the most widespread of India's small cats, jungle cats are understudied and have received little conservation attention relative to larger carnivores such as tigers and leopards.

Conservation baseline

This animal – with a white muzzle, yellow irises, large ears ending in black tufts, and the sometimes faint striping on its long legs – avoids dense forests and heavily-modified landscapes, preferring agro-pastoral and open habitats, according to a new study based on the largest dataset on the species in India.

The study was published in *Scientific Reports*, and provides a baseline for future conservation planning.

"Until now, we didn't know about their population status or how they are responding to several habitat and climatic covariates," Dr. Bandyopadhyay, who undertook this research as a PhD student at the University of Wyoming, said.

The team found human pressure to be the foremost factor influencing where jungle cats live and that while they can tolerate moderate levels of human disturbance, they avoid densely populated areas.

"Our results highlight the importance of agro-pastoral landscapes in conserving wildlife beyond protected areas, especially as urbanisation continues to expand," Dr. Bandyopadhyay said.

'An important analysis'

To estimate how many jungle cats were in India and where, the team compiled camera-trap records from more than 26,000 locations across India. These records were a 'bycatch' of tiger surveys and were supplemented with data from previous studies, radio-collared individuals, and the authors' personal observations. The researchers then included one camera-trap record every 25 sq. km, one radio-collared data point from



A jungle cat in Rajasthan, 2021. KANDUKURU NAGARJUN

every 5 sq. km, plus all secondary data (from outside protected areas). Then they used machine-learning to model suitable habitats using the final dataset of over 6,000 records.

The team combined these results with sex-specific home range data to estimate a countrywide population of over 3 lakh jungle cats, with at least 1.57 lakh and at most 4.59 lakh individuals. "It's an estimate. It gives you a limit within which the cat is likely to be," Yadvendradev Jhala, senior scientist at the National Centre for Biological Sciences and the study's co-author and co-supervisor, said.

Across 21 States with suitable habitats, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Odisha were estimated to support the largest populations.

The study is an "important analysis" and has "strengthened the observation that the jungle cat is tightly associated with open natural ecosystems, currently under enormous threat of conversion to other forms of land use, such as built-up areas and large-scale linear infrastructure like highways," Shomita Mukherjee, senior principal scientist at the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Coimbatore, and a member of the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialists Group, said. Dr. Mukherjee was not a part of the study.

Ideal landscapes

Per the study, jungle cats prefer warm, semi-arid regions that are seasonally dry, with moderate rainfall and canopy cover. Their predicted hotspots lie in India's east rather than in the drier west.



Our results highlight the importance of agro-pastoral landscapes in conserving wildlife beyond protected areas, especially as urbanisation continues to expand

KATHAN BANDYOPADHYAY
Postdoctoral research associate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

India needs land policies that recognise the ecological value of open ecosystems, Dr. Mukherjee added.

According to her, the finding that jungle cats use agricultural landscapes aligns with previous knowledge of the species. In and around farms, these cats keep rodent populations in check, thus 'protecting' crops.

However, these landscapes lie outside protected areas and harbour several threats, including fragmented habitats, speeding vehicles on roads, and poaching, according to the study. It also pointed to a potential threat from hybridisation with domestic cats, which could compromise their genetic lineage, although Dr. Bandyopadhyay and Dr. Mukherjee cautioned that this idea doesn't have enough evidence.

Another key threat is the stray dog population, which "acts as a source of wildlife diseases and kleptoparasitism – that means snatching kills from jungle cats and other carnivores," Dr. Bandyopadhyay said.

Per the study, stray dogs could share

foraging spaces with other livestock, so where there is livestock, there could be the risk of these canines as well.

A policy for small cats

According to Dr. Mukherjee, the study's strengths lie in its large spatial coverage and sample size, although she added that jungle cats from Sikkim had been left out and that the population figures were based on a "meagre dataset of a few radio-collared individuals in just a couple of locations".

"Yet this should not be seen as a limitation but an effort to get the best out of data currently available," she added.

Dr. Bandyopadhyay said the records from Sikkim were sporadic and insufficiently viable for the models.

Scientists still have a great number of unknowns, including jungle cats' denning sites, litter sizes, ranging patterns, densities, and diets.

Small cats are generally hard to study because they are nocturnal and secretive. Public awareness is also low, and few organisations have been willing to fund more study.

Going forward, Dr. Jhala said, there is a need to plan wildlife passageways alongside infrastructure development in agro-pastoral and open habitats. "When roads pass through a tiger or elephant corridor, there is a policy to try and mitigate those. But when they pass through agro-pastoral landscapes, we don't plan for it even though these areas support rich biodiversity," he said.

(Ananya Singh is an independent journalist. ananyaasingh.as@gmail.com)

THE GIST

Despite being the most widespread of India's small cats, jungle cats are understudied and have received little conservation attention relative to larger carnivores

According to a new study, the estimated countrywide population of jungle cats is over 3 lakh

Jungle cats avoid dense forests and heavily-modified landscapes, preferring agro-pastoral and open habitats

WHAT IS IT?

exRNA: on a mission

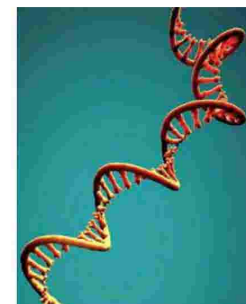
Vasudevan Mukunth

In a study published in the journal *Clean Water* on March 28, scientists reported that extracellular RNA (exRNA) from bacteria can persist in disinfected drinking water. They also found that by studying the exRNA, they could figure out what the bacteria were doing just before they were damaged or killed, releasing the exRNA. This way, the scientists could figure out which survival strategies worked for the bacteria – which can be used to make better disinfectants.

exRNA is RNA that exists outside cells, in body fluids such as blood, saliva, urine, and cerebrospinal fluid. For decades, scientists believed RNA only functioned inside the cell and assumed that if RNA 'leaked' out, enzymes in the blood would destroy it. However, researchers have found that cells in fact intentionally 'export' RNA.

To survive outside the cell, exRNA travels in its own molecular containers that prevent enzymes from breaking it down before it reaches its destination.

exRNA has been found to be part of a sophisticated long-distance communication system. A cell releases RNA to deliver instructions to another cell elsewhere in the body, changing how it behaves or which genes it activates. This process helps coordinate responses in the immune system, tissue repair, and development. However, cancer cells can also release exRNA to



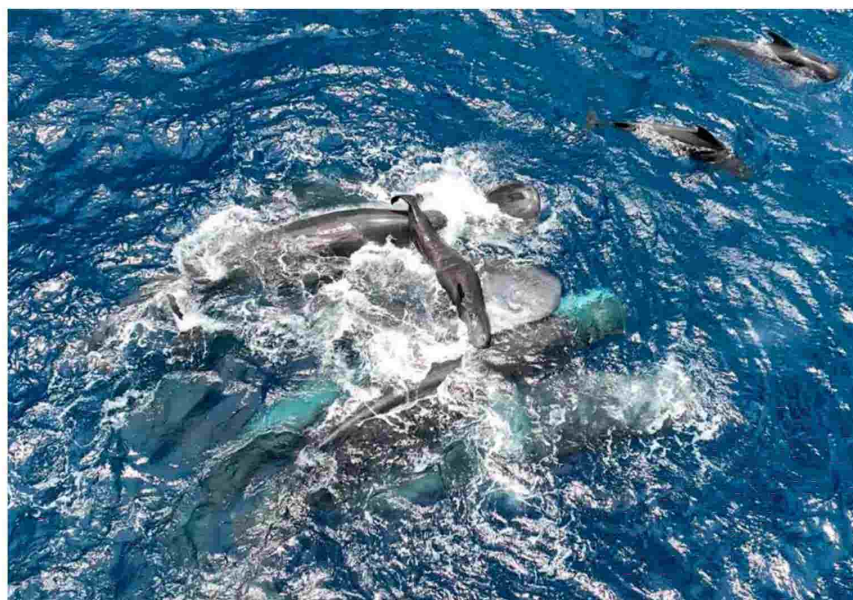
An illustration of the RNA called mRNA. GETTY IMAGES

promote tumour growth.

The discovery of exRNA changed modern medicine. For instance, just by testing a patient's blood or other body fluids, doctors can identify specific RNA patterns linked to cancer or heart disease.

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for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject: 'Daily page'

BIG SHOT



A handout picture taken in 2023 off Dominica Island shows female sperm whales holding a newborn calf above water until it can swim on its own. Last week, U.S.-based Project CETI researchers reported they had witnessed the rare spectacle of a wild sperm whale being born, immediately carried to the surface by members of its clan. AP

the hindu businessline.

MONDAY - MARCH 30, 2026

Commercial pitch

IPL goes global with PE/VC entry, amidst questions

T-20 cricket has always been about mega bucks. But as the 19th edition of the Indian Premier League gets underway it is clear that its financialisation has assumed global proportions. This could alter the manner in which IPL monies are invested and its returns split between various stakeholders. PE/VC funding could reshape the commerce of cricket — and maybe the game itself.



Even before the first ball was bowled, it was the sale of franchises Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) and Rajasthan Royals (RR) at eye-popping valuations — \$1.78 billion for RCB and \$1.63 billion for RR — that made big news. RCB was acquired by a consortium led by Aditya Birla Group, the Times Group, Bolt Ventures and Blackstone. RR was bought by a consortium led by US based tech entrepreneur Kai Somani, backed by US business families including Walmart. The entry of Blackstone and Walmart signals IPL turning into a global sporting property. To be sure, it has some way to go before it can catch up with NFL, NBA and English Premier League. But these two deals could also pave the way for other IPL franchises attracting foreign money. According to analysts, every IPL franchise now is worth more than \$1.5 billion. IPL's business value stands at \$18.5 billion and its brand value is \$3.9 billion, according to Houlihan and Lokey, an NYSE-listed global investment bank. IPL's massive viewership is obviously the prime attraction for global investors. The 2025 season attracted 251 million TV viewers on Star Sports and 1,370 million viewers on the opening weekend on JioHotstar. The 2025 final attracted 678 million viewers on JioHotstar, the official streaming platform.

However, there are some concerns nevertheless over how much more the financial model can be expanded. The IPL has four major streams of revenues — media rights, sponsorships, ticket sales and franchise fees. The revenue model of IPL leans heavily on broadcast rights. BCCI shares almost 60 per cent of broadcast revenues with franchises. Though broadcast rights over the years have gone for huge sums, this seems to have plateaued with only one player bidding for it — JioHotstar that now also owns Star Sports. Ticket prices cannot be raised beyond a point. That leaves sponsorship and selling ad spots as cash cows. But will longer ad spots increase match duration and impact fan experience?

Foreign investors betting on the expansion of IPL into more franchises and matches could run up against scheduling problems with the international cricketing calendar and availability of foreign players. Cricket is perhaps the only global sport that is played across four formats — Tests, ODIs, T20 and the Hundred. The franchise-based model exists only in T20 and the Hundred. The rest are country-based formats. It remains to be seen how the globalised model plays out. Questions about what it does to the game *per se*, as well as cricket's parity or lack of it, with other sports will remain.

FROM THE VIEWROOM.

The smoke and heat of war

Alexander Sebastian

A climate cost analysis of just the first 14 days of the US-Israel war on Iran revealed that it had emitted over 5 million tonnes of greenhouse gases, draining the global carbon budget faster than 84 countries combined, reported *The Guardian*. Experts say the figures will be catastrophically higher by the time the war winds down.

Amid the economic disruption, it is not surprising that most of us don't see the war's impact on the environment. Reports of black rain and breathing problems in the region can easily get buried under volatile stock markets and supply chains.

The Climate and Community Institute, the same think-tank *The Guardian* quoted, says the US military and military manufacturing industries are among the biggest climate polluters in the world. The US military is also the world's largest

institutional consumer of fossil fuels.

We live our lives trying to be diligent about our paper straws and public transport, carrying a sense of guilt that our petrol cars and plastic bags are harming the environment. We opt for the obviously overpriced 'environment-friendly' goods at the supermarket. Elsewhere, powerful nations with business interests and a 'saviour complex' bomb people they don't like, and set fire to oil wells. The bigger question is: Who pays the price for the power games of politicians?

The environmental cost of the West Asia war makes it everybody's business. We are all stakeholders. While we keenly watch the markets crash one day and crawl back up the next, what ought to be kept in mind is that all our investment plans only make sense in a world with breathable air, and an inhabitable climate. With the billions of tonnes of toxins released into the atmosphere as the war goes on, a dark cloud hangs over all of us.

LINE & LENGTH.



TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

It's now exactly 30 days since the US and Israel started the war against Iran. 30 because February has 28 days only and the fighting started on February 28.

Unless you are what's called 'hopelessly optimistic' or foolishly optimistic, you will concede that global output is not only about to shrink by a huge amount, perhaps a third or thereabouts. Germany thinks we are in for an 'economic catastrophe'.

Others may have a different estimate. But a massive shrinkage is around the corner. The only beneficiaries will be those who make and sell arms. But the expansion in their profits will not compensate for the losses of the rest.

This will not be the first time in human history for such a huge shrinkage. It's happened several times before. The last one was just five years ago after the Covid pandemic.

For the last 75 years various governments, whenever output has shrunk, have responded with Keynesian measures, spending more than they were earning as tax and other revenues. This has worked with varying degrees of success because the Keynesian solution assumes a deficiency in aggregate demand, not supply.

But this time it's the other way around. It's the supply that's going to be the problem. First of energy and then because of that, everything else. Unlike in the past, the problem can't be fixed by expanding central banks' balance sheets, that is, by massive government borrowing.

Specifically, no amount of deficit financing will restart the oil and gas wells in the Middle East for several years. They aren't like taps.

The US and Israel have thus kicked the global economy hard. For mind-boggling ineptitude this would be hard to beat.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

So what should governments do that will mitigate the impact of this kind of gigantic supply shock? One answer lies in ancient Indian and modern American history.

DD Kosambi, the great Marxist mathematician, pneumoniologist and historian, wrote 70 years ago that by the end of 8th century Indian villages had become self-sufficient within small areas because trading with villages far away wasn't possible and thus limited supplies of many things. Those were the early trade groupings between villages in a 100-150 mile radius.

bl.explainer

Richa Mishra

The blockade of the Strait of Hormuz following conflict between the US, Israel, and Iran has made India aggressively push for increasing the availability of natural gas and petroleum products. The Natural Gas and Petroleum Products Distribution Order, 2026 has been specifically designed to tackle several historical hurdles that have stalled the country's transition to a gas-based economy.

What is the government trying to do through the Natural Gas and Petroleum Products Distribution Order, 2026?

The government's primary goal through this order is to accelerate India's transition to a gas-based economy by mandating a shift from LPG cylinders to Piped Natural Gas (PNG) where infrastructure is available.

Issued under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, the order focuses on — Mandatory PNG Transition, LPG Discontinuation, Faster Infrastructure Rollout, Access Rights, and Energy Security.

By promoting PNG, which has a higher domestic production than LPG,



This war will inflict severe economic pain

The government now needs to prepare the country for a period of erratic and limited supplies. Direct supply management poses an administrative challenge

Rationing — limiting how much of something you can have — was imposed by the market itself because availability was both restricted and random.

Consumption levels were very low anyway, so this sort of rationing didn't annoy the people.

Of course, energy supply wasn't the problem then because demand for it, unlike now, was entirely manageable. There was lots of wood available. This time it is not.

The shortages in energy and related supplies are going to cause a massive

It's the supply that's going to be the problem. It can't be fixed by expanding central banks' balance sheets. Specifically, no amount of deficit financing will restart the oil and gas wells in the Middle East for several years

compression in global output. This has happened twice in the 20th century, that is, during the First and Second World Wars.

But even in those years, America didn't have to introduce rationing like Europe did, at least not very severe rationing anyway. Basically, it traded very little and was nearly self-sufficient.

So there we have it: we are going to see shrinking trade and self-sufficiency, just like in the 8th century. That will have to be the way ahead until the supply of energy from West Asia returns to its pre-February 28 levels, which experts say could take around five years.

SHORT SUPPLY IN INDIA

Indians are used to this state of affairs. The current generations have seen greater availability of things than the ones before 2000. But the idea itself is not alien. That makes the job easier for the government.

But the actual problem is different. The current lot of civil servants have no experience of direct supply management. We can expect them to make a gigantic mess of it because

allocation and delivery is very, very hard to manage. That's the real danger the government faces today. I wonder if it's even aware of it.

The experience of food delivery during the Covid years was doubtless exemplary but that was because it was just wheat and rice that had to be delivered to everyone. Today, it's going to be very hard to deliver all the other essentials.

How, for example, will entitlement be determined, verified and executed? One can be sure that there is a good deal of thought being given to this but it's the State governments that have to do the actual work and their capacities are quite limited. Quite simply, they don't have trained staff and the administrative infrastructure for it.

Net-net, the government, having successfully quelled the panic over petrol and cooking gas, now needs to prepare the country for a period of erratic and limited supplies. The Prime Minister's speech in the Lok Sabha last week was only the first step in this preparation. A lot more needs to be done.

Why the govt is pushing consumers to piped gas

This shift will reduce India's reliance on imported LPG and insulate the country from global supply shocks

bl.explainer

Richa Mishra

the government aims to reduce vulnerability to global supply disruptions, such as the one caused by the ongoing conflict in West Asia.

Why is the Centre trying to shift people from using LPG to PNG? The move is primarily to strengthen national energy security and reduce the massive import bill. India imports approximately 60 per cent of its LPG, with nearly 90 per cent of those imports passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

Unlike LPG which arrives via ship and truck, PNG is delivered through fixed underground infrastructure that can be fed from diverse sources, mostly domestic fields and multiple import terminals, making it far more resilient to global shocks.

By forcing consumers with pipeline access to switch to PNG, the government can redirect limited LPG stocks to rural and remote regions where laying pipelines is not economically viable. In major metros, PNG is currently roughly 12-15 per cent cheaper than non-subsidised LPG.

Besides, Consumers pay only for what they consume, eliminating 'dead stock' left in cylinders and the need for upfront lump-sum payments.

How will the larger issue of gas availability be addressed? The shift to PNG while gas supplies are



PIPED GAS. The way forward

increase in total gas volume.

According to information available as of March 2026, India has crossed 1.6 crore (16 million) domestic Piped Natural Gas (PNG) connections. The government aims to reach 5 crore (50 million) domestic PNG connections by 2030.

The gas for PNG and CNG comes from two main pools: Domestic administered price gas and imported gas.

Gas produced from domestic fields is sold at regulated, lower prices. Under the Order, 100 per cent of this gas is diverted to City Gas Distribution (CGD) companies. India has secured 20-year contracts with countries like the UAE and Qatar. This gas is ring-fenced — it cannot be sold to factories until the needs of homes and cars are met.

The government is mandating that domestic fields (like those in the KG Basin) prioritize City Gas Distribution (CGD) companies. Previously, gas producers sold to the highest bidder, mostly power plants. The government is shrinking the gas pool for industry to ensure the domestic PNG pool remains full.

India already produces 92 MMSCMD of natural gas domestically out of a total daily requirement of 191 MMSCMD. City gas distribution has expanded from 57 geographical areas in 2014 to over 300 today, according to the government.

BELOW THE LINE



GAS. Novel moves

Cylindrical vision

Do you have a commercial LPG cylinder to offer? Come to Mumbar and enjoy a free stay in a resort for a day.

The resort owner in the hill station

has given an unusual offer of rent-free accommodation for a day with complimentary breakfast on one condition: guest should arrive with their own cooking gas. The crisis has forced the owner to temporarily shut operations for a week, prompting this creative workaround to keep the business running.

While the resort has switched to firewood for cooking, the sharp increase in its price — from ₹4 per kg to ₹20 — has added to the challenges. The offer will remain in place until the LPG supply returns to normal.

Musical chairs

Earlier this month, the Commerce Ministry invited applications for the post of director, Basmati Development Export Foundation

(BDEF). At least four retired officials have applied for it.

The director's role is seen as significant in view of the Ministry collecting ₹70 a tonne plus GST from basmati exporters when they seek registration-cum-allocation certificates.

However, the fate of the four will be known when a key Commerce Ministry official returns from an overseas visit.

Spaced out

An executive of a multi-national gadget company was left shocked during a recent visit to Chennai

where he had come to inaugurate one of the experience centres of the gadget maker. Contrary to expectations, the venue turned out to be a tiny multi-brand retail outlet, no larger than a few office cubicles.

While his team had tried their best to create a makeshift stand displaying a handful of products, the executive was left uncomfortable as he addressed the press amidst customers walking around in the background and signs of competing brands featuring prominently in the background.

Silence on Kaleshwaram Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy doesn't miss an opportunity to take a dig at the Opposition. This time he took off on the Kaleshwaram project. He lambasted the BJP for

not ordering a CBI probe on the project despite the State government's pleas over the last one year.

Speaking in the Assembly, Chief Minister said: "Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah openly made a statement that the KCR family siphoned off funds allocated for the Kaleshwaram project. It was Union Minister G Kishan Reddy who also commented that the Centre is ready to order the CBI probe and put KCR and Harish Rao behind the bars within 48 hours of the state government being ready."

The State government had written a letter to the Centre requesting to handover Kaleshwaram scam to CBI. No luck so far. **Our Bureaus**

Delhi's green heritage

A voyage of discovery into the city's flora and fauna

BOOK REVIEW.

KC Vijaya Kumar

Cities often get reduced to clichés: Delhi's pollution, Mumbai's rush, Chennai's heat, Kolkata's time-warp, and Bengaluru's traffic congestion. But beyond these definitions, there are more layers to discover within Indian urban sprawls.

Neha Sinha does precisely that in her latest book *Wild Capital*, taking the reader on a voyage of discovery into Delhi's flora and fauna. Like her earlier book *Wild and Wilful*, a sense of wonder permeates her outings that sample nature's myriad hues, this time specifically in India's capital.

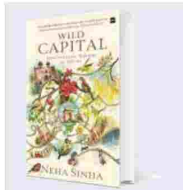
The writing resonates with the style usually associated with Ruskin Bond, and in her specific arc, a conservation biologist's rigour is evident. Just like Bond and other gifted authors, Neha makes you pause and peer outside the window. In India, nature-writing can at times do the grand-standing trick of only following the tiger. But Neha begins to differ.

Nothing escapes her attention, be it leaf litter, long grass, flowers, bugs, gnarled trees, birds and animals. Even water bodies and scrub jungles are highlighted. There are references to her life, and how in unmeshing it with nature, she finds stillness and joy. When she finds her dog Cappy, the dark shroud of grief dissipates slowly through her forays into the outdoors.

In this era of cramped living spaces and designer lawns, Neha's anguish is evident when she writes: "Manicured gardens look to evade the needs of time, privileging the fast-growing over the slow and patient. Standing in a centuries-old forest, I wonder if we can appreciate where we are and how we must spread the seeds of the old."

Be it the Central Ridge, the Hauz Khas lake, the land around Mughal-era monuments, and near the Yamuna river, Neha dips into the respective terrain's present, broods over the past and highlights nature's evolution, be it loss and growth, and the constant flux.

Just as the book throws light on Delhi's tryst with the elements, and Neha's odd health scares, it also offers a warm embrace to its naturalists. Be it Pradiy Krishna, Vallari Sheel or Vijay Dhamsana, they all find a generous mention in the tome. Their pithy lines, and insights into forests that fringe Delhi, reveal people placed far



Title: Wild Capital
Author: Neha Sinha
Publisher: Harper Collins
Price: ₹799

from the rat-race. "It might seem daunting to find such people, but more often than not, people who share similar interests are people you can get along with," Neha writes. Later she adds: "Going into nature has meant a going out of comfort zones, and a growing inward for rootedness."

SEMALS' WAY

The semal tree is often a reference point, an anchor that whips up some terrific lines: "Semals are the bays that the crashing waves of a kite's flight dock in; semals are the bays that have protected us from the high tide of negative thoughts." Neha finds naughty squirrels and coppersmith barbet upon this tree, and diligently she notes down their quirks and charms.

The finest of nature's prose can be culled from the backyard, it doesn't necessarily demand a trip to the Nilgiris Biosphere or the Himalayas. Our cities do have their own spaces of grace, and Neha does yeoman service to Delhi, just like other wordsmiths in the past, be it Khushwant Singh or William Dalrymple.

That nature, if allowed, heals itself and us, is a theme that runs through this book. Army veteran Colonel Pankaj Sharma tells Neha: "I tell others, the moment you can settle into a life a bit, look at birds. They will soothe you." It is also a book that is like a hangout zone for fellow writers. Robert Macfarlane, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, are all quoted.

Neha stresses that Delhi, with its myriad environmental issues, can still revive itself. There is hope lingering in the last few pages. "Nature doesn't ask us for reports, payments or untruths," she writes. This is non-fiction with the finest of literary flair and a gorgeous hat-tip to India's capital.

The reviewer is Sports Editor, The Hindu

Insight into a historian's method

Romila Thapar challenges inherited narratives and demystifies some stereotypes about early India

BOOK REVIEW.

Uday Balakrishnan

In his celebrated television series *Civilisation*, the well-known art-historian Kenneth Clark compared an African tribal mask with a Greek statue of Apollo. While admiring the mask's power, he nevertheless concluded that the Greek statue represented a higher state of civilisation. African art, he claimed, arose from a world of fear and darkness, while Greek art sprang from light and reason.

The judgment tells us little about African culture and a great deal about Clark's own assumptions. It illustrates a warning by the writer Jan Myrdal: "Many authoritative books reveal more about the society that produced them than about the cultures they claim to describe."

It is this habit of mind that *Speaking of History* resists. In conversation with Namit Arora, Romila Thapar shows that history is neither intuition nor inherited belief, but a demanding craft. As AJ P Taylor once observed, the historian's task is to understand an epoch on its own terms, not to judge it against modern or personal scales. Thapar's approach also echoes EH Carr's insistence that historians must try to understand why people acted as they did. This requires method, i.e., choosing subjects open to inquiry, asking the right questions, verifying sources through scrutiny, and organising evidence into a reasoned and honest historical account.

The conversational format brings this out effectively. Arora often speaks in the voice of the informed lay reader: confident, contemporary, sometimes speculative, and frequently axiomatic. Thapar responds without condescension, grounding the

discussion in scholarship, particularly when it turns to sensitive themes such as the rise of Hindutva. She does not rebut opinions so much as dissolve them by placing them in historical context.

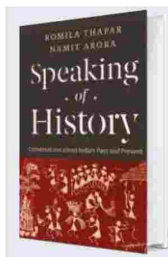
This aversion is evident in her critique of colonial interpretations of Indian history. She revisits James Mill, who wrote a history of India without ever visiting the country and framed Hindus and Muslims as two hostile nations. Thapar challenges these inherited narratives by pointing to long-established trading networks and intellectual exchanges, reminding us that Islam had a peaceful presence in India long before invading armies.

ISSUES OF RELEVANCE

Several of the later conversations address issues of immediate relevance: Islam's integration into Indian society, the limits of nationalism, and the need to revise our own historical interpretations. This is especially important today when religious polarisation threatens India's democracy, secularism and pluralism. Thapar's approach here recalls Margaret MacMillan's warning that the past can be used and misused to justify exclusion and violence.

Thapar also demystifies cherished assumptions about early India. On patriarchy, she notes that available evidence suggests enslaved women were treated as property, exchanged as gifts, neither of which is cause for celebration. She questions romantic claims of ancient tolerance, asking why Ashoka would need to plead for non-violence if it was already the norm.

Not all her conclusions are uncontroversial. Her scepticism about the existence of a common Indian identity in early Sanskrit inscribes invites debate, given how widely the epics circulated among ordinary people. Yet the value lies in her willingness to leave



Title: Speaking of History - Conversations about India's Past and Present
Authors: Romila Thapar and Namit Arora
Publisher: India Allen Lane
Price: ₹699

MEET THE AUTHOR

Romila Thapar is emeritus professor of history at Jawaharlal Nehru University
Namit Arora is a writer, social critic, and the author of four books

questions open rather than force conclusions.

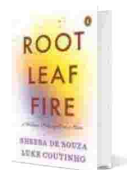
Speaking of History is less a survey of the past than a demonstration of how to think about it. By identifying what is genuinely worthy of pride in the Hindu past, such as the decimal system, zero, algebra, and geometry, Thapar points out how easily real achievements are displaced by exaggerated or invented

claims. If Thapar is the book's intellectual conscience, Arora is its necessary foil. His questions, while accessible, frequently carry the freight of contemporary grievance, and it is what draws Thapar out. Where Arora nudges the conversation toward predetermined conclusions, she resists; where he reaches for historical analogy to validate a present-day position, she reframes. The pattern is revealing: each time historical examples are invoked to score a contemporary point, Thapar demonstrates why that move fails: the past is not a quarry from which convenient stones may be extracted, but a complex terrain that resists easy navigation.

In this sense, Arora's instinct to instrumentalise history, so common among informed lay readers, becomes the book's most useful device. It gives Thapar's rigour something to work against, and in doing so, makes the case for serious historical method more vividly than a more scholarly interlocutor might have done. A troubling question nevertheless remains. Romila Thapar is among the most celebrated historians India has produced, yet reputation alone cannot bridge the distance between the seminar room and the public square. In an age when history is being aggressively weaponised, popular understanding of the past is increasingly shaped by articulate voices whose credentials do not always bear scrutiny. It is they who set the terms of public debate. This book largely addresses readers already inclined to listen. For Thapar's thinking to matter beyond an admiring audience, it must find ways to travel further without sacrificing the rigour that makes it worth hearing in the first place.

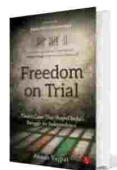
The reviewer is a columnist exploring the intersections of state, society, and history. He taught public policy and contemporary history at IISc, Bengaluru

NEW READS.



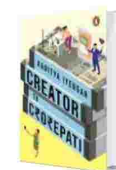
Title: Root Leaf Fire
Author: Luke Coutinho, Sheeba de Souza
Publisher: Ebury Press

The book is a clear and practical approach to everyday eating, blending science-backed health principles with deeply personal, intuitive, flavour-driven cooking



Title: Freedom On Trial
Author: Akash Vajpai
Publisher: Rupa Publications India

The book uncovers a forgotten front of the independence movement, where colonial courts became battlegrounds and justice itself stood accused



Title: Creator to Creopate
Author: Aadiya Iyengar
Publisher: Penguin Business

The book offers a non-nonsense guide to navigating the creator economy, explaining what works, what doesn't, and how to start turning content into income

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 30, 2006

STPI units eligible for IT sops

The Finance Ministry has said that Software Technology Park of India (STPI) units should not be denied tax exemption under Section 10A of the income-tax law merely on the grounds that approval to such units have been granted by the directors of the STPIs and that such parks had not been approved by the Central Government.

Videocon-GAIL group bags Oman contract

Only days after making public its acquisition bid for Daewoo Electronics of South Korea, Indian consumer durables major Videocon Industries Ltd has gone prospecting for oil in Oman. The company said a consortium that includes GAIL (India), BPCL, HPCL and Oiles of Australia had been awarded Block 56 in Oman for exploration and further development.

Norms eased for unlisted cos raising money abroad

The Government has eased the domestic listing rule for unlisted companies that raised money from overseas markets and are not making profit. Such entities have now been permitted to comply with the listing condition on the domestic stock exchanges within three years of having started making profits.

Short take

Tea industry looks to retain aroma

Sujit Patra

Defying fear of a slowdown due to punitive US tariff and geo-political disturbances, tea exports recorded a high in 2025.

The last calendar year was remarkable, as the industry witnessed higher production and exports. The Tea Board and the Commerce Ministry have supported the industry, which is valued at around ₹1 lakh crore. The industry now regards 2026 with both apprehension and optimism.

After a huge fall in tea output of 90 million kg (mkg) in 2024, there was an increase in production by 66 mkg in 2025; North India accounted for much of

the increase in both production and exports. While CTC, commonly consumed in India as well as exported, saw a 36 mkg jump in production, Orthodox saw production and exports rise 30 mkg and 22 mkg, respectively. Orthodox tea production hit a record high of 148 mkg, and the growth came from the small growers who produced 78 mkg, i.e. 57 per cent of India's production even as big growers lost crop in 2025. Due to this, supply of better quality CTC was cramped in 2025 while availability of plain and medium varieties increased.

Higher import has been a worry for the industry, though a major portion of it was meant for re-export. Bulk of these imports were from Nepal, Kenya and

Vietnam. Cheap quality imported teas, blended with indigenous tea and re-exported as Indian tea, have become a headache for the industry; the government needs to enact some multi-origin rule to protect India's quality image.

In 2025, India posted a record tea export of 280 mkg. In the midst of geo-political turmoil and high tariff by US, exporters focused on Iraq, Iran, UAE and China. Iran, Iraq and UAE now jointly account for over 40 per cent of India's exports.

Iraq and UAE have now replaced Russia (31 mkg) as the largest destinations. The combined increase in shipments to Middle East more than offset the deepening contraction to US

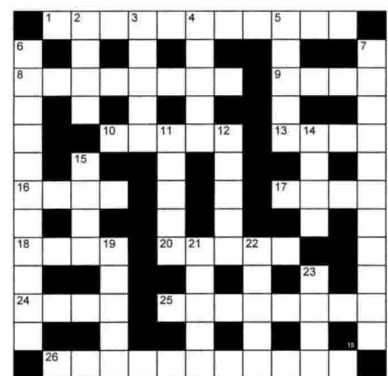
and EU. The current West Asian conflict could disrupt tea exports, if the war does not end soon. The Centre's restoration of RoDTEP, shipment credit, will surely help the tea industry's efforts to boost exports.

Price scenario has been gloomy since June 2025 and heavily discounted till the end of the year. Tea Board's Directive of 100 per cent dust tea auction and random testing has had some impact on the market. Realisations have improved.

Pipeline stocks are low compared to last year. Premixtication of tea as well as inclement weather in North India since November 2025 suggest that prices may stay firm for a while.

The writer is former Secretary, Indian Tea Association

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2646



EASY

ACROSS

- Chiefly (11)
- Mineral salt, halite (4-4)
- Great affection (4)
- Fool, buffoon (5)
- Rock hollow (4)
- Neaten (4)
- Clenched hand (4)
- Insensitive or irritating person (4)
- Pull together, revive (5)
- Pond creature (4)
- Harem (8)
- Just proportion in all the parts (11)

DOWN

- Speed event (4)
- Of the nose (5)
- Connected by marriage (2-3)
- Tree with light purple flowers (5)
- Scaring (11)
- Enjoyment, delight (11)
- Express willingness (5)
- Of the senior service (5)
- Dry, parched (4)
- Jetty (4)
- Put one off (5)
- The white poplar (5)
- Inclined oneself (5)
- Of Czech, Slovak, etc group (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- In the main panic, I'll pry into it (11)
- This sort lack a form of halite (4-4)
- What tennis player starts with his passion (4)
- Funny man not always clever to admit it (5)
- Schoolboy's warning looks hollow (4)
- Neat way to get one's balance (4)
- It's a duke's handwriting (4)
- Irritating person to see in dinner dress (4)
- The right supporter for a motoring event (5)
- Like a salamander found on leaving Sir Isaac (4)
- At sea, girl can come to nothing but the harem (8)
- It gives the effect of distance to obsolete optics (11)

DOWN

- Rush for the groove that holds the ball-bearings (4)
- Of the nose that turns up in Pamela's ancestry (5)
- Working as a solicitor related by marriage (2-3)
- Pale mauve is all one can make with carbon (5)
- Finger thing that may be causing alarm (11)
- Enjoyment of cattle in ode written about it (11)
- A bid made for possible contents of iron (5)
- Name of a grandparent concerned with the fleet (5)
- Dry raid carried out (4)
- A buttress that may be put out to sea (4)
- Put one off making bucks around the end of August (5)
- Be in the drink with a white poplar (5)
- Was inclined to allow an insert to be made (5)
- Eastern European has almost given up the French waltz (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2645

ACROSS 1. Vaporise 4. Odds 8. Nip 9. Piano 10. Ska 11. Strudel 12. Trend 13. Considerate 17. Water 18. Lignite 20. Too 21. Aloft 22. Irk 23. Hake 24. Deserter
DOWN 1. Vanish 2. Paper 3. Stall 5. Dissect 6. Shandy 7. Forthright 9. Pedestrian 14. Outlook 15. Twitch 16. Beaker 18. Loose 19. Idiot

OPINION

GRAND STRATEGY | Happymon Jacob



Why India can't be a mediator in Iran war

Widening gulf over Iran war

There is growing unease among the GCC States over costs of the US's unclear Iran strategy and the effectiveness of its security guarantees

As the war in West Asia enters its fifth week, with the Trump administration deploying thousands of American troops to the region for possible ground operations, the potential for fissures between Washington and the member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE — has only increased.

There are also concerns about whether the security guarantees provided by hosting US military bases in the Gulf States have been overplayed as these facilities have been targeted with some success by Iran, with civilian infrastructure being impacted as collateral damage.

Iran's firm grip on the Strait of Hormuz has also had a devastating impact on most GCC States, dealing a crushing blow to their hydrocarbon-dependent economies as energy shipments — their most important export — have virtually come to a halt.

The dynamics that served as ballast for the close security partnership between the US and the Gulf States have been changed by the current conflict, and the fallout of this will be felt for many years even if the war were to end in the near future.

Hatching of hope for the Indian bustard

The first Great Indian Bustard (GIB) chick hatched in the wild in Gujarat is welcome news for the bird's conservation. Dwindling numbers — 150-200 at present from close to 1,000 in the 1970s — have not only earned it an IUCN classification of "critically endangered", but also have put the very survival of the species under question in recent years.

For a long time, wildlife experts have argued for expansion of the bird population outside Rajasthan, which hosts the largest GIB population within the country. A raft of development imperatives in the areas of the state that the bird inhabits are in conflict with conservation essentials.

Inter-breeding, not just Gujarat, but a handful of other states where the bird has been reported need to be explored for habitat expansion potential.

Effective mediation requires either leverage to ensure compliance or having nothing to lose. India has too much to lose from a failed attempt and too little leverage to guarantee success

There is a raging debate in India on whether the country should mediate in the Iran war. Those in favour argue that India's unique relationships with Tehran, Washington, and the Gulf as well as its global standing make it the natural mediator between Tehran and Washington.

Let me begin with an uncomfortable question: Why are we even debating this when we didn't hear any of this during the Ukraine war? If you trace the timing of the mediation argument in New Delhi, you will realise that the ongoing debate is not a result of India identifying

a clear strategic interest in brokering peace or an opening where it could make a genuine difference or because the parties to the war invited India to mediate. None of that. The debate resulted from Pakistan taking the initiative to mediate together with Turkey and Egypt, and offered a negotiating venue.

To be fair, some voices calling for Indian mediation are sincere, arguing that India has a moral obligation and strategic opportunity to do so. I disagree with them on the merits. But the argument driven by optics and competitive instincts deserves to be called out. Let's recall a little history. India does have a history of mediation. In the Korean War, it acted as an information channel between Washington and Beijing, eventually sponsoring the 1953 UN resolution that ended the conflict.

played an important role in helping end the Suez Crisis of 1956. That record should not be dismissed. But it belonged to a different historical moment — genuine equidistance, a non-aligned movement with systemic weight, and a bipolar world creating space for a third voice. None of those conditions exist in 2023.

Consider the specific conditions of this war before advocating mediation. The manner in which the third-party talks organised by Oman were used by the US and Israel as a cover to spring a surprise attack on Iran is useful to keep in mind. The third round of Oman-mediated talks concluded on February 26 with Oman's foreign minister declaring "significant progress" and a follow-on meeting scheduled for March 2. Less than 48 hours later, Washington and Tel Aviv launched their strikes.



Great powers mediate in conflicts within their spheres of influence because their leverage can compel compliance.

reputational cost of being used would be far more damaging than the cost of staying out altogether. Effective mediation requires either leverage or having nothing to lose. The great powers mediate in conflicts within their spheres of influence because their leverage can compel compliance.

Then there is the lesson from what China is doing. Beijing has every advantage to be a mediator, most of which India lacks — a UN Security Council veto, a formal strategic partnership with Tehran, deep economic leverage over the Gulf States, a great power in Trump's eyes, and a special envoy for the region. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has made 18 calls in 27 days since the war started. And yet the war continues. If China, with all that advantage and weight, cannot move the needle, what exactly can India do?

There is a final, underappreciated danger. Every time India endorses the principle that external powers, not the UN, have a legitimate role in mediating active conflicts, it quietly weakens its own longstanding resistance to third-party involvement in Kashmir. Mediation as a norm, after all, cannot be selectively applied abroad while refusing it at home.

There is a final, underappreciated danger. Every time India endorses the principle that external powers, not the UN, have a legitimate role in mediating active conflicts, it quietly weakens its own longstanding resistance to third-party involvement in Kashmir. Mediation as a norm, after all, cannot be selectively applied abroad while refusing it at home.

Happymon Jacob is distinguished visiting professor, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University. The views expressed are personal.

STRAIGHTFORWARD | Shashi Shekhar



The wages of war, and the lessons of history

It was a scene that should have begged media attention around the world — as a photograph that would have launched a thousand conversations on the very meaning of humanity. But it didn't. The media chose to ignore it, leading us to wonder if we have created a blind and insensitive social bubble around us.

Let us talk about the scene. On March 24, dozens of women marched hand in hand, barefoot, on the streets of Rome. These were mothers from Gaza and Israel. Their children or relatives were victims of the violence unleashed by Hamas and the revenge extracted by Israel.

Their message was loud and clear: The residents of Israel and Gaza both consider themselves children of Adam and Eve, and all they need is peace. The march was a lesson for those who think every Israeli wants to burn Gaza down.

These women met Pope Leo XIV on March 25. The Pope had already made an appeal for peace. But did he talk to the US or Europe at the behest of these mothers? There has been no news of his reactions since then. When and where would he get a better opportunity to say his influence and the moral authority of his office?

We are living in times of dwarves, not leaders. The global community prior to and just after World War II saw giants such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, whose actions, appeals and arguments carried a lot of weight and found resonance around the world. They kept the world awake and alive through their own awaking.

Inspired by them, ordinary people raised their collective voice against injustice. Let me share an example. It was June 8, 1972. Children in Vietnam's Trang Bang region were running for safety, fleeing America-supported attacks. Nine-year-old Kim Phuc became the embodiment of the horrors visited upon Vietnam by the war, when she was photographed running stark naked after a napalm attack burnt her back.

Our mental universe seems to have been corrupted beyond repair, in the years since those instances of anti-war activism. The US-Israel bombing of Iran for over a month

now has killed, among others, over 170 girls and teachers in the Iranian city of Minab. Tehran released photos of the dead girls. Videos and photos of their grieving parents were shared in media and social media, but how many of us cared to look at them?

The western media may block it out but the deaths will keep haunting humanity for centuries to come. Our deliberate blindness can't hoodwink history.

The Lidice Massacre offers perspective. On orders from Adolf Hitler, Nazi forces lined up 173 men and boys above 15 years of age in Lidice, a village in the present Czech Republic and shot them point blank, in retaliation for the death of a Nazi official. Women and children were sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp. The majority of them were gassed (nine children were housed with Nazi families to be "Aryanised"). The statues of 82 murdered children of Lidice still stand, underlining the hollow humanity of our civilisation.

Russia's war on Ukraine is now inching towards its fifth year. There are reports of thousands of schoolchildren, women, and men being trafficked. So far, close to 400,000 people from both nations have been killed in the conflict. A Lancet report from February says, in Gaza, close to 75,000 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands have been displaced.

Filmsy justifications are forwarded by the aggressors for the attacks on Ukraine and Gaza. But the attack on Iran is living testimony of political lies and deceit. After destroying Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2023, why have US President Donald Trump and Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attacked the country again? They may keep repeating their justifications but they are now caught in their own trap. They forgot Iran is no Gaza. The Persian civilisation is one of the oldest in the world. One can't just obliterate them from the face of the Earth. Iran isn't just doggedly fighting back, it has also created a real scare for the global economy. Who has the upper hand in the present conflict? Who's winning? What will the winner gain? Who's victory? What fate will the vanquished suffer?

It is disturbing that the rise of the US as the sole superpower since 1991 has become oppressive. Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and now Iran's destruction are sad reminders of this fact. The US could wreak such misery because its military and economic might has remained almost unchallenged. The Vietnam War ended in 1973. At the time, the US economy — at \$33.7 trillion — was the world's largest. The erstwhile Soviet Union was second and Japan third. The US economy was more than twice as big as Japan's. Today, the difference between the two countries is six times. This asymmetry has made several US presidents reckless and arrogant.

This is the reason the death of innocent children and the lament of their mothers don't move anyone anymore. This barbaric aspect of human civilisation should scare us all.

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

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYI | PRESIDENT, UKRAINE. There must be pressure on the aggressor. Lifting sanctions is certainly not pressure. It looks strange. On the easing of sanctions on Russian oil trade.



What the State fails to get about dissent

Ladakh activist Sonam Wangchuk's recent release from detention may close an immediate confrontation but leaves a larger democratic question unresolved. Wangchuk's fast sought constitutional protections for Ladakh's fragile ecology and political safeguards such as inclusion under the Sixth Schedule after the region's conversion into a Union Territory.

Nandigram ended in violence. Villagers opposing the Kudankulam nuclear plant were dismissed as impediments to development.

The pattern is more pronounced in India's frontier regions where dissent is filtered through the State's anxieties about sovereignty. Here, protest is rarely treated as democratic negotiation and quickly reframed as a question of national security. The bombing of Aizawl in 1966 during the suppression of the Mizo insurrection reveals how swiftly dialogue could give way to force when unrest emerges in borderlands.

The treatment of dissent in the past decade reflects both continuity and intensification of these tendencies. The Narendra Modi government has increasingly relied on legal and administrative instruments — from sedition provisions to anti-terror legislation — to frame protest as a matter of security rather than democratic negotiation.

Political theorists have long argued that dissent is not an aberration within democracy but one of its organising principles. Democratic systems derive resilience from their capacity to absorb disagreement before it hardens into rupture. Protests are an early-warning mechanism through which societies register policy failures and moral anxieties.

Across decades and governments, dissent has often been ignored until it becomes politically costly or tolerated only within carefully defined boundaries set by those in power. The forms, however, have evolved across different phases. In the early decades post-Independence, dissent was acknowledged but carefully contained. Jawaharlal Nehru, as Prime Minister, shepherded the First Amendment in 1951. Criticism was welcomed in arenas the State could domesticate — Parliament, universities, intellectual circles. But when dissent spilled into streets, it was often treated as destabilisation.

Implementation of the Mandal Commission by V.P. Singh in 1980 faced backlash from upper-caste students including tragic acts of self-immolation. It was handled primarily as a matter of policing than a chance for a sustained national conversation on caste, merit and opportunity. During Manmohan Singh's tenure, land acquisition conflicts in Singur and

Shubhrastha teaches electoral sense-making at the School of Global Leadership, Gurugram. The views expressed are personal.

OUR VIEW

GUEST VIEW



Meta-Google ruling: AI labs must pay attention

A judicial verdict on the harms caused by addictive-by-design social media spotlights the menace of reckless digital innovation just as AI-guided warfare raises global risks skyhigh

In an age of unprecedented tech evolution, the law can easily fall behind the curve; all too often, legislation fails to keep pace. Yet, precedents matter. Last week, a jury in the US held Google and Meta liable for social-media platforms designed to be addictive, thus exposing underage users to health risks they left unflagged. The news was duly welcomed with sighs of relief. At last, social media was being hauled up by the US justice system. What objections to harmful posts could not do, given how America shields free speech and social-media platforms for what users post, a lawsuit that put YouTube and Instagram in the dock has done. A 20-year-old plaintiff was awarded damages that look tiny against the \$132.2 billion and \$60.5 billion made last year by their respective owners, Google's parent Alphabet and Mark Zuckerberg's Meta. However, since a tidal wave of similar lawsuits is on its way, these megacorps are set to escalate their defence. Rather than pay the penalty, they plan to appeal the verdict. Their likely hope: the addiction bit could yet be proven flaky, which would let them off the hook. In all this, the question of Big Tech's liability echoes an old battle against Big Tobacco. And that's also why this case is a wake-up call for the US tech industry. Now that artificial intelligence (AI) has driven the stakes skyhigh on what counts as reckless or wilful harm by digital design, even if done indirectly, its quest for profit might face tighter tests of justice even in the 'land of the free.'

For decades, US tobacco firms looked the other way as evidence mounted of smoking risks. A scandal led to a big verdict in 2006 that held America's market leader guilty not just of hiding how addictive and risky its products were, but also lacing them with stuff to make

them harder to quit. As for social media, a whistleblower at Facebook (now Meta) alleged in 2021 that the company was aware of various harms, but user-engagement for profits took priority. The plaintiff who won last week was found to have suffered anxiety, depression and body dysmorphism, but the case pivoted on whether app addiction was to blame. Snap and TikTok, also accused, went for quiet settlements. Google and Meta fought on liberty, even as they sought to trash the argument that dopamine hits delivered by their apps made them irresistible. But app features like infinite scrolls and algorithmic feeds were not just held to be addictive, but wilfully designed to hook eyeballs. Given what we know of the brain's reward circuitry and how dopamine lights up our synapses, plus the revealed conduct of the accused, the US jury's call was correct. It also explains why some countries want to keep under-16s off social media.

How historic will last week's decision prove? That depends on how it impacts future cases. Social media acting like a drug might have clinched *KGM vs Meta Platforms et al*, but the case was broadly about digital products that put people in harm's way through a profit chase that's either rash or unethical. That should ring an AI bell. Alarm over how AI is evolving has been hushed by an American triad: an arms race with China, Big Tech's clout and free-market theory. With calls for restraint reduced to cries in the wilderness, America risks letting loose AI tools that could menace us all. Warfare in the age of AI should focus minds. Likewise, the risk of lives taken wantonly by AI weapons deployed to act on their own by rogue actors. What lawmakers are wont to overlook (or encourage), perhaps the pursuit of justice could restrain.

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

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discriminates this way. The fact is, it is most of us, including the class that is disgusted. So, the outrage is not a process of self-improvement. It is just compensation for the self-awareness that we will persist with this behaviour that first associates the colour of the skin with poverty, and treats those who are clubbed as the underclass with no respect. An unsung fact of Indian mediocrity in every walk of life, from dentistry to news anchoring, is that it is populated with very 'presentable' people.

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People of the same race and caste in India come in different colours. So there is the cruelty of discrimination, but without the fellowship of the dark-skinned.

Digital fraud compensation: It's now for banks to tighten security

RBI's directions should push lenders to invest in high-end systems designed to safeguard customers



ABHINAV BANSAL & SUBHAJIT BASU are, respectively, managing director, senior partner and APAC head, risk and compliance, Boston Consulting Group (BCG); and principal, risk and data science, BCG.

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) draft amendment directions released this month are timely and appropriate. These will hopefully persuade banks to prioritize resource deployment for controlling digital fraud overall and not just in payments. While the Indian economy has benefited significantly from digital infrastructure, including for payments, the time is right to step up the institutional capacity to keep digital fraud in check. This will enhance adoption of the digital infrastructure by providing a safety net for retail victims. By proposing a compensation mechanism for victims of digital frauds ranging from phishing to coerced money transfers, the central bank is acknowledging something the numbers have been saying for years: fraud in India is not a payment-rail problem. It is a systemic one.

RBI is in lockstep with global regulators: Major global regulators have been moving towards hard liability frameworks on the understanding that sophisticated digital frauds can't be stopped by warning consumers alone.

In the UK, the Payment Systems Regulator's mandatory reimbursement rules came into force in October 2024, requiring payment service providers (PSPs) to split losses equally between the sending and receiving institution up to £85,000.

A receiving bank that permits mule accounts on its platform now bears a direct financial cost for that failure. The EU went further under its PSD3 framework; its Parliament and Council reached a provisional political agreement in November 2025. If a fraudster impersonates a PSP and tricks a customer into a transfer, the PSP owes a full refund with no ceiling. Singapore's Monetary Authority deployed its Shared Responsibility Framework on a waterfall principle: Financial institutions pay when controls fail, telecom firms pay if SMS channels are exploited and only when both have met their obligations does the loss fall on the customer. Scam cases fell 26% in the first half of 2025 itself. Regulators in other major economies such as the US, Australia and New Zealand are at various stages of applying such regulations.

RBI's current draft focuses on digital frauds below ₹50,000; each victim may claim compensation only once in a lifetime. This should go a long way in bolstering the confidence of the economically weak, although more effort may be required by the whole ecosystem. The framework runs for one year. After that, RBI has signalled it will progressively shift more cost onto banks, sharpening their incentive to prevent fraud rather than absorb its aftermath.

Digital fraud beyond small tickets: India recorded over 2.8 million cyber-crime complaints on the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal in 2025, a 24% jump over 2024. Financial losses reached ₹22,495 crore. Investment-related scams dominated, accounting for 76% of total losses and 35% of all cases; fake trading platforms, Ponzi schemes and crypto traps run on WhatsApp and Telegram groups. Within banking, RBI's *Annual Report for 2024-25* recorded 13,516 digital payment fraud cases, representing 56.5% of all banking frauds, with losses of ₹320 crore. One in five families with a UPI user has been hit at least once, yet 51% never file a complaint so official figures understate the reality.

Pre-emptive fraud detection: While exceptional players exist, the typical players in India's banking and payment ecosystem may not be keeping pace with an evolving and ever-sophisticated adversary. The reason may not be capability so much as lack of prioritization. Some industry players that have highly evolved digital processes in terms of customer onboarding and loan decision-making may have relatively under-developed fraud detection systems. They still run on transaction velocity thresholds, geographic flags, fixed transaction caps and other outdated mechanisms engineered for a different era of payments. These generate false positives that frustrate genuine customers and false negatives that let sophisticated fraud through.

Wider adoption of advanced tools, such as graph-network models that map mule account networks, detect synthetic identities, apply behavioural biometrics and are linked with suspect-mobile databases, would help. The systems needed to run these models require capital commitments, which most institutions have deferred.

We need systemic capability: India's fraud ecosystem requires shared infrastructure—an inter-bank fraud intelligence platform run by a specialized bureau for fraud signals, mule account identifiers, device fingerprints and emerging attack patterns to be exchanged in real-time across the financial system. Fraudsters exploit information gaps between institutions, often using the same plays to attack banks successively. Lack of communication imposes higher costs on bank account holders than can be.

RBI's draft sets a compensation floor. However, it cannot reduce the volume of frauds that makes compensation necessary. Whether institutions build upon it, driven by considerations of customer service and operational resilience, is the question that will determine whether Indian consumers find themselves better protected.

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MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

The paradox of being dark-skinned and upper-caste

MANU JOSEPH



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

In the 1980s, India briefly adored a teenage leg-spinner, Laxman Sivaramakrishnan. Then he faded, and later returned as a commentator. A few days ago, he was in the news after decades because he quit commentary stating that he was constantly belittled for his dark skin. He was accusing Indians, so everything he said rang true. He said powerful people tried to hide him from the camera, they were reluctant to invite him to the toss. It was conveyed to him that he was not 'presentable.' When he opened to the media about this, he said that his life was always this way, even when he was a young cricketer star. He was often mistaken for a poor person and treated shoddily.

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GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

We must rethink insider lending in cases of corporate insolvency

Related-party creditors of insolvent firms should be asked to show that the credit extended was not actually equity in disguise



M. S. SAHOO & DHANYA JHA are, respectively, former chairman, Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India, and an emeritus fellow of the Insolvency Law Academy, and a student at Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab.

Should insiders that lend to their own companies stand in the same queue as arm's-length creditors in insolvency? The answer, at least in liquidation, is largely 'yes' under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code of 2016. A promoter may support its company by infusing equity in the guise of debt through a group entity. If the company later enters insolvency, the creditor, despite having enjoyed informational and structural advantages and effectively provided risk capital, may still rank alongside external financial creditors.

Judicial decisions reaffirm this. In *Times Innovative Media Ltd.*, the appellant contended that the related-party creditor should be treated as an equity investor and be placed at the bottom of the liquidation waterfall. The appellate authority rejected the contention, holding that since the statutory waterfall makes no distinction between related and unrelated creditors, a claim cannot be subordinated merely because the creditor is related to the debtor.

This approach aligns with the Supreme Court's reasoning in the *M. Rajagopalan* case in the context of distribution under resolution plans. The court clarified that the Code does not mandate identical treatment for all creditors within the same class, nor does it prohibit differential treatment. Distribution under a resolution plan largely falls within the commercial wisdom of the committee of creditors (CoC).

Related parties occupy a peculiar position in the insolvency framework. The Code bars related-party financial creditors from participating in the CoC to avoid conflict of interest and disqualifies related parties of ineligible promoters from submitting resolution plans to preserve process integrity. It subjects their transactions to heightened scrutiny through longer look-back periods and avoidance mechanisms to unwind deals favouring insiders. These safeguards recognize the potential for abuse inherent in their position.

Yet, in the liquidation waterfall, related-party lenders rank *pari passu* with unrelated ones. This can create distortions: it dilutes recoveries for arm's-length creditors, enables promoters to strategically structure or recharacterize intra-group funding as debt in anticipation of distress, and rewards insiders by allowing what is risk capital to recover ahead of those who assumed genuine commercial risk.

In India, the concern is amplified because financial creditors rank above operational creditors. The outcome is counterintuitive: an insider lender whose funding closely resembles equity recovers ahead of an external supplier who extended trade credit on arm's-length terms. This raises a question: Should the insolvency framework remain blind to the structural advantages insiders possess?



Many insolvency regimes address this concern through doctrines such as equitable subordination in US bankruptcy jurisprudence. This empowers courts to subordinate a creditor's claim in certain circumstances. Courts typically apply a three-pronged test: the claimant must have engaged in inequitable conduct; the misconduct must have injured other creditors or conferred an unfair advantage on the claimant; and subordination must not be inconsistent with the statutory scheme. The principle reinforced is that insiders should not benefit from their own misconduct.

Other jurisdictions rely on statutory rules. In Germany, most shareholder loans are automatically subordinated below unsecured creditor claims. Spain similarly places certain related-party debts near the bottom of the priority ladder. These frameworks reflect a legislative judgement that insider funding often resembles equity more than arm's-length debt.

International guidance reflects similar concerns. The United Nations Commission on International Trade Law's Legislative Guide on Insolvency Law recognizes that related parties are more likely to possess early knowledge of the debtor's financial distress and may have received preferential treatment. It, therefore, recommends special treatment for certain related-party claims, including subordination where appropriate.

Indian insolvency law provides no comparable mechanism for subordinating insider claims based on inequitable advantage. Adjudicating authorities cannot override the statutory waterfall on grounds of fairness alone. Any change in the treatment of related-party claims must, therefore, come through legislative reform.

The Code is built on two guiding principles: maximization of value and balancing stakeholder interests. Treating insider lenders identically to external creditors, without examining the economic sub-

stance of their claims, risks undermining both. The Code already recognizes that those responsible for a company's distress should not regain control through the resolution process. The same logic should inform how insolvency proceeds are distributed. Where insider lending is structured to secure an unfair advantage over external creditors, the law must have the capacity to correct it.

A carefully designed framework for subordinating related-party claims could address this concern without discouraging legitimate intra-group financing. The objective should not be to penalize insider lending, but to clearly distinguish between genuine commercial credit and opportunistic positioning. Where insider credit is extended on arm's-length terms and for legitimate business purposes, it should be respected as debt. But where the structure reveals an attempt to game the insolvency waterfall, the law should respond accordingly.

One approach would be to introduce a rebuttable presumption that related-party financial claims are subordinated below unsecured third-party claims. During the claims verification process, the resolution professional could identify related-party claims separately and seek enhanced disclosures on the commercial rationale for such a loan, its terms and whether equity was a realistic alternative to it. Where the transaction withstands scrutiny, the claim would be treated as debt. Where it does not, the claim could be subordinated to reflect its true economic character.

A regime that overlooks the distinctive position of insiders risks undermining the fairness that insolvency law seeks to achieve. Creditors who assume genuine commercial risk should not stand on the same footing as insiders who can structure their support as debt. Closing this gap would strengthen the fairness and credibility of India's insolvency framework.

Washington's war on statistics will leave everybody worse off

Dodgy data could have severe economic and social consequences



MICHAEL R. BLOOMBERG is the founder and majority owner of Bloomberg.



Fears have arisen over America's statistical system losing its integrity. ISTOCKPHOTO

We have a saying at Bloomberg, one we brought with us to New York City Hall: "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it." The federal government is now in danger of proving just how much truth those words hold.

For over a century, Republicans and Democrats have agreed on the need for objective data to inform their debates. In the 1890s, when the Senate commissioned a novel study of prices and wages, Senator Nelson Aldrich, a Republican and staunch protectionist, explained the rationale: "There was no expectation that the members of the committee would agree about the political or even the economic bearings of the facts ascertained, but all were desirous that hereafter there should be no reason to question the integrity of the facts."

Or, as New York Senator Pat Moynihan would later put it, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts." Those common-sense and bipartisan sentiments helped produce a statistical system that became recognized as the global gold standard, one that delivers immense value for American citizens for its relatively modest cost, about 0.1% of the federal budget. The categories of data collection are endless—inflation, employment, crime and many others—because they are invaluable.

Government officials rely on this data as they make decisions about allocating resources to tackle problems and as they determine whether policies and programmes are working. If you think government is inefficient and ineffective now, wait until you see it operate without good data. Business leaders are even more dependent on this data as they make planning and investment decisions.

Nevertheless, the US administration has been undermining the integrity of the country's statistical system by playing politics with it. When, for example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) delivered a downbeat jobs report last year, the president abruptly fired its commissioner. After introducing deep cuts in food stamps for the poor, officials cancelled a survey measuring how many people were going hungry. Data on inflation, education, farm wages, police misconduct and federal employee morale have also suffered or disappeared amid staff and budget reductions.

The potential harm goes well beyond transparency. To give just one example: The BLS that reduced data collection could at times change its estimates of year-over-year inflation by 0.1 percentage point—a variation that, small as it might seem, can alter Social Security benefits by billions of

dollars a year while also potentially leading to financial-market inefficiencies that slow investment and growth.

Making matters worse, the attack on the integrity of federal data is undermining the private sector's confidence in it—and that uncertainty can also be a drag on the economy. Otherwise obscure technical changes now inevitably raise questions about political motivation and data reliability.

That's not to say the statistical system is perfect, of course. It's idiosyncratic, clunky, sprawling and flawed. Some 13 principal statistical agencies and about 100 other programmes present users with different interfaces that often produce frustration. Many agencies struggle to maintain data quality as people become increasingly difficult to reach with traditional surveys.

The right way to address such shortcomings is to do what successful companies do: invest in modernization. Shift from expensive phone calls and visits to online responses. Share data across agencies and incorporate private suppliers to improve accuracy and avoid duplication. Take advantage of automation and artificial intelligence. This would entail big upfront costs to build new system while simultaneously maintaining the old—but, done right, it would save money in the long run.

The US Congress never anticipated an assault on federal data. Only four of America's 13 principal statistical agencies enjoy any significant statutory protections, and even those are weak. Legislators should strengthen those protections and provide the resources and oversight needed to modernize systems. The Senate should also use its confirmation power to reject nominees with partisan or ideological biases who seem likely to fudge numbers or weaken the integrity of data collection. It was encouraging to see senators raise concerns about the partisanship of a nominee to lead the BLS, leading the White House to drop him.

There's another saying that I've long lived by in business and government: "In God we trust. Everyone else: Bring data." But if the federal government makes it so that data can't be trusted, God help us.

We have no shortage of complex and difficult problems in America. And trying to solve them without high-quality, non-partisan and trustworthy data is sure to make them worse. **©BLOOMBERG**

GUEST VIEW

Annihilation of caste: How capitalism could achieve it

AMAR PATNAIK & ANSHUMAN SHARMA



are, respectively, a lawyer, a former Comptroller and Auditor General bureaucrat, and former member of Parliament, and director of Global Policy Research Foundation.

The dominant progressive argument in India calls for dismantling of caste through radical redistribution by means of land reforms, state intervention or revolutionary social restructuring. The argument is that the entrenched inequality of India's caste system must be annihilated through political and economic leveling.

However, this framework misses a counter-intuitive argument. What if the faster path to annihilating caste is through capital? A growing body of thought suggests that markets, entrepreneurship and access to capital can dissolve social hierarchies more effectively than centralized redistribution.

Caste as a system of power asymmetry: A helpful framework for understanding the system's multi-nodal hold on structural inequality could be the 'power asymmetry octagon' outlined by one of this paper's authors in his work, *Institutional Change and Power Asymmetry in the Context of Rural India* (Patnaik, 2018). This approach argues that inequality in India arises from eight overlap-

ping asymmetries of power: economic power, political power, social status, cultural legitimacy, access to information, skills and technology, opportunity and capability.

A caste hierarchy has concentrated privileges across: land and capital (economic power), social prestige (social power), cultural legitimacy (ritual authority), political influence and access to education and information. Meanwhile, marginalized communities are excluded across almost every side of the octagon. This multi-dimensional asymmetrical power structure makes the caste system extremely resilient.

Interventions aimed at reducing asymmetries often address only one dimension—say, through redistribution policies—and leave the broader structure intact.

Markets reduce multiple asymmetries and erode traditional hierarchies: Capital can compress multiple sides of the power asymmetry octagon simultaneously. When individuals gain access to credit, entrepreneurship, digital platforms and markets, power shifts. Capital expands economic power. Entrepreneurship expands opportunity power. Digital platforms expand information power. Skill-based employment expands capability power. Markets reconfigure the entire structure of opportunity and com-

merce quietly dissolves barriers that ideology struggles to dismantle.

This is visible in India. Platforms like Zomato and Swiggy have normalized millions of 'anonymous transactions' everyday. Consumers order food without knowing the caste of the cook or delivery partner—something that would have been unthinkable earlier, when notions of ritual purity governed food exchanges. Plus, gig work, digital marketplaces and startup ecosystems have made occupational identity fluid. A person can be a delivery partner today, a small entrepreneur tomorrow and a digital creator next.

Our economy is thus becoming dynamic rather than hereditary. If wealth, innovation and influence increasingly come from entrepreneurial success rather than lineage, social hierarchies begin to reassemble themselves. Our markets are not morally neutral, but they are redistributing status in real time.

The cultural legitimacy of capital: Economic historian Deirdre McCloskey in her

works on 'bourgeois dignity' argues that societies flourish when commerce and entrepreneurship gain social legitimacy.

When merchants and innovators are respected, economic dynamism spreads and social mobility expands. Europe's transformation after the Enlightenment, according to McCloskey, was not driven merely by capital accumulation but by a cultural shift that dignified commerce. In enterprising societies, individuals from modest backgrounds could rise through markets. Our economy is seeing a similar shift. Economic participation increasingly depends on what one can build or deliver rather than on one's birth. While caste asks who one was born to, markets ask: Can you create value?

Markets are indifferent to lineage. They accord status not by birth but by one's ability to create value

Bottom of the pyramid capitalism: Chandra Bhan Prasad has argued that capitalism may be the most effective emancipatory force for historically marginalized communities. He argues that Dalit entrepreneurship, business networks and private sector participation represents not just economic advancement

but a structural challenge to caste hierarchy. When the once-marginalized become employers, investors and entrepreneurs, they alter power across multiple dimensions of Patnaik's octagon. This is not just symbolic mobility as the ability to generate value in an economy changes status perceptions.

Redistribution versus mobility: The former attempts to level inequality by reallocating existing wealth. This can address immediate deprivation, but can't transform structural opportunity the way capital formation can.

Markets are not morally neutral, but since they are active agents of status redistribution, they offer us a path to the annihilation of caste—one of India's most urgent moral and social goals. Caste is resilient because it is embedded in both culture and the economy. Ideology-driven cultural reform and political mobilization has struggled to achieve it. However, markets and capital, if widely accessible, have the capacity to reduce several asymmetries simultaneously and annihilate caste. Not because markets are morally superior, but because they are structurally indifferent to lineage.

If India can democratize capital deeply enough, caste may not need to be overturned through any dramatic action. It may simply become economically obsolete.

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY -
RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

G7 meet underlines fractures in the West

WHEN THE foreign ministers of the Group of Seven met at a mediaeval monastery outside Paris last week, their agenda was inevitably dominated by the US-Israeli war against Iran and its cascading global economic consequences. The ministers called for an immediate halt to attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, emphasised the protection of diplomatic missions and foreign nationals, and warned that continued escalation could destabilise the wider Middle East. They called for coordinated humanitarian assistance for affected populations and underlined the need for a return to diplomatic channels. The G7 ministers also warned that disruption to shipping through the waterways posed a serious threat to the global economy, given the large share of the world's oil and gas that transits it, and indicated readiness to coordinate maritime security efforts to ensure freedom of navigation.

The barebones statement did little to conceal, however, the deepening divisions between Washington and its NATO partners. Trump has been relentless in publicly castigating European allies for their reluctance to back the US against Iran. The Europeans, for their part, felt angry at being excluded from decisions over a war at their doorstep; some have declared it illegal and want no part in it. Secretary of State Marco Rubio reminded European partners that Washington has borne the major share of Iran's defence over four years — a war, he pointedly noted, not of America's making. He also sought to reassure them that the war against Iran would be over within weeks and that the US would prevail. For five decades, the G7 has been the sheet anchor of Western leadership of the international order. It has weathered political storms before. This time, though, the differences look deep and structural rather than superficial and tactical.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar attended the Paris meeting as a special invitee, alongside counterparts from Brazil, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Ukraine. He used the occasion to engage collectively and bilaterally with G7 ministers and to underscore the importance of coordinated action in ending the war. Jaishankar and his French counterpart agreed to maintain close coordination on securing the Strait of Hormuz. The two ministers also confirmed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation in the G7 Summit in June, underlining India's contribution to the group's work on macroeconomic imbalances and international partnership. His presence at the Paris meeting was a demonstration of the country's growing global salience — and a reminder of the greater responsibilities that come with it. As the fracture within the West deepens, India's contribution to stabilising the Gulf situation becomes not merely needed but also urgent.

Crisis must spur efficient use of resources

IN THE 1970s, when the first oil shocks emanated from West Asia, Indian farmers were just starting to use urea and diammonium phosphate, while households overwhelmingly relied on firewood and dung cakes for cooking, and a minuscule minority wore polyester and nylon fabrics. That isn't so today, with over 70 million tonnes of mineral chemical fertiliser consumption, 330 million active domestic LPG connections, almost 60 per cent of India's textile production based on manmade fibres, and polymers becoming ubiquitous in everything from plastic bags, bottles and buckets to pipes and cables. It is not surprising that the current US-Israeli-versus-Iran war is having a far more widespread impact on India's economy. Everyone — consumers, manufacturers, eatery operators, farmers and airline companies — is feeling the heat.

This war could be to India what the 1970s energy crises were to the Western economies. That decade of high inflation and low growth ("stagflation") upended the prevailing Keynesian economic model of fiscal policy-led demand management, paving the way for Reaganomics in the US and Thatcherism in the UK. A similar wake-up call awaits India, at least with regard to dependence on imported energy, especially fossil fuels. Indian farmers are unlikely to go back to ploughing their fields with bullocks or replace factory-made chemical fertilisers with composted cow manure. Nor is it desirable to return to the era of smoky kitchens and cooking with dried dung, tree branches or coal. But it certainly cannot be business as usual. The 1970s shock impelled Brazil to launch an ambitious ethanol-based transport fuels programme. Efficient use of resources that India lacks, along with paying their full scarcity value and searching for viable alternatives, has to be mainstreamed into government policy and consumer behaviour. It means not subsidising fertilisers or limiting it to a certain number of bags per farmer, 3kg LPG cylinders.

Efficient imported energy use, apart, India must step on the gas with ethanol-blending in petrol and incentivising the production of electrified flex-fuel vehicles. This should be accompanied by scaling-up of initiatives such as bio-additives in chemical fertilisers (to enhance nutrient uptake and improve soil health), dimethyl ether from biomass-derived methanol (as a substitute for LPG), bio-CNG from sugarcane pressmud and other agricultural as well as municipal organic waste, and potash from distillery spent wash. The chances of success are higher when the opportunity cost of imported fuels — that extends to national security and strategic vulnerabilities — becomes obvious. For India, this is an unprecedented crisis and a moment of opportunity.

The West Bengal puzzle — social gains have not translated into higher incomes



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH ASHOK GULATI AND BIDISHA CHANDRA

THERE IS no development left," claimed West Bengal (WB) Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee while launching the TMC manifesto for the upcoming Assembly elections. However, consider the per capita income (PCI) numbers of WB: In 1960-61, when Congress held office in the state, WB ranked second in the country on a PCI basis, just behind Maharashtra. By the time the Left Front took over in 1977, it had slipped to the fifth position. And when Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress took over the reins in 2011, the state had fallen to the 17th position. Three terms later, WB ranks 16th, with a PCI of Rs 1.63,467 — well below the national average of Rs 2,05,324 and far behind Telangana's Rs 3,87,623.

This is not to suggest that WB has stagnated in the past five decades. On social indicators, the state's story is more impressive. Female literacy among the 15-49 age group stands at 93.1 per cent (according to the Sample Registration System, or SRS, 2023). At 1.3, WB's total fertility rate is in line with the southern states, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu (SRS, 2023). This has translated into a population growth rate of just 0.5 per cent

per annum, against India's 0.9 per cent, and Bihar's 1.43 per cent. Why haven't these gains translated into higher incomes?

One reason is the state's consistent failure to attract and retain private investment. The pivotal moment came in 2008, when the late Ratan Tata announced that Tata Motors would withdraw from the Nano plant in Singur, attributing the decision to Mamata Banerjee's anti-land acquisition agitation against the Left Front government. The signal to corporate boardrooms across India outlined the episode: WB was not a safe destination for long-term capital.

After coming to power, Banerjee did little to reverse this perception. In 2013, the West Bengal Incentive Scheme (WBIS) was introduced to promote industrial growth through a range of fiscal incentives. In April 2025, the state passed the Revocation Act, retrospectively withdrawing three decades of promised industrial incentives to free up resources for welfare schemes targeting disadvantaged groups.

Companies that invested on the basis of those incentives now face serious financial losses, with outstanding claims wiped off the books overnight, making fresh investments difficult. In 2023-24, WB's Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) stood at just 1.2 per cent of its GDP — nearly half of India's 2.3 per cent. The picture worsens when one looks at Net Fixed Capital Formation (NFCF) — a mere 0.4 per cent of GDP, compared to 1.1 per cent for India. This sharp drop reflects the high level of depreciation, which accounts for 64 per cent of GFCF in WB, much higher than India's 51 per cent. Ultimately, sustained growth and em-

Mamata Banerjee's answer to all of this is freebies. Her flagship cash transfer scheme for women accounts for nearly 7 per cent of the state's budget expenditure in 2026-27. There is no major plan for industrialisation

ployment generation depend on private investment. Freebies can temporarily cushion poverty; only industry can alleviate it. WB appears to have forgotten this lesson.

The growth data underscores the problem. Between 2011-12 and 2024-25, at constant (2011-12) prices, WB's GDP grew at an average annual growth rate (AAGR) of 4.8 per cent, well below the national figure of 6.2 per cent. Bihar with an AAGR of 6.5 per cent, UP with 6.1 per cent, Odisha with 6.3 per cent, Jharkhand with 5.6 per cent, and Assam with 7 per cent fared better. The picture is even more concerning in agriculture, which employs 38.2 per cent of the state's workforce. The sector grew at an AAGR of just 2.9 per cent in WB, and the state fared poorly compared to India's AAGR of 4 per cent. In comparison, Bihar's agriculture AAGR stood at 3.9 per cent, UP's 5.7 per cent, Odisha's 4.6 per cent, Jharkhand's 5.9 per cent, and Assam's 6.3 per cent during the same period.

This is puzzling because WB is a leading producer of vegetables, including cabbage, brinjal and cauliflower. The problem comes after the harvest. Typically, a farmer receives roughly a third of what the consumer pays. The remaining two-thirds dissipates in the supply chain, or is simply lost. The state government did try to build vegetable value chains on the lines of SAAFI in Delhi (SUFAL, Bangla), but the results have been limited at best. What WB actually needs is serious agri-processing investment — a PepsiCo doing contract farming with potato farmers, processors in fisheries, and direct pipelines into high-value domestic and export markets.

WB is not short of resources. It

lacks the political will to invest, modernise, and compete. Take jute. WB produces 80 per cent of India's jute, 6.8 million tonnes in 2024-25, and has 88 of India's 118 jute mills. By any measure, it should be the global capital of jute — a natural fibre. Instead, most of the output goes into making sacks for food grains and sugar, sold largely to the government. Bangladesh, starting from scratch after 1971, diversified, modernised, and captured international markets. Darjeeling tea tells the same story: It lost the branding war to Ceylon Tea, whose lion logo guarantees certified quality standards enforced centrally by the Sri Lanka Tea Board. Darjeeling tea, fragmented across individual estates with no unified quality enforcement and a GI tag routinely abused by fraudulent blenders, could offer no such assurance.

Mamata Banerjee's answer to all of this is freebies (read: Lakhshmi Bhandari, her flagship direct cash transfer scheme for women, costs Rs 27,500 crore, nearly 7 per cent of the state's total budget expenditure of Rs 396 lakh crore in 2026-27. There is no major plan for industrialisation or agro-processing supply chain investment. WB's public debt-GDP ratio was 34 per cent in 2023-24, next only to Punjab's 40 per cent, among major states. This is because the welfare schemes are being funded not from growth dividends but from borrowed money. Today's freebies are tomorrow's fiscal crisis.

So, what will decide the 2026 elections? Religion? Revdis? Or the Special Intensive Revision controversy? We wish that it will be decided on the basis of the TMC's performance in the past 15 years.

Gulati is a distinguished professor and Chandra a research assistant at ICRIER. Views are personal

We need a green exit from the urea trap



CHANDRA BHUSHAN

THE WEST Asia conflict has thrown a spotlight on India's deep energy insecurity. What is less discussed is how this vulnerability affects our food security. Since the Green Revolution, India has relied on urea to supply the nitrogen essential for higher crop yields. Urea accounts for 56 per cent of all fertilisers consumed and nearly 80 per cent of all nitrogenous fertilisers. Over 80 per cent of domestic urea is produced using imported natural gas, and more than a fifth of the total consumption is imported. In effect, nearly 90 per cent of the urea consumed in India is import-dependent.

The fiscal burden tells its own story. The urea subsidy has ballooned from less than Rs 500 crore in 1980-81 to Rs 1.65 lakh crore in 2022-23. Enormous public resources are poured into sustaining a system built on insecurity. The good news is that the technology and government programmes needed to build alternatives already exist. What is missing is a mission to bring them together.

Urea production involves two key processes: Producing ammonia from hydrogen and nitrogen, and then reacting it with CO₂. Indian plants derive hydrogen and CO₂ from natural gas, while nitrogen is drawn from the atmosphere. Urea produced through this process is called grey urea. But hydrogen can also be produced from water through electrolysis. In the 1970s, the Fertiliser Corporation of India's Nangal plant used electrolysis to produce hydrogen until power shortages in the Bhakra grid forced a switch to hydrocarbons. Carbon capture and utilisation (CCU), using absorption technologies, too, is already widely used in the urea sector to recover CO₂ from flue gas. So, we already have the building techniques — hydrogen from electrolysis, carbon dioxide from carbon capture, and nitrogen from the atmosphere — to produce urea using electricity alone. Power that electricity with renewables and you get green urea.

We must optimise urea consumption, because urea is significantly overused, polluting land, water and climate. To achieve this, the government should launch a Green Urea Mission

The obvious question is cost. A study of all 36 urea plants in India by my colleagues and me shows that green urea could become the most cost-effective option for a new urea plant by 2028. By 2030, the levelised cost is projected to be 20 per cent lower than that of grey urea; by 2050, this advantage widens to nearly 100 per cent. For the sector, the aver-

age levelised cost of green urea between 2025 and 2050 works out to about \$475 per tonne, compared with \$540 for grey urea. Today, grey urea in global markets is touching \$600 per tonne. In an era of uncertain geopolitics, economics has tilted in favour of green.

India's programmes to power this transition; they need to be redirected. The National Green Hydrogen Mission focuses on exporting green ammonia and using it in non-urea fertilisers and other sectors. The focus must shift towards green urea. The Union budget earmarked Rs 20,000 crore over five years for carbon capture, utilisation and storage. The programme should prioritise the supply of CO₂ to urea plants. If we bring these programmes together and provide them with strategic clarity, we can transition the urea sector to green.

We must also optimise urea consumption, because urea is significantly overused in the country, polluting land, water and climate. To achieve this, the government should launch a Green Urea Mission that does three things: Transition urea manufacturing from natural gas to green hydrogen, optimise consumption, and rebalance the fertiliser mix. If, by 2040, we move 90 per cent of urea production to green hydrogen, increase the urea under non-chemical farming to 30 per cent, improve nitrogen use efficiency in agriculture by 30 per cent, and reduce the proportion of urea in nitrogenous fertilisers by 30 per cent, the rewards will be immense. Urea imports would be eliminated, subsidies would fall by 65 per cent and GHG emissions from the sector would decline by over 60 per cent. Water and air pollution would be significantly reduced. The cumulative value of these benefits could be above Rs 1 trillion over the next 25 years.

This will not happen without structural reform. The urea sector is heavily regulated, with low profitability and almost no incentive to innovate. The most viable path forward is phased decontrol — market competition, as in case of other fertilisers.

A Green Urea Mission offers a pathway from dependence to self-reliance. The economics are compelling, the technology is ready, and the environmental imperative is urgent.

The writer is CEO, iForest

A quiet diplomacy, based in national interest



KAUSAR JAHAN

AS WEST Asia slides once again into uncertainty, the pressure on major powers to "take sides" has grown. Escalating tensions have revived familiar anxieties over energy security, maritime stability, and regional destabilisation. In this charged atmosphere, India's restraint has attracted criticism from those who mistake silence for indecision. The underlying theme is India's approach to West Asia is rooted in calibrated multi-alignment. Unlike many regional and extra-regional actors, India has sustained parallel and substantive relationships with Iran, Israel, the Gulf monarchies, and the US. This is a conscious policy choice shaped by hard interests and regional realities. Crises such as the present one only underline why this approach is not just defensible, but necessary.

The stakes for India are high. Nearly 88 per cent of its crude oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, a choke point that becomes vulnerable every time regional tensions spike. At the same time, close to 9 million Indian citizens live and work across the Gulf, contributing over \$50 billion annually in remittances. Any public posturing that alienates one side risks endangering energy supplies, trade routes, and the safety of the diaspora. Strategic neutrality is thus not moral evasion — it is national interest.

Critics often overlook the fact that restraint has been matched by concrete action. Despite the suspension of rupee-denominated trade with Iran due to international sanctions, India secured a humanitarian window to import 500,000 tonnes of discounted Iranian liquefied petroleum gas, preventing fertiliser shortages at home. Simultaneously, India has deepened its energy diversification strategy through nearly \$1 billion in green hydrogen investments from the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Operational readiness has reinforced India's posture. The safe passage of Indian-flagged vessels through the Strait of Hormuz during heightened tensions underscores India's focus on maritime security and contingency planning. These actions are far more consequential than rhetorical alignment. Protecting sea lanes and commercial assets is where diplomacy meets state capacity. India's caution is also shaped by the complexity of its partnerships. Relations with Iran are vital for regional connectivity and access; ties with Israel underpin defence and technology cooperation; engagement with Gulf states is central to energy security and diaspora welfare; and strategic convergence with the United States remains crucial in the broader Indo-Pacific context.

Publicly siding with one actor risks weakening ties with another. Moreover, India's role in multilateral forums such as BRICS further limits the utility of unilateral rhetoric. Acting as a responsible stakeholder requires sensitivity to collective dynamics, not megaphone diplomacy.

The West Asia crisis is a reminder that restraint, when backed by preparedness and purpose, is a strength. India's diplomacy may not be loud, but it is calculated, resilient, and anchored in national interest. That is what effective foreign policy should be.

The writer is chairperson, Delhi State Hajj Committee, and member of the BJP

FREEZE FRAME BY EPUNNY



40 YEARS AGO March 30, 1986



Jalandhar terror attack

AT LEAST 12 people were killed and eight injured when six jeep-borne terrorists opened random fire in Jalandhar at the end of a near-total general strike in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Chandigarh. In other incidents, a terrorist was killed and about 40 people were wounded in the police firing and mob violence in Punjab.

Arun Nehru escapes mob

UNION MINISTER of State for Internal Security Arun Nehru had to escape in the face of an unruly mob of men and women in the curfew-bound area on the Daresi

road in Ludhiana when he along with Punjab CM Surjit Singh Barnala visited the site of the March 28 shooting. A mob of about 1,000 men and women came out of their houses, raised anti-police slogans and indulged in brick-battening near Daresi.

India-UK talks

INDIA WILL seek an assurance from Sir Geoffrey Howe, the British foreign secretary, who arrives in New Delhi today on a four-day visit, that Britain will deal with the activities of terrorists on its soil with the seriousness they deserve. The plea is expected to be put across forcefully since New Delhi is of the view that Britain has acted neither firmly nor adequately to stop

the activities of Sikh and JKLF extremists there in the past two-three years, informed sources say.

Gorbachev on test ban

SOVIET LEADER Mikhail Gorbachev asked US President Ronald Reagan for an immediate meeting in London, Rome or any other European capital to discuss a nuclear test ban agreement. He said continued American testing despite a seven-month unilateral moratorium was a "poised challenge" to the Soviet Union as well as to all the peoples of the world, including Reagan's own Americans. Gorbachev said he saw no insurmountable obstacle to a nuclear test ban accord.



WHAT THE OTHERS SAY
It's time for Trump to understand: Israel's government won't stop Jewish terror in the West Bank — Haaretz, Israel

We should never be cowed by anyone, and never expect anyone to be subservient to us



C.P. RADHAKRISHNAN

IT IS a great pleasure and honour to be here today at the Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Awards — an occasion that celebrates professional achievement as well as the enduring spirit of fearless and principled journalism. Ramnath Goenka was a patriot, a nationalist, and an industrialist with a strong sense of social responsibility. These awards, in their 20th year, honour the legacy of Goenka, which was defined by courage, independence, and an unwavering commitment to truth, especially during some of the most challenging periods of our nation's history. At a time when the role of the media is both more powerful and more scrutinised than ever before, his ideals continue to serve as a guiding light.

True journalism means standing with the positive and constructive aspects of society and opposing the negative and unconstructive ones. Wrong should not be published. Journalism should help correct wrongs, to help leaders have correct views in the larger interest of society. Freedom is important. Human beings think differently and act differently. In a democracy, differences of opinion are natural, but they should lead to more constructive and vibrant solutions. We should not differ in ways that create permanent divisions and confrontation. For democracy to remain vibrant, it must accept the right suggestions from everyone. It is through the rigorous exchange of ideas, the questioning of assumptions, and the respectful accommodation of differing viewpoints that policies are refined and decisions

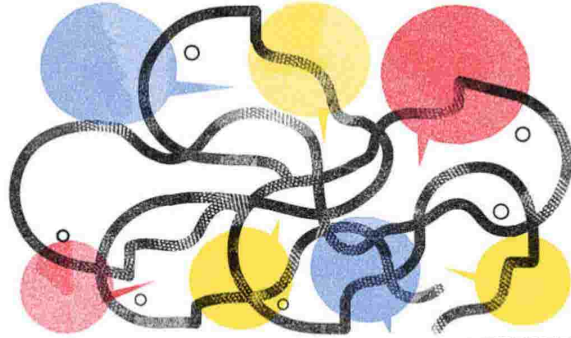


ILLUSTRATION: C. S. SAKIYAMA

gain legitimacy. I firmly believe that discussion, debate and even dissent should ultimately lead to decision-making in the interest of the nation, rather than disruption. Goenka always stood for freedom; that is why he opposed the Emergency. During the Quit India movement, he declared the shutting down of the newspaper in protest against press gagging by the British. It was not an easy decision — it was a very tough one — but he set aside his personal aspirations in the national interest. Not only that, Goenka went on to become a member of the Constituent Assembly. His important intervention relating to the taxation of newspapers in the Constituent Assembly will always be remembered. The power of written and spoken words is well known to

everyone. But Goenka demonstrated the power of silence by printing blank editorial during Emergency. He opposed it with strong will, confidence in his heart, and firm conviction. We are enjoying the fruits of that freedom today. Goenka refused to buckle under pressure despite the editor being sent to jail and power supply to the newspaper being cut off. Despite suffering huge financial losses and harassment, Goenka held on to the spirit of vibrant democracy of our great Bharat during that dark chapter of history. Goenka was born in Darbhanga, grew up in Chennai and later became a member of the Lok Sabha from Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh. He published newspapers in different regional languages along with English, so that the news and views reached the

It is through the rigorous exchange of ideas, the questioning of assumptions, and the respectful accommodation of differing viewpoints that policies are refined and decisions gain legitimacy

people of different regions. Seeds take time to bear fruit — that is what Goenka demonstrated. I appreciate that this legacy continues even today through his family and the Indian Express Group. In my early political life, I was also influenced by such journalism, especially by *Dinamani*, the newspaper then published by the Indian Express Group. I recall that in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address at the Ramnath Goenka Memorial Lecture last year, he had emphasised the need to consciously shed the colonial hangover. Newspapers should lead from the forefront in this endeavour. I always emphasise that development should be inclusive — no one should be left behind. We must take care of everyone. We have to grow together, as humanity must progress together. When the world was grappling with Covid, many nations and multinational pharmaceutical companies developed vaccines, and some sought to patent them for greater profits. However, India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, developed vaccines and provided them free of cost to our people, while also supplying them to more than 100 countries. That is the greatness of Bharat. That is why I always say we should be strong — not to dictate terms to others, as that is not our culture, but strong enough that no one can dictate terms to us.

This is the inspiration I draw from the life of Goenka — that we should not be afraid of anything, never be cowed down by anyone, and never expect anyone to be subservient to us. With this, I conclude. I congratulate the organisers for continuing this important tradition of recognising excellence in journalism. The writer is the Vice President of India. These are edited excerpts from his speech at the Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Awards on March 27

Trump may have triggered process of regime change — but not in Iran



OVER THE BARREL
VIKRAM S MEHTA

I WAS first introduced to the petroleum business 50 years ago when I commenced my graduate thesis on Iran's trade policy with a focus on the barter of crude oil for other commodities. The thesis made me appreciate the intricacies of petroleum pricing, and I have since limited my answer to questions on the trajectory of oil prices to three words. I don't know. This is because the trajectory of prices is determined by six factors, of which only three lend themselves to quantitative rigour — supply, demand and exchange rates. The other three — geopolitics, speculative trade and idiosyncratic leadership — are driven by subjective sentiment.

In a similar vein, this article is more than reflections on the "off-ramp" ramifications of the current conflict. US President Donald Trump went into this war with a mix of objectives, but one statement has been heard more often than others — "regime change". He may well achieve this objective, but not quite in the way he meant it. His objective was regime change in Iran. What he may have triggered is a process of regime change elsewhere. In time, high oil prices, supply chain disruptions and recession could erode public support for governments elsewhere. It would be ironic if the theoretic regime in Iran survives but the Republican Party loses its hold over the US Congress in November in a prelude to the loss of the presidency in 2028. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu finds himself back in the dock struggling to avoid jail, and the Gulf monarchs who host American air bases witness an outbreak of public protest against Western intervention. The bombs will stop falling sooner rather than later. But will that mean the end of "war"? Yes, in the conventional sense, but not if the meaning is stability. The Rubicon has been crossed. West Asia will not be stable for a long time. Thousands have lost families and homes. Many will live for one purpose — revenge. The conflict has highlighted the asymmetries generated by technology. Drones worth \$50,000 pitted against multimillion-dollar interceptors, with the former gaining the upper hand in the war of nerves. The conflict has established that sophisticated weaponry is no guarantor of security. It has also brought into focus the effectiveness of nuclear weapons as deterrents. Iran's capability to produce such weapons may have been "obliterated" but I suspect it is now more determined than ever to develop them. Israel will not permit this, and the cycle of hot conflict and cold war will persist. More worryingly, so-called middle powers like Japan, South Korea and Brazil may decide they should contemplate developing a nuclear arsenal. In such an outcome, India is possibly the worst affected by this conflict. Simple maths will indicate the severity of this impact. We import approximately 5 million barrels of crude oil of varying qualities every day, of which around 3 million barrels are sourced from West Asia. The average per-barrel price of the latter (Dubai benchmark) in February was \$70/barrel. The current spot price is around \$160/bbl. The incremental import cost is \$90/bbl or \$270 million every day. In addition, we import LNG, LPGs, fertilisers and sulphur — the prices of which have also rocketed up. The consequential stagflationary impact will be compounded by a slowdown in FDI. Amazon and Google may well renege their plans to invest in energy-intensive data centres. The crisis compels reflection on what we must do to manage and mitigate our vulnerability. Our buildup of strategic petroleum reserves has not been enough. We must create additional caverns and fill them. We have taken impressive strides in green energy development. More than 50 per cent of our installed electricity capacity is from renewables. However, much of this capacity is underutilised because of the inadequacy of smart transmission grids, battery storage and smart meters. Investment in these areas must be deepened as also in the electrification of transport and household heating. Finally, we must turn Mumbai, Delhi and possibly Bengaluru into international aviation hubs in competition with airports in the Gulf states. The threat of airspace closure in West Asia will not dissipate even after "normalcy" returns. The necessary infrastructure and policy should be developed without delay.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fiscal danger

THE GOVERNMENT'S efforts to insulate the public from the far-reaching consequences of the West Asia crisis are much needed, but the question is, for how long? ("To ease the pain, a timely cut," *IE*, March 28). The focus of the rest of the world should be on restoring the situation as it was before February 28. Measures like this or further tax cuts will eat into revenue, with disastrous results. Steep price hikes and inflationary tendencies will disturb growth numbers. The quest to reduce our dependency on imported energy sources must be undertaken with bold decisions and technological development. *Sanjeev Balra Raina, Greater Noida*

Climate targets

THE UNION Cabinet has set revised climate targets, including an increase in the forest and tree cover. It marks another step towards the goal of net-zero emissions by 2070 ("Fine tune Paris design, underline equity," *IE*, March 28). With the country bearing the brunt of the impact of climate change, the updated NDCs include several measures related to climate adaptation and disaster resilience. Awareness and the readiness to embrace change are key elements of renewable energy expansion. *S S Paul, Nadia*

Menstrual leave

THE DEBATE on menstrual leave must move beyond a narrow "for or against" framework and instead focus on dignity, choice, and structural reform ("Menstrual leave policy must be nuanced, inclusive" *IE*, March 28). Treating menstrual leave as a special privilege misses the larger issue — many women continue to work through pain not out of resilience, but out of compulsion. The conversation must not stop at formal workplaces. A vast number of women work in the informal sector, where even basic sanitation and rest facilities are absent. Any serious policy intervention must prioritise access to clean toilets, affordable sanitary products, and safe working conditions. Without this, menstrual leave risks becoming an urban, privileged solution to a widespread problem. *Aditi Gupta, Jammu*



DAYAL PALERI

KERALA GOES TO THE polls on April 9. From a national point of view, the results on May 4 may appear of limited significance, as two competing fronts — the CPI(M)-led LDF and the Congress-led UDF — are part of the INDIA bloc. The BJP, meanwhile, appears unlikely to secure a significant number of seats, let alone form the government. However, at the level of Kerala politics, this election is highly consequential. The Left is keen to retain the only communist-led government in the country, while Congress and its allies seek to end a prolonged period out of office. Even though it is not a contender for government formation, the BJP's performance will tell us more about the future of Kerala politics, especially the durability of its bipolar competition. Kerala is known for a remarkably durable bipolar competition between the LDF and the UDF, which have alternated in power for five decades. The LDF has articulated a politics of class alongside a relatively firm commitment to secularism, while the UDF, led by Congress, has often relied on more communitarian political articulations. The roots of this bipolarity lie in the consolidation of opposition to early communist rule, which resulted in the infamous liberation struggle. While these coalitions have become increasingly porous, the system has endured, anchored in a broad commitment to secular politics that has kept the BJP largely outside this dynamic. However, the 2025 elections disrupted this entrenched pattern. For the first time, an incumbent government, the Pinarayi Vijayan-led

Kerala polls will shape future of its bipolar politics

LDF, secured a second term with an increased mandate. Vijayan thus became the first chief minister to remain in office for a decade, marking an exception to the law of anti-incumbency in Kerala politics. The LDF is now attempting to convert this exception into a new pattern, organising its campaign around its record in office. Despite an economic crisis, an often hostile Union government, and repeated natural disasters, its campaign rests on achievements in welfare and development, including expanded social security pensions, poverty eradication, housing under the LIFE mission, and public investments in education, health, and infrastructure. However, recent developments have unsettled this confidence. There has been a rise of rebel candidates, including senior CPI(M) leaders, with the UDF backing some. The 2025 civic elections, in which Congress secured a clear majority in most local bodies, suggest the persistence of anti-incumbency. Following recent electoral gains, the Congress-led UDF appears revitalised. However, this impression is undermined by three factors. First, a weakening of its traditional social coalition of upper-caste Hindus, Muslims, and Syrian Christians, with organisations such as the Nair Service Society and the SNDP distancing themselves, while its association with Jamaat-e-Islami Hind has also generated unease among sections of Muslim organisations. Second, leadership struggles plague Congress. Multiple leaders have emerged as contenders for the chief ministerial position, exposing

internal divisions. With the passing of Oommen Chandy and the withdrawal of A K Antony from active politics, the party has struggled to project credible leadership, marking the present moment as one of crisis rather than transition. Third, Congress has struggled to articulate a coherent ideological and programmatic alternative to the LDF. Unable to effectively counter its governance narrative, its strategy has increasingly relied on issues such as Sabarimala, which no longer carry the same electoral weight. While the BJP remains far from emerging as a serious contender for state power, it has broken its earlier electoral isolation in certain pockets, making several constituencies triangular contests. It has begun realigning its strategy, attempting outreach to Christian communities while recognising demographic constraints. With the appointment of Rajeev Chandrasekhar and its alliance with the Twenty20 Party, the BJP is also seeking to appeal to the expanding middle class and its technocratic aspirations. Its parliamentary victory in Thrissur and successes in the civic polls in the state capital indicate some conversion of organisational presence into electoral gains. While progress remains gradual, the BJP has become an increasingly consequential electoral force, eyeing victory in constituencies like Manjeri, Palakkad and Nemon. Its performance in this election will have important implications for the future of Kerala's bipolar coalition system, which has long underpinned the state's political stability.

The writer is assistant professor of Social Sciences at NLSIU, Bengaluru



MADHAVI RAVIKUMAR AND ANIRUDDHA JENA

ON MARCH 26, a Los Angeles court awarded a now 20-year-old woman \$6 million after jurors found Meta, platforms and YouTube (Google) negligently designed addictive products that harmed her mental health as a minor. The jury held the companies liable for exploiting young users through algorithmic recommendations, endless scrolling and incessant notifications, despite awareness of associated risks like anxiety, depression and obsessive usage. The ruling could influence thousands of similar lawsuits across the US. The timing is appropriate. Recently, Karnataka's 2026-27 budget proposed a ban on social media for under-16s, echoing moves in Australia, Indonesia, France and many other European countries. India's 460 mil-

In the dock, social media platforms' business models

lion-plus social media users, one-third under 18, face real harms, including cyberbullying, sleep deprivation, distorted self-image. Yet, the Los Angeles verdict does not vindicate bans. It demobilises them. The jury's finding is clear: Harm stems less from children's choices than from platforms' business model — what scholars like B J Fogg identified as "persuasive design" within "platform capitalism". Features that maximise engagement, drive data extraction and ad revenue, making these companies among the most valuable globally. Internal documents presented in court reportedly showed that the management of the platforms recognised the mental-health risks to adolescents but preferred "engagement" metrics that drive billions in advertising revenue. By pinning liability on the platform architects rather than the users, the verdict rejects the notion that children are the problem. Bans are largely performative, shifting responsibility onto families and the state.

Constitutionally, a state like Karnataka cannot unilaterally muzzle global platforms, as IT falls under the Centre's jurisdiction. Practically, bans collapse — children can bypass them by falsifying age, sharing devices or using VPNs, as studies have repeatedly shown. Stringent age-verification invites questions related to surveillance and privacy. Moreover, bans inflame adolescents. Association scientist Danah Boyd has argued, platform function as "networked publics" where young people build identities and social connections. Blanket restrictions further deepen inequality: Data

from National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) and UNESCO show stark disparities in smartphone access, meaning affluent urban children are barely affected, while rural or low-income youth face greater marginalisation. The deeper flaw in ban-centric thinking is that it leaves the root cause untouched. Karnataka's accompanying campaign — "Mobile Bidi, Pustaka Hidi" (Drop the mobile, pick up a book) — is commendable for promoting reading. However, reading alone will not fix an attention economy built on addiction-by-design. What India needs is platform-focused regulation. Frameworks like the EU's Digital Services Act and the UK's Age-Appropriate Design Code already mandate algorithmic transparency, limits on minors' data use, and safer interface design. India's forthcoming Digital India Bill should go further — mandating age-appropriate design by default, restricting targeted advertising to minors, curbing addictive features like auto-

play and endless scrolling, and imposing strong penalties for violations. Enforcement must be uniform nationwide, not patchy state action. The Karnataka proposal has sparked an important national debate on digital childhood. But the US court's stance rethinks the issue: The question is not whether children should be banned, but whether platforms can treat them as profit centres. A verdict that compels Meta and YouTube to compensate for harm they knowingly caused is a powerful signal: Regulation must redesign the digital landscape itself. Anything less merely displaces responsibility while the addictive machinery keeps humming. Protecting India's young citizens requires placing accountability squarely on the companies that built these platforms — anything less is abdication. Ravikumar teaches at Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad. Jena teaches at School of Management, IIT Mandi

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• POLICY

Gopinathan's stalled resignation from IAS: What service rules say

Shyamal Yadav
New Delhi, March 29

KANNAN GOPINATHAN, a 2012-batch IAS officer who resigned from the service in 2019 over the "denial of freedom of expression" to the people of Kashmir, has accused the Union government of stonewalling his resignation for more than six years. This day, he said on Wednesday, has prevented him from contesting the forthcoming Kerala Assembly elections as a Congress candidate. Government sources say that the final recommendation on Gopinathan's resignation is yet to be sent to the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT). Sources also say there is no precedent for such a delay in acceptance of resignation.

What are the rules on IAS officers and political activity?
Gopinathan quit the IAS in August 2019 to protest the restrictions imposed in Jammu & Kashmir following the abrogation of Article 370. He joined the Congress in October last year and was reportedly being considered as a candidate for the Palkkad Assembly seat. But the conduct rules bar serving government servants from being associated with any political outfit, and from taking part in any political activity.

An amendment on November 27, 2014, added a few clauses to The All India Services (Conduct) Rules, Rule 3(1) reads: "Every government employee shall at all times maintain political neutrality and commit himself to uphold the supremacy of the Constitution and democratic values."

Gopinathan's status as a government officer is in limbo. The latest available Civil List of IAS officers retains his name. On Wednesday, he posted on X that the situation is "pure harassment".



What is the resignation process for IAS officers?

Resignations from any of the three All-India Services — the IAS, the Indian Police Service and the Indian Forest Service — are governed by Rules 5(1) and 5(1A) of the All India Services (Death-cum-Retirement Benefits) Rules, 1958. Other central services have similar rules.

- An officer serving in a cadre (state) must submit their resignation to the Chief Secretary of the state.
- Officers on central deputation from a cadre are required to submit their resignation to the secretary of the ministry or department concerned. The ministry or department then forwards the resignation to the state cadre concerned, along with its comments or recommendations.

Cases of AGMUT (Arunachal Pradesh-Goa-Mizoram and Union Territories) officers are routed through the Ministry of Home Affairs. Gopinathan was from the AGMUT cadre.

Can the resignation be rejected?

After the resignation is submitted, the state checks if the officer faces any pending dues, cases or inquiries (such as corruption). In such a case, the resignation is normally rejected. The state then provides details on outstanding dues and vigilance status, along with its recommendation, to the Union government. It forwards the resignation to the Union government. In the case of IAS officers, the authority that can consider the resignation is the Minister of the DoPT — in other words, the Prime Minister, who is the Cabinet Minister for the DoPT.

Can the government sit on IAS resignations?

There is no time limit for the government to accept a resignation by an IAS officer. However, a DoPT circular issued on February 15, 1988, says it is not in the interest of the government to retain an officer who is unwilling to serve. The general rule, therefore, is that a resignation of an officer should be accepted — except in certain circumstances as mentioned above.

How many IAS officers have resigned in the past?

A total of 31 IAS officers have resigned from the service since 2010, shows RTI data received by *The Indian Express* this month from the DoPT. While 11 IAS resigned between 2010 and 2014 (UPA), 20 quit between 2015 and May 2025 (NDA). In 2019, AGMUT cadre officer, Keshish Mittal, had resigned after being transferred from Delhi to Arunachal Pradesh. Mittal was relieved in 2019 itself. In 2018, O P Chowdhary from the Chhatisgarh cadre resigned. He later joined the BJP and now serves as Minister of Finance in the state. Others include Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnav, who quit in 2011 from the Odisha cadre to start his own business and later joined the BJP.

• WAR IN WEST ASIA

For India, LPG supply a bigger worry than LNG



THE EFFECTIVE halt in vessel movements through the Strait of Hormuz due to the West Asia war has severely affected India's energy supplies, particularly liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and liquefied natural gas (LNG).

India's crude oil supplies have also been hit, but its import dependence is greater for LPG and LNG. LPG is of particular concern. India depends on imports to meet around 60% of the fuel's needs, and 90% of those imports came through the critical maritime chokepoint of the Strait. This means that around 54% of India's LPG supplies are effectively disrupted, forcing the government to heavily cut supplies to commercial and industrial consumers to ensure uninterrupted supplies to crores of households that use the fuel for cooking.

Some stress is also visible in the natural gas segment, where supplies to commercial and industrial consumers has been reduced to some extent to ensure supplies to priority segments like households using piped natural gas (PNG) and vehicles running on compressed natural gas (CNG). India depends on LNG imports to meet half of its natural gas requirement, and 55-60% of it comes from West Asia through the Strait of Hormuz. This means that the Strait's effective closure has cut off roughly 30% of India's natural gas supplies. Relative to LPG, the situation is much better, which is evident from the fact that the government has been urging LPG consumers to shift to PNG wherever feasible.

While both LPG and LNG are hydrocarbon gases turned into the liquid state, they differ in their chemistry, production processes, transportation, and delivery.

The chemistry and physics of LPG and LNG

LPG is a gaseous fuel mix primarily comprising propane and butane that is a byproduct of crude oil refining and natural gas processing. It may also contain some propylene, butane, and isobutylene or isobutene.

What Iran's drone blitz means for the future of warfare

Abhinav Chakrabarty
New Delhi, March 29

OVER THE years, Gulf Arab countries propped up the line US-made fighter jets and air defence systems to counter external security threats. But these lavishly assembled systems have run into a formidable opponent built at a fraction of their cost — Iran's Shahed drone, which it has used to devastating effect in the war in West Asia.

The use of drones, not just in the Gulf, but also the Russia-Ukraine war and the India-Pakistan conflict last year, demonstrates how modern war is being shaped by low-cost technology that is easy to obtain and difficult to defeat.

Up in the air

Besides missile systems, Gulf countries have deployed advanced fighters such as the F-16 to tackle the swarms of Shahed drones. These fourth-generation jets cost about \$70 million for newer variants (older ones are less than half the cost), besides additional costs for special packages. They are armed with air-to-air missiles such as the AIM-9X Sidewinder (about \$485,000 each) and the AIM-120 AMRAAM (over \$1 million each). These jets can use their cheaper cannon rounds, but that would require them to attack drones at close quarters and low altitudes, endangering civilians.

Since the war began on February 28, these Gulf fighters have managed to intercept most of the 3,000-plus drones Iran has fired across the region. But their effectiveness has come at a high cost, not just financially but also in the form of overstretched pilots and planes on guard round the clock.

• USAGE TO IMPACT: HOW LPG DIFFERS FROM LNG

The Strait of Hormuz closure has hit a large chunk of India's energy supply — crude oil, and, to greater degrees, LPG and LNG. Here's what they are used for and how they differ.

MEANING

LNG, OR LIQUEFIED NATURAL GAS, is primarily a natural gas — mainly methane. It is cooled to below -160 degrees Celsius and cryogenically turned into a liquid for storage or ease of transportation

LNG is regasified into natural gas and is called:

- PNG, or piped natural gas, when supplied to households
- CNG, or compressed natural gas, when used to power vehicles

USE

LPG, OR LIQUEFIED PETROLEUM GAS, primarily comprises propane and butane. LPG is a byproduct of the crude oil refining process. Under relatively low temperatures or moderate pressure, LPG becomes a liquid, allowing it to be bottled in cylinders.

LPG: Cooking, heating and limited industrial applications

LNG: Regasified into natural gas, it is used in transportation, industrial applications such as power generation and machinery operations, cooking

The dependency is greater for LPG...

- 33 million tonnes India's annual consumption
- 13 million tonnes is the share of domestic production in annual consumption
- 60% India's import dependency
- 90% of these imports come via the now-closed Strait of Hormuz
- 54% the effective hit to total supplies

...than for LNG

- 71 billion cubic metres India's annual consumption
- 35.6 billion cubic metres is the share of domestic production in annual consumption
- 50% India's import dependency
- 60% of these imports come via the now-closed Strait of Hormuz, mainly from Qatar and the UAE
- 30% the effective hit to total supplies

LPG usage is greater

India has a huge LPG consumer base with 33.3 crore domestic connections

Households with PNG connections are far fewer, at about 1.5 crore

cryogenic tanks and requires trained handling to prevent vapourisation or boil-off. In its liquid state, LNG occupies roughly 1/600th the volume of natural gas in gaseous form, making it viable for transport and storage over long distances. The problem, though, is that this has to be done cryogenically, and is energy intensive.

Essentially, LNG is natural gas that is liquefied for easier storage and transportation, and is mostly converted back to natural gas before being used. Natural gas itself has a number of applications — cooking fuel, transportation fuel, and industrial fuel or feedstock in sectors like refineries, fertilisers, power plants, and petrochemicals.

Delivery, storage, safety

LNG is transported in specialised cryo-

India depends on imports to meet around 60% of its LPG needs, and 90% of those imports came through the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint

genic ships and lands at LNG regasification terminals, where it is converted back into natural gas and then transported further, mostly using pipeline networks. The natural gas is sent to the end user usually through pipelines — sold as PNG to households and industries, and as CNG or automobile fuel sold through dispensing stations.

LPG, on the other hand, is bottled into cylinders and transported mainly by road to the end consumer. As it doesn't really depend on pipeline connectivity, LPG becomes highly portable and can be made available in any region, even remote and rural areas that may not have any pipeline connectivity. It is also much easier to store, as it is just pressurised cylinders.

By contrast, every household that wants to use PNG must have pipeline connectivity at its doorstep, and natural gas itself cannot be really stored, unless it is liquefied. This is why LPG is now increasingly being seen as a fuel for rural and remote areas, while PNG is being encouraged in urban areas.

Although PNG requires pipeline infrastructure, once it is established, the fuel scores higher than LPG in terms of convenience for users. The pipeline provides uninterrupted supply and there's no need to store or keep track of the gas stocks in the case of LPG, where cylinders need to be booked and exchanged at regular intervals. PNG supplies are constant and metered, like power supply, and there is no need to make bookings.

PNG is also considered safer than LPG. This is because natural gas is lighter than air, which allows it to disperse quickly in case of a leak. LPG is heavier than air. It sinks and accumulates in the air in case of a leak, which makes it much more prone to fires and explosions in such instances.

Govt's PNG push

The government, over these weeks, has been pushing for the use of PNG. It has mandated that cooking gas LPG supply to households will be discontinued if consumers fail to switch to PNG where such connectivity is available.

Meanwhile, priority sectors continue to receive protected natural gas supplies, including 100% supply to the household PNG and CNG for transport segments, while supplies are industrial and commercial consumers are being regulated at around 80%.

Iran's Shahed-136 'kamikaze' drone

ONE-WAY DRONE

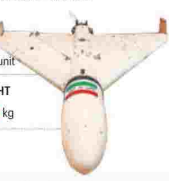
COST \$20,000-30,000 per unit

WINGSPAN 2.5m RANGE 3000km WEIGHT 200kg

ALTITUDE: From 20-30 metres (below the radar) to up to 5.2 km

• Push-propeller engine

• Explosives in their nose



• Often deployed in swarms

• They dive towards their target, detonate on impact

Laser weapons

• Laser weapons are a cost-effective option to target drones

• HELIOS Laser, deployed on the US destroyer USS Preble, was reportedly used to hit Iranian drones

• They work by shooting beams that destroy targets with heat. But their performance can be affected by the weather

lion. A THAAD interceptor missile costs \$13-15.5 million.

The US and its allies fired over 800 of these interceptors in the first few days of the war. According to military data trackers, only 620 of the most advanced Patriot missiles were produced and delivered in 2025, while the annual tally for THAAD was 96. Replenishing stocks will take years.

Cost-effective solutions

Ukraine earlier used Patriot interceptors (which it receives as part of US military aid) to combat Russia's Geran drones — Moscow's version of the Shahed.

It has since adopted low-cost solutions — such as a counter-drone technology that can recognise the Geran's lawnmower-like

sound, an interceptor drone called Sting, worth \$2,000-4,000 per unit, and an American-made anti-drone system called Merops.

The *New York Times* reported that these small Merops interceptors have proven so effective that the US was racing to deliver thousands of them to West Asia.

The US said in March that it deployed its own one-way attack drone in Iran. The LUCAS (Low-cost Uncrewed Combat Attack System) costs about \$35,000 apiece. Closer to home, the India-Pakistan conflict in May last year also saw significant use of drones. To combat Pakistan's employment of the same drone, India used its indigenous air defence systems like the Akashster and the Integrated Air Command and Control System, besides air defence guns such as Bofors L-70, ZU-23, and Shilka. But he felt that India needs to do more in terms of integrating drone and counter-drone systems with air defence networks.

The road ahead

For now, Gulf countries will need to think about their reliance on costly US defence systems. Anan Tello pointed out in an analysis for *Arab News*: "For Gulf states, the lesson is clear: even with advanced defences, the economics of modern warfare are shifting, and the cost of protection may prove as decisive as firepower itself."

But while drones may play a key role in the future of war, Narang said they have not replaced aircraft: "All major attacks are done by manned aircraft. Even today, wherever heavy payloads have to be dropped, it was (them). But in terms of the ability to strike soft targets, drones have done well."

• SPACE

Artemis II: NASA's Moon missions could lay ground for deeper space exploration

Amithabh Singh
New Delhi, March 29

Last week, the US space agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), unveiled an ambitious road map for lunar exploration over the next decade. It includes laying the groundwork for a permanent base on the Moon capable of supporting frequent, long-term astronaut stays.

This comes amidst preparations for the launch of the Artemis II mission, possibly as early as this week. It will take four astronauts around the Moon, marking the return of humans to the lunar vicinity after more than five decades.

In outlining its road map, NASA has addressed a frequent and familiar question in the context of renewed global interest in lunar missions: what is so great about going to the Moon when it has already been done

more than 50 years ago? As NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman put it: "This time the goals are not flags and footprints. This time the goal is to stay."

It shows that the lunar missions of the coming years, including those involving human landings, are going to be fundamentally different from the six Apollo missions (1969-72) that landed 12 humans — two at a time — on the Moon.

Permanent base

Those missions had happened barely 12 years after the beginning of the space age. While they marked a dream technology leap, the space ecosystem then was too nascent to capitalise on them to make further progress. So, the landings became standalone successes.

When humans started probing the Moon again, in the early 2000s, they began not

from where they had left off in 1972 but from scratch: by sending Orbiters. This current phase of lunar exploration has progressed incrementally and fresh human landings, expected in a couple of years, are going to serve as stepping stones to a greater and closer engagement with the Moon, and possibly use it as a launchpad for going further into space.

What NASA is setting out to do is to establish a facility for permanent human presence on the Moon, much like the way it is currently being done on the International Space Station (ISS), a space-based laboratory which has been continuously manned for about quarter of a century now. But such a facility will take time to be built, requiring several Moon missions: carrying humans, robots, equipment and fuel that can exploit and utilise locally available resources to create a habitat that can sustain human presence over prolonged periods of time.

Such missions have already begun with the Artemis programme. Its first flight happened in 2022, wherein an uncrewed Orion spacecraft flew around the Moon and came back. The second flight, scheduled for launch this week, will carry four astronauts on a similar route — around the Moon and back. Another flight is scheduled for next year ahead of the planned 2028 Moon landing: "before the end of President Donald Trump's term", as Isaacman said.

A new phase

A series of other missions are also being planned, involving private space players and international partners, to carry logistics and other hardware. NASA is targeting a Moon landing, crewed or uncrewed, at least once every six months.

The set-up being attempted for the Moon — about 400,000 km away from the Earth

— is very similar to the ISS: regular missions carrying humans and logistics, continuous astronaut presence, and ongoing experiments. ISS is just 400 km from the Earth, but has proved to be extremely useful in extending humanity's understanding of outer space, and in acclimating them to survive and operate outside the protective environment of the Earth.

ISS is set to retire within the next three to four years, and is likely to be replaced not by one but multiple space stations, set up by private players and countries like China and India. NASA is not planning to send a replacement space station, but said it will continue to maintain its presence in low-earth orbit through industrial and international partners.

NASA also announced its plans for using nuclear energy to propel space missions. Its Space Reactor-1 Freedom mission to Mars in

2028 would be the first nuclear-powered interplanetary spacecraft. Nuclear energy can bring greater efficiency into space missions.

When the first human landing on the Moon (Apollo 11) happened in 1969, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) did not even exist. It was set up within a month of that epoch-making event. Now, when NASA is working to take humans again to the Moon, ISRO is not just a collaborator but also a competitor, with its own plans of landing humans on the Moon.

This characterises the current phase of lunar exploration: unlike the 1960s and 1970s, there are multiple players in the race. Russia, which inherited the Soviet space programme, has not been very aggressive, but China, Japan, and India are serious contenders. There are other countries, including in Europe, who would be very important collaborators in these endeavours.

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

WHY VIVEK KATJU

Veteran Indian diplomat Vivek Katju, from the 1975 IFS batch, dealt with Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan during his career. He watched the 1979 Iran Revolution from Abu Dhabi, was part of policy-making during the time of Delhi-Lahore bus service, Kargil war and Agra summit, managed negotiations with the Taliban during IC-814 hijack and dealt with the file on Iran's nuclear programme. As the Indian envoy to Afghanistan after 9/11, he also dealt with the Iranian regime. He was also posted in the US and worked on bilateral ties with India. He is well placed to make sense of the evolving war in West Asia, where the US-Israel and Iran have been fighting for four weeks now

Shubhaji Roy: You were posted in Abu Dhabi during the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In today's context, how would you explain India-Iran relations? How has India engaged with Iran under the Ayatollahs?

The '79 Iranian Revolution was a development that caused a great deal of consternation all over the world and in our region. It was a seminal year. I reached Abu Dhabi in mid-February of 1979. There was great trepidation about the new leadership which had emerged and in the Gulf, one could see it... there were question marks because our relationship with the Shah was never stable, and Pakistan was a factor. In Delhi, too, they wondered what the nature of this relationship would be. But in time, there was a greater sense of assurance in Delhi that we will be able to have a balanced relationship. Because it wasn't only a regime change. It was a systemic change. The years that I dealt with Iran were not the easiest but there was an understanding that there were enough commonalities of interest between India and Iran. In the '90s we found a great congruity of interest relating to Afghanistan. The emergence of the Taliban worried them greatly. It also worried India and Russia. India, Russia and Iran cooperated fairly extensively in trying to shore up anti-Taliban forces.

Shubhaji Roy: As an Indian diplomat, how did you see the dichotomous Iran — technologically powerful but brutally repressive?

Iran was never a democracy. As a diplomat, one has dealt with all kinds of systems and governments. Khomeini introduced the Velayat-e Faqih or 'Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist'. Velayat-e Faqih has built an institutional and coercive apparatus to sustain the Revolutionary Guards and Basij. A scholar in Tehran said these people are cultured and refined and deeply annoyed by the structure of the Velayat-e Faqih. There is a tension there. So there are three elements: *Shahadad*, culture and civilisation, and practicality. They are ruthlessly pragmatic. Anyone who has dealt with Iran experiences that. One never knows what is going to come to the fore. So, it is not the easiest thing to negotiate with them. And I am sure the Americans who did the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action would have felt this.

Shubhaji Roy: Iran has been under attack for four weeks now. What are they thinking?

One does not know exactly what they are thinking because it is all behind closed doors in Iran and not available to us. We don't even know who is making the decisions. In any system, crucial matters of war and peace can only be made by the top leaders. In 1988, Khomeini accepted the ceasefire with Iraq after eight years of warfare and told his people to drink from the poisoned chalice and they accepted because Khomeini had that standing within Iran. If Khomeini had said it, they would have accepted.

After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, who told the Japanese people that they must surrender? The emperor. And they accepted. Today, we don't know who is taking the decisions in Tehran. Mojtaba Chameh has been announced as the leader but no one has seen him. One hopes that he is there. But there is a gradual acceptance that they are in contact with the Americans. Hopefully we'll get some clarity soon. Even governments today don't have an exact sense of who they are dealing with in Tehran.

Shubhaji Roy: Will talking to President Masoud Pezeshkian be of little value?

No, it is so considerable value when it comes to the movement of vessels from the Strait of Hormuz. Incidentally, that's the last thing which the Iranians will open up. That's the ace of spades. They are permitting ships to go through, and it is important to speak to Abbas Araghchi and to the President. Delhi is doing well talking to them. But I would not think that these two gentlemen are the final decision makers in Iran today.

Shubhaji Roy: On US President Donald Trump's three-and-a-half weeks of messaging, he's given mixed signals. What do you make of that?

At the best of times, I find it very difficult to comprehend Trump. He negotiates like a person in real estate. He can do gorilla chest thumping, make exaggerated and wrong statements, and then walk away from them. In August 2017, he announced that Pakistan must stop supporting the Taliban and threatened dire consequences. But as months passed, he had no compunctions about not standing by those threats. So today, these threats are more like: *Ho jaye, toh ho jaye. Nahi hota, nahi ho*. What's the harm in that? If they agree, it's fine; if they don't, we'll move on. With all the sophistication of the American bureaucracy, here is a man who does things like this... It seems sometimes that the Americans are pleading with the Iranians to accept defeat, and they are saying why should we agree. It's a very fluid situation, full of imponderables.

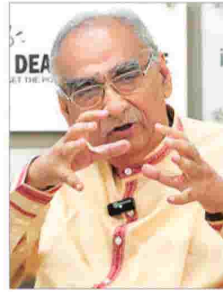
Shubhaji Roy: So, what is his exit strategy?

It's quite clear that Trump has given up wanting a system change. He's saying there's already been a regime change because the decapitating strike did that. But he's given up the idea that Velayat-e Faqih would be



ON THE ONGOING WEST ASIA WAR

It's clear that Trump has given up wanting a system change... Iran has said that there shouldn't be decapitation strikes anymore and that's logical. They should be given some guarantees that it will not take place'



ON INDIA-IRAN RELATIONS

'Iranians are far-seeing people. They haven't said anything, even though the ship torpedoed by the Americans, was returning from India. India is a major country and Iran doesn't want to alienate us. This is their pragmatism'

'Can't imagine Netanyahu bucking Trump if Trump lays the law. He may turn and twist but he will listen'

Veteran Indian diplomat Vivek Katju on US-Israel war on Iran, India's evolving position on it, why Pakistan wants to be a mediator in the scheme of things and difference between war goals of the US and Israel. The conversation was moderated by Shubhaji Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*



Former diplomat Vivek Katju (right) in conversation with Shubhaji Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express* TASHI TORGIYAL

overthrown by Iranians and he is no longer telling them to come out on the streets. On the nuclear issue, the Iranians will perhaps want to keep the right to domestic uranium enrichment. Then he would minimise the capacity of the Iranians to project power. I think these three things are vital. He is not interested in how much the Iranians would suffer. What he thinks is suffering must come to an end. There will have to be some kind of international arrangement or agreement on the Strait of Hormuz and that will finally be the most difficult thing to achieve.

Shubhaji Roy: What is Iran's off-ramp?

Iran has said that there shouldn't be decapitation strikes anymore and that's logical. They should be given some guarantees that it will not take place. Now, reparations, I don't really think so. The nuclear thing, the Iranians have always been very conscious of their rights. And the rights that international law gives them. To what extent will they insist on what they are now saying about the right of their proxies, is open to question.

Shubhaji Roy: How do you see India's position evolving in the last three and a half weeks of this war?

The perception in the first four to five days of this war conveyed by the Modi government was that it was more in harmony with the interests of the Arabian Gulf than with any other. And at that stage, Indian analysts within the government may have been of the view that Iran was finished one way or the other. And that our interests were very substantial in the Gulf. After all, we have one crore people and interests in the energy flow being maintained. We have trade interests, transit interests, IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor). So, I believe they said that the preponderance of interest is so substantial that even if the perception is there that we are leaning to one side, so, I think the foreign interlocutors were tell-

ing the government the same thing. But later, perhaps, after four or five days, it dawned that not condoning the death of a leader of another country, one which is in your region, in your neighbourhood, is wrong. And therefore, Vikram Misri (Foreign Secretary) went and signed the condolence book. The missions were also allowed to sign condolence books, wherever these were opened by the Iranians. Now, the focus seems to be on our interests in the region and that is paramount and logical. But the perception persists that we are leaning to one side. But look at the Iranian reaction. They've been very wise. They're far-seeing people. And their system is a far-seeing system. They've overlooked the first four days. They haven't said anything, even though that ship, which was torpedoed by the Americans, was returning from India. So, they have taken all that in their stride at the moment. Because India is a major country and Iran doesn't want to

alienate us. So, this is where their pragmatism comes from.

Shubhaji Roy: Pakistan has positioned itself as a mediator. What is your view?

As a *dalal*? That is the word my former colleague (External Affairs minister S. Jaishankar) had used. In the '90s, the Pakistanis had a dreadful time when there was a proxy civil conflict between the Sunnis and the Shia Tazemzes in Pakistan. And it is notable that the Saudis were behind the Sunni Tazemzes and the Iranians were behind the Shia Tazemzes. So, that's the last thing that the Pakistanis would want at this stage. Recently, there's been a fairly turbulent relationship on the Baloch issue between the two countries. And not in the distant past, the Pakistanis did some strafing in Iranian territory, what they claimed were Baloch militant strongholds. But the predominant feeling in

Pakistan seems to be to capitalise on the present opportunity to shore up to burnish this diplomatic standing. Part of the thinking is that if Pakistan becomes the venue for any contact between the Americans and the Iranians, then that will bring about a lot of positive perceptions about Pakistan. And if it doesn't work, then what do they lose? Second, it has improved their standing in the Islamic Ummah. That they are the only Islamic state with nuclear weapons and yet in the Ummah they are not taken seriously, is something that really infuriates them. They feel they might improve their position.

Vikas Pathak: The Opposition is questioning the timing of the PM's visit to Israel. Is the criticism valid?

The timing of the Prime Minister's visit to Israel was intriguing. When the visit took place, it was quite clear that Trump was gathering what was being called a naval armada. And while negotiations were going on, which the Omanis were doing at that stage, the chances of a military conflict were substantial. The government still hasn't clarified why it decided to go ahead.

Vikas Pathak: India had largely de-hyphenated itself from Pakistan. However, after Operation Sindoor, Pakistan appears to be regaining diplomatic attention. Could the shift harm India's strategic interests?

On Operation Sindoor, the Pakistanis have played their cards, with Trump in particular, to ingratiate themselves with him. PM Shehbaz Sharif has gone to the extent of saying that 'you have saved millions of lives' and of course, that is music to Trump's ears. And we've kept silent. As for mediation, you can only be a mediator if one side wants you to be. In the early '50s, during the Korean War, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was approached to be the mediator and that is why we played a very prominent role and are standing in the world roles. It's certainly odd

that Shehbaz Sharif has tweeted that they will be honoured if they host this meeting in Pakistan. That's unusual. I certainly wouldn't have liked our PM to do that. So, if the world had come to the ruling dispensation to say that Modi is a *shanti doot*. But that opportunity is not there. People have to come to you. You don't start soliciting to be a *shanti doot*. And therefore, the government, the way it played in the end, is right. Whether the word *dalal* should be used or not I will leave that to more learned people.

Shubhaji Roy: What would you have advised to be done differently?

I can't ever imagine myself to be in an advisory role. But one thing I would have said is that it's in keeping with our tradition to condole the death of the Ayatollah. And we should have taken his name. I don't think the government has taken his name even now. Apart from that, one would have crafted messages in a way that would have shown us the perception of maintaining a greater balance. At the moment, it would seem that the Iranians have shown the wisdom of maintaining their links with India, allowing our ships to go. The PM has spoken twice to the Iranian President. Jaishankar has spoken five times to Araghchi. So the communication channels are active at the highest level. They should be maintained. We pursue America and Israel too, with equal vigour. This is the ultimate test of diplomacy.

Shubhaji Roy: But what about the unpredictable X-factor, Mr Trump?

One way of dealing with him is to ignore what you feel can be ignored. And that is what the government decided for his aims that he had mediated and saved the lives of millions. You ignore it. The second is to be combative and to say that 'no, what you are saying here is not correct.' And that depends on the context. If something that he is saying is so vile to the people here, that you are compelled to put your stand on the record, then that should be done forthrightly. Otherwise, it is best to ignore him.

Vandita Mishra: On the government's silence on the West Asia War — the spectrum between responsible statecraft and moral cave-in, where would you place yourself?

I've always believed in statecraft being an instrument for safeguarding and promoting interests. I find that morality and ethics, while we may all want them, have little role. Whenever a government or a State says it's acting ethically, I think there should always be suspicions. The same governments can act very unethically. It's a different matter to assess whether the statecraft or the diplomacy that we have practised, since the war, has safeguarded and promoted our interests. For the time being, some energy flows are taking place. For the time being, our people here, the 90 lakh to 1 crore people, are safe. But if this breaks down, then we'll be in very deep trouble.

Vandita Mishra: You've dealt with Pakistan. Have you watched *Dhurandhar*? What do you think of it?

I suppose it's a lot of fiction. Everyone speculates that there's some kind of messaging going through. Such messaging, if it is taking place, is childish. If you are taking it as entertainment, then it is fine.

Shubhaji Roy: What would you have advised the Opposition?

I would have advised them to continue to play their political games if they want to. I really believe that the Opposition must come together on matters which are true challenges. Back in 1994, Benazir Bhutto had cut off all contracts between India and Pakistan. Nawaz Sharif won the early 1997 election, and became the PM. He indicated that he wanted to resume dialogue. It was HD Deve Gowda's government and Mr IK Gujral was the External Affairs Minister, and they decided we should. Before the dialogue began, Mr Gujral briefed all the Opposition leaders, and of his own coalition. I recollect one of the senior Opposition leaders saying, 'Go ahead, do it. We are in full support of this.' That was there in those days. Attacks on each other were never aerobic. Notwithstanding those traditions are no more.

Monojit Majumdar: There seems to be a clear difference in the war goals of the US and Israel. If Trump pulls back but Netanyahu does not, where might this lead in the short and longer term?

I can't imagine Netanyahu bucking Trump if Trump lays down the law. He may turn and twist but he will listen. I don't think he has enough elbow room with the Americans. The lobby is not exercising the same role that it used to. Its stranglehold is weakening. That was also exhibited in the revulsion in fairly substantial sections of American opinion about what is happening in Gaza. Netanyahu either led Trump to believe or led sections of the American administration who have access to Trump to believe that once we have this decapitating strike, we remove the leadership, we inflict all this tremendous pain, we strip away their own identity. Then, they will come to their knees. I think what they didn't figure was the Iranian capacity to bear pain. And that they will be effective in choking off oil supplies. Perhaps they didn't even gauge that the Iranians will hit the Arab Peninsula states (the Gulf states) the way they have.



ON DHURANDHAR

'It is a lot of fiction. Everyone speculates that there's some kind of messaging. Such messaging, if it is taking place, is childish. If you are taking it as entertainment, then it is fine'

Opinion

MONDAY, MARCH 30, 2026

A glaring deficit

Pledge on green goals is welcome, but secure energy supplies and manageable costs are equally vital

ITOOK HARDLY any time for the war in West Asia and the consequent near-halt in shipments through the Strait of Hormuz to trigger a run-away spike in global crude oil prices. While knocking the global and Indian economies off stronger growth paths and reigniting inflation worries across the globe, the military conflict also quickly exposed the soft underbelly of India's energy management systems. Last week, five weeks after the war broke out, the government stated that the country's oil stocks—including a modest, fledgling strategic reserve and larger stockpiles and inventories held by domestic oil companies—were enough for 74 days. Further, it asserted that with a 40% post-war ramping up of domestic liquefied petroleum gas production, import dependence for the cooking fuel reduced to 40%, and that, with cargoes secured from the US, Russia, and Australia, supplies would be ensured. Iran's gesture allowing safe Hormuz passage for India-bound ships is also a morale booster. All this has reinforced the notion that essential hydrocarbon supplies might not be immediately disrupted.

What cannot be brushed aside, however, is that India is hardly an energy-secure country and can't be one even in the medium term. Neither is the contingency preparedness satisfactory or comparable to how other large economies have managed for themselves. India is highly exposed to the current West Asia crisis, for instance, with 45% of its crude and 55% of natural gas imports coming from the region. A \$10/barrel rise in benchmark oil price could widen India's current account deficit by 0.5% of the GDP. Less than a month of the war pushed state-run oil marketing companies into steep losses, forcing the government to cut auto fuel taxes. This move could require the government to absorb an annualised fiscal cost of a whopping ₹1.7 lakh crore while shielding end consumers. To be sure, India's oil reserves are significantly below the International Energy Agency-prescribed threshold of at least 90 days of net oil imports. Among other large Asian economies, China holds reserves for 110-140 days of net imports.

Energy security has acquired a new meaning and dimension in the evolving global landscape. Rapid transition away from fossil fuels to green energy of assorted forms and the artificial intelligence boom that has made every data centre a power-guzzling factory are posing immense challenges to most countries, except a few naturally endowed ones. The task is far more daunting for India which needs a high-growth path over the next few decades to accomplish Viksit Bharat goals, but its domestic energy production is seriously constrained. Low-cost energy supplies are a key national security imperative, increasingly so in today's world. Despite the significant energy deficit, India seems to place great importance on fulfilling its green and sustainable development obligations. Although non-fossil fuels accounted for 52.6% of installed electricity capacity as of February 2026, the Cabinet recently set a more ambitious target of 60% for 2035 and vowed to cut emission intensity by 47% by 2035 from 2005 levels.

This tenacity towards climate justice is creditworthy, but a far more aggressive policy is required to keep energy supplies intact and costs manageable. Objectives that need greater vigour include boosting nuclear energy and future fuels like green hydrogen, fast-tracking electric mobility, creating a unified national electricity grid, and accelerating battery storage capacity. Regarding hydrocarbons, the policy approach should be more pragmatic, emphasising equally both tapping domestic resources and forging cost-effective overseas alliances.

Will US toast Pernod Ricard swallowing Jack Daniels?

PERNOD RICARD'S TALKS to acquire spirits rival Brown-Forman, the owner of Jack Daniel's whiskey, may seem like small beer; the combined company would have annual sales of about \$15 billion, still less than Diageo's \$20 billion or so. But the mooted tie-up is an indication that distillers and brewers need to find radical solutions to the pressures on the booze industry. Much like makers of snacks and seasonings, they're having to get more creative.

Alcoholic beverages have suffered a nasty hangover after a boom that saw consumers turn to mixing drinks at home during Covid-era lockdowns. When bars and clubs reopened, they splurged on pricey bottles of spirits when out on the town; like the luxury industry, big booze thought the good times would never end. But as consumers, particularly in the US, grappled with inflation, they cut back or turned to cheaper tips. Younger people are drinking less than past generations and, when they do want to indulge in altered reality, some are turning to cannabis instead. Weight-loss drugs curb alcohol cravings; US tariffs add to the toxic cocktail for the drinks industry.

Pernod Ricard and Brown-Forman clearly think they have the best chance of navigating this testing landscape by bulking up. In the US, the enlarged company would have the second-biggest market share behind Diageo, uniting Jack Daniels with Martell Cognac, Jameson Irish Whiskey, and Absolut Vodka. The greater scale would give it more clout with alcohol distributors and retailers.

And benefits aren't confined to the US; the unified firm would also be the biggest spirits company in Europe. And it would be a well-balanced business geographically, with the US, Europe, and Asia each contributing about a third of sales.

It helps that the portfolios of both firms are complementary. As well as Jack Daniels bringing significant exposure to American whiskey—something Pernod Ricard has lacked—it would add tequila brands Herradura and El Jimador. Analysts at Barclays note that Brown-Forman has more products at higher price points, which will become increasingly important amid increased weight-loss drug usage. Consumers may drink less, but when they do they'll want a better quality of tipple. And any deal would bring significant cost savings, which could be invested in expanding low- and no-alcohol drinks, another promising growth area.

There are challenges, however. Pernod's borrowings are already high, with net debt at 3.9 times earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortisation at the half-year, according to *Bloomberg Intelligence*. In statements on Thursday, both Pernod Ricard and Brown-Forman said they were discussing a partnership "akin to a merger of equals." The transaction under consideration has a significant stock component.

Pernod Ricard has the bigger market capitalisation, worth around \$18 billion compared with Brown-Forman's \$12 billion as of Thursday's close. Crunching the pair together at their prevailing valuations would mean the US side owning a smaller slice of both the enlarged company and any ensuing upside.

The tricky task of satisfying both the Brown and Ricard families, both of which are significant shareholders in their firms, may be smoothed because each side understands the need for consolidation to safeguard their stewardship of the roster of brands, echoing the backdrop to Estee Lauder's potential acquisition of Puig Brands.

There's another factor to consider: While competition issues are unlikely to derail the drinks deal, the US president could. Will Donald Trump and his Magsa heartland allow such an iconic name as Jack Daniels to fall into the French hands? And rival interest can be ruled out, although Dave Lewis, the new chief executive officer of Diageo, has historically been a seller of assets rather than a buyer.

Whatever the outcome of the talks, one thing is clear: Big booze needs to find solutions to its existential crisis. Lewis, who has already taken an axe to Diageo's sales forecast, is likely to shake things up further. LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, majority owner of Moët Hennessy, which includes the eponymous cognac and Moët & Chandon champagne brands, is trying to revive its fortunes after a more than two-year slide. Given all of these moving parts, Pernod's overture to Brown-Forman looks more like a prearranged than last orders.



Andrea Felsted, Bloomberg

LAUNCHING THE TRINAMOO Congress (TMC) manifesto for the upcoming Assembly elections in West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee claimed "there is no development left" for the state. But look at the per capita income (PCI) numbers: In 1960-61, when the Indian National Congress was in power, West Bengal ranked second in the country, just behind Maharashtra. By the time the Communist Party of India (Marxist) took over in 1977, it had already slipped to fifth place. And when Banerjee took over the reins in 2011, the state had slid to 17th place. Three terms later, the state still ranks 16th in 2024-25, with a PCI of ₹163,467 against a national average of ₹205,324, while Telangana tops with ₹387,623.

That is not to say West Bengal has not progressed at all. On social indicators, the story is more impressive. Female literacy among the 15-49 age group stands at 93.1% (Sample Registration System [SRS], 2023). The total fertility rate (TFR) is 1.3, par with southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu (SRS, 2023). This has translated into a population growth rate of just 0.5% per annum against India's 0.9% and Bihar's 1.43%. Yet, despite these demographic and social gains, why has this not translated into higher PCI?

One reason is the state's consistent failure to attract and retain private investment. The pivotal moment came in 2008, when the late Ratan Tata announced that Tata Motors would withdraw from the Nano plant in Singur, attributing the decision to Banerjee's anti-land acquisition agitation. The signal it sent to every corporate boardroom in India lasted far longer—that West Bengal was not a safe place for long-term capital investments.

Since then, Banerjee has done little to change that perception. In 2013, the West



Ashok Gulati, Respected Distinguished Professor and Research Assistant at ICRIER

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

HISTORY WILL NOT BE KIND TO THE PEOPLE OF A STATE WHO CHOOSE FREEBIES OVER DEVELOPMENT

The battle for Bengal

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Bengal Incentive Scheme (WBIS) was introduced to promote industrial growth through a range of fiscal incentives. In April 2025, the state passed the Revocation Act, retrospectively withdrawing three decades of promised industrial incentives, explicitly to "make state finances available for various welfare schemes for the socio-economically disadvantaged and marginalised sections of the state".

Companies that invested on the basis of those incentives now face serious financial losses, with outstanding claims wiped off the books overnight, making fresh investments difficult. In 2023-24, the state's gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) stood at just 1.2% of its GDP, nearly half of India's 2.3%. The picture worsens when one looks at the net fixed capital formation, which falls to a mere 0.4% of the GDP compared to 1.1% for India. This sharp drop reflects the high level of depreciation, which accounts for 64% of GFCF in West Bengal, much higher than India's 51%. Ultimately, sustained growth and employment generation depend on private investments. Freebies can temporarily cushion poverty, only industry can cure it. West Bengal appears to have forgotten this lesson.

Let the numbers do the talking. Between 2011-12 and 2024-25, at constant (2011-12) prices, West Bengal's GDP grew at an average annual growth rate (AAGR) of 4.8%, well below India's 6.2%, and lagging even states like Bihar (6.5%), UP (6.1%), Odisha (6.3%), Jharkhand (5.6%), and Assam (7%). The picture is even more concerning in agriculture, which still employs 38.2% of the workforce (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24). The sector grew at an AAGR of just 2.9%, compared to India's 4%, Bihar's 3.9%, UP's 5.7%, Odisha's 4.6%, Jharkhand's 5.9%, and Assam's 6.3% over the same period.

West Bengal is not short of resources. It is short of the political will to invest, modernise, and compete

This is puzzling because West Bengal is a leading producer of vegetables—cabbage, brinjal, capsicum, cauliflower, radish, cucumber, and pointed gourd. The problem comes after the harvest. Typically, a farmer receives roughly one-third of what the end consumer pays. The remaining two-thirds is captured or simply lost in the supply chain. Banerjee did attempt to build value-added chains on the lines of SAFL in Delhi (Safal Bangla), but the results have been limited at best. What the state needs is serious agri-processing investment—a PepsiCo doing contract farming with potato farmers, processors in fisheries, and direct pipelines into high-value domestic and export markets.

West Bengal is not short of resources. It is short of the political will to invest, mod-

ernise, and compete. Take jute. The state produces 80% of India's jute, 6.8 million tonnes in 2024-25 (Unified Portal for Agricultural Statistics, 2025), and hosts 88 of India's 118 jute mills. By any measure, it should be the global capital of jute, a natural fibre. Instead, most of the output goes into making sacking bags for foodgrains and sugar, sold largely to the government. Bangladesh, starting from scratch after 1971, diversified, modernised, and captured international markets. Darjeeling tea tells the same story: It lost the branding war to Ceylon tea, whose lion logo guarantees certified quality standards enforced centrally by the Sri Lanka Tea Board. Darjeeling, fragmented across individual estates with no unified quality enforcement and a GI tag routinely abused by fraudulent blendders, could offer no such assurance.

And yet, Banerjee's answer to all of this is freebies. Lakshmi Bhandari, her flagship direct cash transfer scheme for women, alone costs ₹27,500 crore, nearly 7% of the state's total budget expenditure of ₹396 lakh crore in 2026-27. There is no major plan for industrialisation or agri-processing supply chain investment. The state's public debt-GDP ratio stood at 34% in 2023-24, next only to Punjab's 40%, among major states (State Finances, Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2023-24), because the welfare schemes are being funded not from growth dividends but from borrowed money. Today's freebies are tomorrow's fiscal crisis.

So, what will decide the 2026 elections? Religion? Freebies? Or the Special Intensive Revision controversy? We wish that it is decided on Trinamool's 15-year performance. History will not be kind to the people of a state who choose freebies over development.

Vivek is personal

Independence on boards often negotiated



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

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Does corporate India truly want independent directors who question power, and are those entrusted with that role willing to do so when it matters?

RECENT RESIGNATION of a board chairman framed around ethical divergence has placed the institution of independent directors under an unforgiving public lens. When director exits come without clarity, they do little to resolve doubt, and often deepen questions around intent.

This commentary is not about the entity, about perceived strains between its management and the board, or among individuals within it. It is not about whether a board member breached the expected conduct of a non-executive role. It is not about the culture of the organisation suddenly revealing itself, even if conversations around sales push, mis-selling, and internal pressures continue to surface despite being industry folklore. It is not about presumed power struggles within management, or about the muted behaviour of widely held institutional shareholders, which quietly dismantles the myth that institutional ownership guarantees pristine governance. It is not whether scrutiny of insinuation will hold, or whether an individual's alumnus, much like institutional power, is enough to make it disappear. It is not even about whether Indian corporates truly allow formal disagreement on strategy and leadership, when many board members know, often unspoken, that they serve at the pleasure of power.

It is about what this moment has done to the credibility of and expectation from independent directors across India.

For now, as commentary expands and facts remain selectively visible, the minority shareholder is rendered largely toothless. That is the uncomfortable truth.

Independent directors exist precisely to ensure representation, voice, and protection of minority shareholder rights. Yet

in fast developments, these very shareholders are left most exposed. Institutional investors and ultra-high-net-worth individuals possess both the financial muscle to rebalance and the networks to access qualitative insights that remain beyond the reach of ordinary shareholders.

In such moments, narratives compete. The institution will have one. The leader of the institution often presents another, even as corporate India continues to blur the line between individual and institution. The departing board member carries a third account. A fourth narrative resides within the board itself, among those who know what transpired but remain formally silent, even as fragments surface through unnamed sources. The final layer comes from official quarters even if unofficially, including regulators and the state, especially in a sensitive market environment.

Amidst this, public expectations of independent directors have been denied. It must also be acknowledged that board members operate under multiple, often competing pressures, and their service to corporate governance and the broader economy remains consequential. Episodes such as these, however visible, do not diminish the role they play even as they compel a more honest examination of it.

There has been an open scepticism about independent directors truly are. If an independent director were to rigorously apply judgement to a board agenda, would they follow? One knows, but seldom reflects, that in

life there are two stakeholders one does not choose. Parents and bosses. In corporate boardrooms, similar conundrums define the limits of independence. Independent directors do not operate in abstraction; they function within ecosystems shaped by power, access, and longstanding equations.

Even where regulations assume nomination and remuneration committees act independently in selecting board members, it's an open secret that such decisions do not move without the explicit or implicit sanction of promoters or influential shareholders, including directors in ostensibly non-promoter boards. Many thus do not practice independence as much as they learn to manage it. Independence becomes situational, not absolute. And in doing so, the system normalises a version of governance where dissent survives, but only within acceptable boundaries.

Not all independent directors possess a clear voice or a defined vision for the institutions they serve. Many are appointed for their stature, networks, or perceived non-nuisance value. Over time, this shapes behaviour on both sides of the table. Executives grow accustomed to not being challenged. Corporate India has seen non-promoter chief executives remain at the crest for extended periods, often articulating governance ideals while overlooking something as fundamental as succession. As long as valuations rise, even the most sophisticated investors hesitate to disturb equilibrium. Yet the reality of boards is not about

seamless alignment. It is about raising uncomfortable issues and still having the confidence and ability to debate them openly within the privacy of that room.

Such disagreements cannot be fully addressed within the structure of formal board meetings. They serve for conversations beyond the agenda.

But many independent directors do not see this as part of their role. They assume they are compensated to attend meetings, not to invest time in navigating complexity between meetings, even as, in certain instances, the foundations of such arrangements may not always be limited to formal remuneration alone. If stewardship is the expectation, board remuneration must reflect the time, risk, and responsibility it entails. It is time for Sebi to revisit this with urgency.

Which leads to a harder question: Are independent directors prepared to be wartime generals? But then, many are peacetime generals. When a crisis emerges, very few rise to the occasion.

Independent directors must be prepared for friction. For argument. For push-back. For conversations that aren't pleasant or performative. They must learn to ignore the surrounding noise and focus on decisions that serve stakeholders over the long term, even if it requires short-term compromise to stabilise the institution.

This episode will pass. What will endure is a harder question: Does corporate India truly want independent directors who question power, and are those entrusted with that role willing to do so when it matters? Independence must be exercised in the difficult, often uncomfortable stretches within the boardroom, when silence is easier and consequence is real.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Question of reforms

The finance minister's candour about growth risks is welcome, even if the timing—weeks after upgrading the forecast—raises questions about how thoroughly external vulnerabilities were factored in earlier. India's dependence on West Asian energy and remittances was not a new variable. The reassurance about forex reserves covering 11 months of imports is genuine comfort. But reserves address a

balance-of-payments concern, not an inflation one. Rising crude feeding into input costs across fuel-intensive sectors is a slower, more pervasive problem. It erodes household purchasing power quietly, well before it shows up in headline numbers. The emphasis on redoubling structural reforms is correct. The question is which reforms, on what timeline, and with what accountability. Generality at moments of specific stress is not policy. —A Mylarsi, Coimbatore

Excise duty cut

Apropos of "Buying time on fuel" (FE, March 28), the central government's decision to cut excise duty is welcome. This decision was necessitated to offset surging global oil prices. It is taken to ensure there is no price hike by oil marketing companies (OMCs) for consumers even if crude prices jump further. While OMCs will recover some of the losses of the last fortnight or so, it was

necessary to stabilise prices and manage inflationary pressure. The ball is now in the state's court, but fuel taxes are major revenue sources. Considering most of the states have poor financial health it would be better if they provide targeted relief to public transport, farmers, and transporters rather than a blanket cut for all. —Bal Govind, Noida

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

Petrochem Price Surge Hitting Economy Hard

Govt must intervene to keep retail prices low

A clutch of industries that use petrochemicals as inputs, from pharmaceuticals and paints to textiles and toys, is facing the brunt of the Iran conflict as refiners have passed on the surge in crude oil and natural gas prices. Some of the downstream sectors in the petrochemicals complex are labour-intensive small enterprises with low pricing power, such as textile units where distress is showing up in employment figures. These industries are looking at an extended spell of margin pressure as input costs are unlikely to subside till global petrochemicals supply chain recovers, possibly only months after hostilities end in the Persian Gulf.

There's cause for Govt's intervention for sectors directly affected by the energy price pass-through to dampen its effect on generalised inflation. This could range from fiscal to trade support. Even signals from Govt that it is considering relief will help dial down sentiment, with consequences for prices. Inflation had been creeping up before the Iran conflict, and once petrochem buyers start raising prices, the seer will show up in the headline numbers. The incomplete transmission of energy costs through food and fuel may not be enough, given the extent of rise in petrochem prices.

India's Goldilocks economic scenario of strong growth and low inflation is over. Effects of petrochem inflation are not as immediate as fuel — these appear with a lag. Packaging prices rise show up in new inventory that arrives in the market with a delay. Petrochem use is almost universal in consumer goods, and the ticket shock, though slow and imperceptible, shows up over time. The price transmission works through labour-intensive industries and affects lower-income consumers. The market is pricing in uncertainty, and there is a likelihood petrochem prices will keep rising independent of how the Iran crisis resolves. Monetary policy will have to adjust for the persistent pressure. These adjustments may need to be front-loaded.

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Mere Lip Service Won't Save Our Rich Forests

The systematic ravaging of the Aravallis' ecological wealth by Aravalli-belt states — whether for mining, forest resources, or 'development' — is a story as old as the hills. Yet a more insidious layer of institutional decay has recently surfaced: a high-stakes jurisdictional turf war between two senior IFS officers in Haryana, a state that possesses an almost single-minded focus on flattening the Aravallis. The catalyst is the illegal felling of over 1,000 khair trees within the protected Kalesar Wildlife Sanctuary. Make no mistake: the fight between the two officers is not a valiant struggle to protect the canopy. Instead, it is a cynical, post-facto dispute over who has the 'legal authority' to investigate the theft long after the timber has been hauled away.

This systemic rot is not an isolated Haryana phenomenon — it is a regional epidemic. A 2022 CarbonCopy investigation revealed illegal extraction of Khair from Suhelwa Wildlife Sanctuary in UP. The motive is commercial: the tree's heartwood produces kattha, the lifeblood of India's multi-billion dollar pan masala industry. Demand is so insatiable that Suhelwa has been hollowed out, transformed into a 'ghost forest' where organised syndicates operate with the quiet complicity of compromised departments. This lucrative 'kattha boom' has now migrated into the fragile Himalayan foothills.

At the end of the day, these cases pull back the curtain on a ugly truth: bureaucratic ringfencing and jurisdictional buck-passing are not mere accidents of governance. They are deliberate mechanisms designed to shield high-ranking officials from accountability, allowing them to pay lip service to the conservation of our precious forests while presiding over their steady liquidation in broad daylight.

JUST IN JEST
Forget LPG, public urination in Delhi could now set you back by ₹500

Committing Nuisance Just Got Expensive

Delhi has finally found its silver bullet for civic order: a 10x increase in the fine for 'committing nuisance' — that lovely Victorian euphemism for urinating in public spaces. Amendments to the venerable Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957, and New Delhi Municipal Council Act, 1994, have transformed 'committing nuisance' from a ₹50 pocket-change offence into a ₹500 luxury crime. At ₹50, a wall was merely a canvas for desecration. At ₹500, it becomes a premium gallery space, accessible only to those with deep pockets and weak bladders. Expect Instagram influencers soon: 'Just dropped ₹500 at Connaught Place, #NuisanceButMakeItLuxury'. Enforcement, of course, will be a spectacle. Municipal officers sprinting with receipt books, calculating compound interest on mid-stream infractions. Will offenders be offered EMU plans? 'Sir, three easy instalments of ₹167, and you're free to go.' But Delhi's infrastructure holds the pee... sorry, ke. Toilets elusive as unicorns. Stepping out is a round of bladder roulette for men — since women don't seem to face this micturition problem. The ₹500 fine is as much about hygiene and instilling civic sense as it's about theatre. It's Delhi's way of saying, our air may choke, our traffic may coagulate, but our walls shall no longer drip with indignity — unless, as the opposition will remind us, you can afford it.

India and countries like Pakistan are inactive and active for safety of their citizens and economies

Middle East Reiterations



Ashok Malik

domestic discourse on the latest Gulf War took a puzzling turn this past week. Has Islamabad re-established its strategic weight? Should India have taken on the role of peacemaker and mediator? The questions are silly and reductionist. They flow from an all-weather obsession with Pakistan.

They also mis-appreciate the primary purpose of foreign policy: sheltering of one's own citizens and economy. This is what all countries troubled by the conflict are attempting to do. Even mediation is only resorted to if it serves this objective, not otherwise. For Narendra Modi, managing India's immediate energy security and preventing Indian assets from being targeted in any military escalation are key priorities. In this, at least so far, Govt's diplomacy has met reasonable success. The good luck may not last. But it will not be for want of effort.

Pakistan is trying to achieve the same goals for its people. So are several other affected countries across Asia and the Indo-Pacific, from the gates of Europe to the Philippines and Australia. Structural disruption in energy and fertiliser supplies, inflation surges and an ineluctable growth shock are widespread fears. Collectively, these will take a toll on the 2026-27 business year. Further down, rebuilding regional and global economies might well take us into the early 2030s. With its most crises, from the pandemic onwards, future historians could interpret the 2020s as a lost decade for the world economy. That is the enormity of what we face in the circumstances. India and Pakistan are hardly each other's problem.

Where is the contact situated? Nobody is certain of the floor. There are countervailing interests and, therefore, pressures on Donald Trump.



Making moves

Gulf states have become frontline targets. A reckless US-Israel intervention has jeopardised Gulf countries' modernisation programme. It has shaken an economic model focused on urbanisation and connectivity, innovation, technology financial services, and a welcoming tourism and expat experience. It has left Iran more relevant as a coercive actor.

Any post-conflict scenario will require greater military and internal security spending by Gulf states. They will also be vulnerable to different types of Iranian influence ops. Bahrain, for instance, is a Shia country with a Sunni monarch. Along with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, it's urging Trump to 'finish what you started'. In real terms this means freeing the Strait of Hormuz from an Iranian chokehold.

This, in turn, would involve not just a US assault on one or more islands off Iran's southern coast, but perhaps a longer term occupation, even if eventually under a multinational regime. How would this square



Pakistan, Türkiye, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are working towards a frozen outcome, with Iranian capabilities more intact than Gulf states would want. Their imperatives, too, would appear legitimate

with Trump's 'stay home' commitment to his MAGA base? To be fair, it's not as if Gulf states are unwilling to de-escalate the US-Israel war. This is a reality. Nuisance value is the ultimate leverage in global politics. As regional economies are reconstructed, accommodation and incentivisation of Iran is inevitable. Gulf states would only want more cards in their hands when this process begins.

Other countries are nudging Trump differently: Pakistan, Türkiye, Egypt and Saudi Arabia — with the first hosting the other three in a 2-day foreign ministerial talks in Islamabad to de-escalate the US-Israel war on Iran — are working towards a frozen outcome, with Iranian capabilities more intact than Gulf states would want. Their imperatives, too, would appear legitimate.

These three countries have among the most professional militaries in the Muslim world. They are wary of being drawn into an expanding unrest in Pakistan, for example, has a security pact with Saudi Arabia. Understandably, it does not want this invoked. Or to get into war with Iran on somebody else's behalf.

An Iran that's fragmented, or where the theocratic government doesn't hold, is also a concern. This will likely lead to Kurdish and Baluch insurgencies that could spill over to Türkiye and Pakistan respectively. Further, Islamabad, Ankara and Cairo — as well as Teheran — are potential bastions of GCC-centric geo-economic and connectivity mega-projects advance. India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) is a challenge to all of them, and the setback it has

suffered has been noted. To that end, any continued pressure that restricts Iran's economic ambitions and salience is useful. When, and at which point, on the graph the X axis of Iran's military degradation (mediator states' nightmare) will determine the region's course.

Finally, there's Israel. Will it stop fighting even if the others do? Notwithstanding a busy and industrious bilateral corridor, India's and Israel's regional strategies are diverging. Trade, multi-modal connectivity endeavours and a calibrated economic normalisation that finesse politics: Israel is not buying



A reckless US-Israel intervention has jeopardised Gulf countries' modernisation programme. It has shaken an economic model, and has left Iran more relevant as a coercive actor

into this template. It has doubled down on containment. Given its moves in Lebanon and Syria, it's exploring territorial expansion as a security buffer. The likelihood — or risk — of new political maps in West Asia is at its highest in decades.

Given all this, India needs to protect its flanks, be mindful of its strategic equities in Gulf states, and its working relationships with almost all stakeholders. Modi has wisely recognised this is a time for caution and, to the extent possible, for shielding the national economy. It is not a matter for adventurism. Masterly inactivity is a storied diplomatic tradition. It has its merits today.

The author is partner, The Asia Group, and chair of its India practice



THE SPEAKING TREE

Higher Purpose

CHANCHALAPATHI DAS

In the time of rapid technological advancements and changing lifestyles, the question arises whether ancient scriptures still hold relevance. Confront us again. Teachings of Vedic Shastras remain timeless because they address fundamental realities and challenges of human existence. Truths that transcend time, culture and circumstances. Shastras focus not on temporary social conditions, but on universal aspects of life that remain unchanged across generations. Shastras discuss certain fundamental aspects of reality which have not changed. For instance, in Gita, Krishna shares that 'the soul is eternal, indestructible and cannot be destroyed. These constitute knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment.' He mentions states such as 'jñān-mitya-jarā-vyādhī-duḥkhānāṁśantam' and explains that there are four inescapable realities of life for everyone: birth, disease, old age and finally death.

While modern life has transformed dramatically, these existential experiences continue to define the human condition and encourage us towards a higher purpose. This is why Gita and the wider body of Vedic literature continue to serve as guiding texts. Rather than an empty legitimising momentary trends, they engage with questions of life, making them as relevant today as they were in ancient times. They do not encourage us towards a higher purpose.

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MELODY FOR MONDAY

Easy Faith No More

Faith No More's 1992 cover of Lionel Richie's 'Easy' is one of those rare reinterpretations that honours the original while completely reshaping its emotional terrain. The Commodores' 1977 original, written by Richie, is a smooth, soulful ballad — its warm lies in the velvet textures of Motown-era production and Richie's tender delivery. Faith No More drags the song through the grit of the early '90s alternative rock landscape, layering it with irony, distortion and Mike Patton's mercurial vocals. What makes their rendition so compelling is the tension between sincerity and subversion. Patton croons with unexpected delicacy in the verses, almost mimicking Richie's soulful ease, before the band crashes in with grungy guitar tones and a sardonic edge. The juxtaposition creates a raw beauty: the song becomes both homage and parody, a love letter wrapped in a smirk. 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Editor's TAKE

Doomsday for the developing world

It is going to be devastating for developing nations. Those least responsible for climate change are set to suffer its deadliest consequences the most

Peak summer is still months away, but the temperatures in northern India are soaring, and it is getting worse with every passing year. The world is heating up fast, and the temperatures are projected to rise by approximately 1.5 to 2.0 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2050. The report by the Climate Impact Lab has projected that by 2050, ten times more deaths will occur in the Global South due to the rise in temperature than in the West. The developing countries are going to be the worst affected. The heat will result in harsh work conditions, leading to deaths, as the Global South is least ready for it. This natural calamity is unfolding before our eyes, albeit, at a slow pace. The reason for this is twofold. First, most developing countries that constitute the Global South, fall in tropical regions of Africa and Asia, where temperatures have already risen to alarming levels. Secondly, due to low GDP, these countries would not be able to provide better conditions for work like air conditioning, proper hydration and trauma care to their people that can make all the difference in saving lives. In places like India, where summer heat is already intense, additional warming transforms seasonal discomfort into a public health emergency.

Rising temperatures will be traumatic for the people working in fields like farming, construction workers, pavement sellers and the like. What turns heat into a killer is the lack of adaptive capacity. The people in developing countries cannot afford climate control devices due to limited purchasing power. Besides, work conditions are harsh - people working in a heat-intensive environment like brick kilns, bakeries, metal furnaces could be the worst hit. This growing "cooling divide" is emerging as one of the most critical fault lines in the climate crisis. With weak labour protections and informal employment, basic heat safety is not even heard of in these countries, leaving the most vulnerable exposed to heat-related issues. Healthcare systems in many of these regions are also ill-equipped to handle the growing burden of heat-related illnesses. Limited access to medical facilities and the absence of a heat-specific response can become fatal. Add to this lack of awareness about the treatment further compounds the problem. The way our cities are developing into concrete jungles and trees becoming extinct in urban landscapes, heat trapped in small ill-ventilated houses that becomes unbearable during the peak heat hours, resulting in dehydration, sun stroke and many other heat-overexposure health disorders. As American Professor Michael Greenstone has pointed out, this represents one of climate change's cruelest ironies: those who have contributed the least to global emissions are the ones who will suffer the most severe consequences. The disparity is also deeply moral, raising urgent questions about global responsibility and justice. Addressing this challenge requires a shift in priorities. Investments in climate adaptation, such as heat-resilient infrastructure and early warning systems, which can significantly reduce mortality. At the global level, the climate finance must become a priority to deal with this impending calamity.

What Om Birla's survival means for Parliament

The failed impeachment motion against Om Birla has done more than reaffirm the numerical strength of the ruling side — it has reignited a debate about the neutrality and resilience of the Speaker's office in India's parliamentary democracy



BHOPIINDER SINGH

The role of the Lok Sabha Speaker in promoting parliamentary stability and independence is incredibly important and deserves recognition. On March 11, 2026, the Opposition's impeachment motion against Speaker Om Birla was defeated by a voice vote, nearly four decades after the last attempt. With 119 MPs signing the notice, the Opposition highlighted the perceived bias in the Speaker's conduct. Removing a Speaker requires at least 272 votes in the 543-member House, and historically, no Speaker has ever been removed. The Speaker is back in his chair.

The repeated challenges to the Speaker underscore political tensions in the legislature, raising questions about the balance of power and mutual respect among legislators. Thus, the Speaker's role is essential to both legislative procedures and the fostering of trust in parliamentary democracy.

Following the unsuccessful impeachment motion, Speaker Birla reiterated his impartiality, asserting that the rules apply equally to all members, including the Prime Minister. He addressed the House to refute allegations of bias. He clarified that there is no mechanism to mute the Speaker's microphone. He emphasised, "This House is not a fair or a festival. We must follow the rules, and no one has the right to speak outside of them, regardless of their position."

Union Home Minister Amit Shah criticised the Opposition for their unruly performance in Parliament, highlighting Rahul Gandhi's low attendance—51 per cent in the 17th Lok Sabha and 52 per cent in the 16th Lok Sabha, compared to averages of 66 per cent and 80 per cent, respectively. The Opposition protested by chanting "Mafi maango," demanding an apology from the Home Minister.

The impeachment motion underscored the ruling party's substantial majority and reinforced the importance of parliamentary procedures. It highlighted the respect that the House warrants for its legislative processes.

Jagadambika Pal, a member of the BJP panel who presided over the session, called upon the Opposition to resume their seats to facilitate voting. Nevertheless, amid ongoing protests, he chose to conduct a voice vote in the House, which led to the resolution's rejection. The House was subsequently adjourned for the day.

Impeachment motions are infrequent occurrences in the history of India's parliamentary system. The attempt to remove Speaker Birla marks the fourth such effort, underscoring the



IN 1966, MPS ACCUSED SARDAR HUKAM SINGH OF OBSTRUCTING INQUIRIES THAT COULD EMBARRASS THE GOVERNMENT AND FAILING TO SUBMIT PRIVILEGE NOTICES. THE MOTION DID NOT ADVANCE, AS FEWER THAN 50 MPS SUPPORTED IT

inherent challenges of this vital office. The Speaker's position is safeguarded by the House itself rather than the President, and removal can occur only by a majority vote. This underlines the office's independence and its critical role in maintaining parliamentary stability. The previous efforts included a 1954 motion against the first Speaker, GV Mavalankar, and the recent motion against Birla. These incidents highlight ongoing concerns regarding bias and parliamentary conduct.

Since independence, there have been three unsuccessful attempts to remove a Speaker of the Lok Sabha. The first was in 1954 against GV Mavalankar, the first Speaker. The motion was debated on December 18, with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Leader of the Opposition AK Gopalan participating. MPs accused Mavalankar of disallowing relevant questions and mishandling adjournment notices.

In 1966, MPs accused Sardar Hukam Singh of obstructing inquiries that could embarrass the government and failing to submit privilege notices. The motion did not advance, as fewer than 50 MPs supported it.

CPI(M) MP Somnath Chatterjee proposed a resolution against Speaker Balam Jhakar. Key participants included Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and P Chidambaram. The House voted against the motion. In the Rajya Sabha, attempts to remove Vice President and Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar in 2024 have failed. Similarly, the 2020 notices to remove Deputy Chairman Harivansh Narayan Singh did not spark a debate.

The 'Effective Majority' requirement defined as a majority of all sitting House members

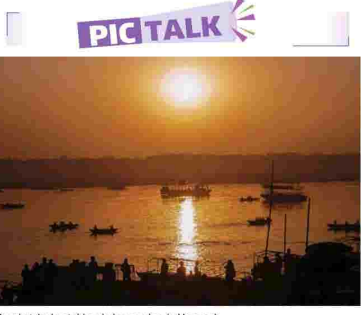
establishes the threshold for removing a Speaker, ensuring that a significant consensus is necessary. During the impeachment debate, Opposition leaders raised concerns about a vacant Deputy Speaker position, faulty microphones, limited speaking rights for Opposition members, and mass suspensions. These issues focus on the challenges facing parliamentary institutions and the Speaker's office. Union Home Minister Amit Shah criticised the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, saying he travels for party purposes and publicity rather than attending parliamentary sessions. "He skipped the President's speech, the Budget, and discussions on Article 370. During key parliamentary sessions, he travels abroad and claims he is not allowed to speak," Shah stated. "According to the established history of this House, its proceedings are conducted based on mutual trust. The Speaker serves as a neutral custodian, representing both the ruling party and the Opposition. It was unfortunate for parliamentary politics that a resolution for the removal of the Speaker has been introduced," he added.

The Speaker's authority underscores the importance of their impartiality and the challenges posed during contentious moments, such as impeachment debates, helping the audience grasp the office's significance to parliamentary stability. Modi, at the end of the impeachment, commended Om Birla for conducting Lok Sabha proceedings with "dedication, patience and impartiality." Now that the House defeated the impeachment motion, Even if the Lok Sabha is dissolved, Speaker Om Birla remains in office until the new House meets and elects a new Speaker.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

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People take boat rides during sunrise, in Varanasi PHOTO: PFI

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Why real leadership is forged in discomfort



RACHNA LAKHPATRI

2ND OPINION

Great managers are not born in leadership courses. They are forged in the uncomfortable decision to put someone else's growth before their own comfort.

Most people collect bossy across a career the way you collect frequent flyer miles — mechanically, without much feeling. Some bosses are efficient. Some are political. Some simply occupy a designation the way furniture occupies a room. And then, rarely, there is one who changes the way a person thinks about work about themselves, about what it means to be led well. That kind of boss is not common. They are, if honesty is permitted here, almost mythological.

Leadership gets discussed constantly in the corporate world — workshops, books, frameworks, job descriptions that list it between Excel and stakeholder

management as though it were something you could simply acquire. But real leadership, the kind that quietly redirects a career, that says the hard thing at the right moment, that bets on a person before that person has learned to bet on themselves — that is something else entirely.

What distinguishes a great boss from a merely competent one is this: they are willing to be misunderstood in the short term for your benefit in the long term.

A great boss will push back on an idea in a room full of people — not to embarrass, but because they know the person can defend it and want them to find that out for themselves.

They assign the difficult project, the one that causes lost sleep, because they have seen something that has not yet been seen from the inside. They say no to something wanted badly, and it stings, and three years later the reason becomes obvious. In the moment, it feels like criticism. Sometimes it feels like indifference. But a manager who genuinely cares about someone's trajectory is the one who makes them uncomfortable on purpose — because comfort, as any honest professional will admit, is where growth goes to retire.

The great boss carries all four, and the balance shifts depending on what the moment demands. On Monday they are the manager, holding the team to a deadline.

By Wednesday they are the mentor, explaining why the deadline matters. When someone walks in looking like the week has already won, they notice before a word is said. And through all of it, they carry a quiet confidence — not in themselves, but in the people around them.

That is the rarest ingredient. Someone who believes in potential before performance has caught up to it. That combination does not come from a training module. It comes from character. The corporate world rewards delivery. It rewards numbers and optics and hitting targets.

The manager who invests deeply in people — who gives honest feedback, who occasionally absorbs criticism on behalf of their team — is doing work that rarely appears in a quarterly review. And so many of them quietly stop.

Not because they stop caring, but because the system was never built to notice. Which is precisely why, when someone finds a boss like that, they remember them for the rest of their career. Not because they were perfect, but because in a world designed to be transactional, they chose to be human. That is not a small thing. That is everything.

The writer is a freelancer and writes on development, social and gender issue

POWER STILL WEARS MASCULINE FACE

Apropos "When work feminises but power masculinises" (March 28, 2025), the paradox of rising female workforce participation alongside stagnant leadership representation highlights a deeper structural imbalance rather than a temporary social transition. While more women are entering professions across sectors, their presence rarely translates into proportional representation in decision-making roles.

The article rightly points out that the entry of women into the workforce has not dismantled entrenched institutional hierarchies. Authority, leadership, and strategic decision-making continue to be culturally coded as masculine traits, while women are often concentrated in roles perceived as supportive, administrative, or less influential. This is not a deficit of talent, ambition, or competence, but

rather a systemic issue where informal networks, legacy structures, and unconscious bias continue to influence promotions and leadership appointments.

The solution lies not merely in encouraging participation but in reforming institutional frameworks — including transparent promotion criteria, equal parental leave policies, mentorship pipelines, and measurable accountability within organisations.

Unless leadership norms are reimagined to value inclusivity, collaboration, and diverse leadership styles rather than conformity to traditional models of authority, the glass ceiling will persist. Real progress will come not from token representation but from normalising women's leadership across all sectors of society.

K CHIDANAND KUMAR | BENGALURU

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

Leadership in time of war

Amid the intensifying Israel-US-Iran conflict, remarks attributed to Donald Trump — such as suggesting renaming the Strait of Hormuz after himself, dismissing allied military assets as "toys," and making exaggerated claims about oil shipments sent as "gas turbines" — stand in stark contrast to the heavy casualties across Iran, Israel and Lebanon.

These lighter or offbeat remarks, often delivered alongside serious policy announcements, suggest a leadership style under strain — using humour, bravado, or hyperbole to dominate narratives amid escalating war pressures, economic shocks, and military uncertainty. While political rhetoric has always been part of global diplomacy, the tone and timing of such comments become crucial during periods of conflict and instability. Globally, such statements draw mixed reactions. Allies view them as undermining the gravity of the situation and weakening coordination, while adversaries exploit them for propaganda, reinforcing concerns about the consistency and credibility of US leadership during a widening and volatile conflict. In times of war becomes a strategic tool that can influence diplomacy, morale, and international perception.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

The circular flight experience

The honour this week goes to our favourite airline, Air India. A couple of weeks ago, IndiGo pioneered a new business model, the Delhi-Manchester-Delhi flight that never quite made it to Manchester — a bold innovation allowing travel without the inconvenience of arrival.

Not to be outdone, the national carrier, Air India, decided to raise the bar. Why restrict the experience to one city when you can include several?

Thus was born the Delhi-Vancouver-Delhi and Delhi-London-Delhi experience, where passengers enjoyed long-haul flying, gourmet meals, and the comforting reassurance of landing exactly where they started. No visa. No foreign exchange. No immigration. Just pure aviation bliss and a joyride in the skies.

If this trend continues, travel agencies may soon rebrand these as aerial meditation retreats. The airport operator may even explore tie-ups with parking lots — because clearly, the car never needs to move.

A truly circular economy, The Air India journey may become the most economical international trip where passengers cross continents and oceans yet technically never leave India.

S AKHILESH KRISHNAN | CHENNAI

Landmark ruling on addiction

A California jury found Alphabet's Google and Meta liable for damages in a landmark social media addiction lawsuit that accused the companies of being legally responsible for the addictive design of their platforms. The decision was delivered by a Los Angeles jury after more than forty hours of deliberation across nine days, and over a month after opening statements were presented in the trial.

Among those who testified were Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Instagram head Adam Mosseri, although YouTube chief executive Neal Mohan was not called to testify. The plaintiff, referred to as KJM or Kaley, was awarded damages after stating that she became addicted to social media at a young age, which worsened her mental health issues. She began using YouTube at the age of six and Instagram at nine.

Meta argued that Kaley's mental health struggles were separate from her social media use, pointing to her difficult home life. However, the plaintiffs only needed to prove that social media was a substantial factor in causing harm, not the sole cause. The verdict may set an important precedent for future digital platform accountability.

KYASH PAL RALHAN | JALANDHAR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Your Time Is Most Valuable Thing.

I will not let you down 🙏

I GIVE YOU MY GUARANTEE, THIS PURCHASE WILL BE WORTH IT.

Indian Newspapers:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
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| <u>2) Hindustan Times</u> | <u>7) Live Mint</u> |
| <u>3) Business line</u> | <u>8) Financial Express</u> |
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A culturally rooted gift, makhana's global supply chain

We are living through turbulent geopolitics and fragile supply chains. Conflicts and chokepoints have disrupted shipping routes, increased freight costs, and forced buyers to rethink where their food comes from. In such a world, the countries that can supply safe, traceable, climate-smart food reliably will shape the next decade of trade

FIRST Column



RAM KRIPAL YADAV

In Mithila, makhana is not merely a snack; it is memory. It lives in our ponds, our rituals, our kitchens, and the quiet pride of families who have tended wetlands for generations. Today, that same 'satvik' tradition is also a modern answer to a changing world—clean, nutritious, plant-based food at a time when global consumers are shifting away from ultra-processed choices.

"From Mithila's ponds to the world's palates—Bihar's makhana can carry India's values with India's quality."

We are living through turbulent geopolitics and fragile supply chains. Conflicts and chokepoints have disrupted shipping routes, increased freight costs, and forced buyers to rethink where their food comes from. In such a world, the countries that can supply safe, traceable, climate-smart food reliably will shape the next decade of trade. This is where Bihar's makhana can step up—not as a commodity, but as a trusted category.

The government's core intent: prosperity for farmers, dignity for workers

Let me state the fundamental intent of our policy in one line: makhana must make farmers prosperous, not just make markets excited. The current value chain is still too dependent on hazardous manual work, seasonal gluts, and uneven quality. Our mission is to modernise the entire makhana economy—from pond governance to processing, science to standards, and local clusters to global shelves—so that the farmer captures a fair share of value.

Modernisation means three things: machines, markets, and trust

First, mechanisation as a special lever. Mechanisation will not replace labour; it will replace hardship. Harvesting and seed collection are among the most physically demanding tasks in Indian agriculture. Our 5-year plan commits to field-validated harvesting solutions, delivered through Custom Hiring Centres, with trained operators, technicians, and service entrepreneurs—creating safer jobs for youth and women. Second, markets that reward quality, not just volume. We will



MAKHANA IS NOT A SNACK STORY. IT IS BIHAR'S NEXT FARMER PROSPERITY AND JOBS STORY

The writer is the Minister for Agriculture, Government of Bihar

ramkripalyadavbjp
@ramkripalpm
The Pioneer

DATA AT A GLANCE (5-YEAR PLAN: 2025-26 — 2030-31)

What we will deliver	By 2030-31
More production with better practices	Area doubles: 41,000 → 82,000 ha
Export engine	Exports triple: 10,000 → 30,000 MT
Quality & price stabilisation	Hygienic storage scales: 7,196 → 64,058 MT
Jobs with dignity	Jobs rise: 60,205 → 117,034 FTE job-years
Women's economic participation	Women's jobs: 19,065 → 39,761; share to 34%
Mechanisation milestone	Harvester available FY 2027-28; scale adoption FY 2028-29

Source: Bihar Makhana 5-year Action Plan (Refined), 16 Feb 2026; CM review brief tables

strengthen grading, moisture discipline, and hygienic storage so that farmers are not forced to sell in a narrow harvest window. When storage improves, the farmer gains bargaining power; when quality improves, Bihar earns a premium.

Third, trust at global standards. Global buyers do not buy intentions—they buy compliance. We will expand lab access, residue and moisture testing, lot-wise traceability, and retail-ready packaging. The National Makhana Board—launched by the Government of India—will act as mission control, aligning research, standards, and market promotion; and APEDA's

Patna office brings export facilitation close to the clusters.

Innovation: Turning a traditional crop into a future-ready industry
Modernisation is not only about machines; it is also about ideas.

We will back innovation across the chain: improved varieties and seed systems; safer, energy-efficient popping and processing; new ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook products; sustainable packaging; and circular use of by-products.

The goal is to move from selling 'loose makhana' to selling 'Bihar-branded

makhana—a product with provenance, performance, and pride.

Women forward by design, not as an afterthought

Makhana's next growth phase must be inclusive. Mechanisation reduces hazardous manual drudgery; storage and processing create year-round work; and compliance jobs—grading, lab handling, documentation, packaging, and e-commerce—are sectors where women's SHGs can lead. Our approach is to formalise these roles with training, certification, and credit—so that women are not 'helpers' in the value chain, but owners of enterprises within it. "If Bihar wants a stronger

makhana economy, it must build a stronger place for women in it."

Why the world's turbulence can become Bihar's opportunity

Geopolitical uncertainty is reshaping food supply chains. Retailers want diversified sourcing, shorter lead-time risk, and credible compliance. India's trade engagement is also opening new doors. India and the EU have concluded negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement, with implementation steps ahead; India and the UK have signed a trade agreement with implementation expected soon. With the US too, trade talks for an interim package have been in motion to reduce friction and stabilise market access. These pathways can expand demand for compliant, packaged, branded agri-products and makhana, with its health profile, is well positioned to ride that wave.

India as Vishwaguru: sharing a healthy, culturally rooted gift

The idea of India as Vishwaguru is not only about technology or geopolitics; it is also about what we give to humanity. Makhana is a gift of our wetlands—rooted in culture, aligned with wellness, and respectful of nature. When Bihar supplies the world with clean, traceable makhana, we carry a message that development can be modern yet farmer-first.

The pledge

- Make mechanisation and safety negotiable: reduce drudgery, injuries, and post-harvest losses.
- Build sets of infrastructure: labs, traceability, grading, hygienic storage, and compliant packaging.
- Move value addition to Bihar: FPO and SHG-led processing, branding, and e-commerce.
- Use the National Makhana Board and APEDA Patna to connect clusters to global buyers—faster, closer, and fairer.

"Makhana is not a snack story. It is Bihar's next farmer prosperity and jobs story." To our farmers: your knowledge built this sector; our policy will ensure you capture its future. To our youth and women: the makhana economy will need your skills, your entrepreneurship, and your leadership. To buyers: Bihar is ready to supply not just volume, but verified quality. And to every Indian when we send makhana to the world, we send a piece of Bihar—and a piece of India's soul.

Digital child sexual exploitation



ARVIND P BHANU



KISHAN PRATAP

The recent conviction and award of the death sentence to a couple by a special POCSO court in Banda, Uttar Pradesh, India, has shaken the conscience of the country. For a decade, a junior engineer and his wife lured children, gave them chocolates, video games and other gifts, and then raped them, filmed the acts, and allegedly produced and transmitted more than two lakh pornographic videos. The brutality began in a rented room in a small town of Uttar Pradesh, but the multinational cybercrime racket, as revealed by the investigating agencies, had buyers of the videos of the rapes of children in dozens of countries. The couple targeted children, including boys who were almost three years old, in multiple districts such as Banda and Chitrakoot. These children were tempted with toys, snacks and chocolates, and later abused and video-recorded.

In the present case, which has been charged under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, and the Information Technology Act, 2000, it cannot be said that it is merely an issue of perversion in an individual capacity. It can rather be said that the present case is yet another poignant reminder that the sexual abuse of children has reached a critical juncture, wherein the dark web of encrypted chats and anonymous identities plays a major role.

Some child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is being shared through open internet platforms until it is detected and deleted. However, some of it is being shared through encrypted messaging platforms and dark web networks. The dark web is a part of the internet that can be accessed through special software that allows users to remain anonymous. This allows users to remain hidden and creates a black market for such material.

The Banda case, as reported, involved the digital dissemination of such material outside India. This is a common occurrence in dark web environments, where the servers, users and financial platforms are distributed across the globe.

The dark web does not create the abuse; the abuse starts in homes, schools and neighbourhoods. However, the dark web facilitates the abuse by turning acts of cruelty into a global black market.

It is important to clarify a legal point that is often misunderstood. While there may be debate about the issue, watching adult pornographic material in private is not an offence under Indian law. However, browsing or watching any material that contains minors in sexual acts is a serious criminal offence. Sections 13 and 14 of the POCSO Act, 2012, criminalise the use of children in pornographic material, and Section 67B of the IT Act criminalises the publication, transmission, browsing, downloading and possession of sexually explicit material involving children in electronic form.

The Supreme Court's landmark judgment in Just Rights for Children Alliance v/s Harish (2024) resolved a contentious debate on whether viewing or possessing child sexual abuse material amounts to an offence. The Court ruled that viewing or possessing such material, without deleting it or reporting it, qualifies as an offence, noting that "each click perpetuates a chain of exploitation that starts with the abuse of a real child."

The Court also recommended replacing the term "child pornography" with "Child Sexual Exploitative and Abuse Material (CSEAM)", emphasising that the language must reflect the reality of abuse.

The urgency is also justified by statistical data. The National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, which operates in association with the Cyber Crime Prevention Against Women and Children Scheme of the Ministry of Home Affairs, has recorded around 1.94 lakh cases of child pornography and sexual abuse-related complaints till April 2024.

However, it is believed that this is just the tip of the iceberg, as the actual number could be much higher. These could include online grooming, sexual abuse, blackmail through morphed images, and sexual abuse threats on social media and dark web platforms. These reports can be filed anonymously with the NCRP. This is an important point because there is a huge amount of shame related to sexual offences. The increasing reports of such offences not only indicate the alarming rate at which such cybercrimes are taking place but also indicate that awareness is increasing. However, the law and enforcement agencies are facing many challenges.

The threat scenario is still evolving with the emergence of AI technology. AI technology has become capable of producing realistic synthetic images and videos depicting children in sexually explicit content. Such images are called AI-generated images; they lead to the normalisation of child exploitation, encourage deviant demand for CSAM, and enable blackmail by inserting children's images into a video or image. Law enforcement agencies all over the world are struggling to understand how AI technology can be regulated in terms of child exploitation

content. The provisions of the POCSO Act and the IT Act are applicable in India in the event of children being used in AI-generated images or being exploited in any manner.

But this is not just a court case; this is a case that indicts society. These were not faceless individuals lurking on the Internet. These were individuals in society, mingling with families and children. Child abuse is the grooming of the child before the abuse is reflected on the Internet. Caregivers, parents, and teachers should be aware enough to monitor any unusual behavior changes in the child. There should be integration of online safety in the school curriculum. There should be improvements in the detection capabilities by Internet service providers, with their cooperation in facilitating the quick removal of offending content by the authorities. There should be the use of reporting tools, such as the NCRP, when one suspects online offending. But most importantly, society should not take the issue of "online content" abuse with levity. There is no such thing as harmless child pornography. Each image is a child whose dignity, safety, and future have been violated.

Technology is not evil in and of itself, but it has been a tool that has brought people together, opened doors for new opportunities in education, and helped drive the economy forward. It has also been a tool that, without careful observation, has been the tool that has allowed humanity's worst attributes to flourish. The dark net, encryption, and technology are not unchangeables, but they take cooperation, new laws, and ethical behavior on all sides to achieve that cooperation. India's laws, buttressed by interpretation in Just Rights for Children Alliance, clearly warn that sexual exploitation of children, whatever form that exploitation may take with technology's facilitation, is not acceptable.

The laws are part of the solution, but without dealing with the trauma that has been caused, there is not a complete solution. As the Banda case demonstrates, the exploitation could have started in a single room, but the scope of the child sexual exploitation could have been across the globe. The solution to the problem of digital child sexual exploitation is not just about punishing the people who commit the crime, but about dismantling the technology, the economy, and the societies that facilitate the crime in the first place. Combating Child sexual exploitation in the digital world is not optional; it is a constitutional, moral, and societal imperative.

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India's biofuel moment



VAIBHAV DANGE

The global energy map is no longer defined by markets alone—it is shaped by conflict, coercion, and control. Oil and gas have become instruments of geopolitical leverage, not just economic exchange. From tensions in the Middle East to sanctions and supply disruptions, energy flows today are as political as they are physical.

For India, this reality carries a steep cost. The country imports over 85 per cent of its crude oil and more than half of its LPG. Every global price spike feeds directly into inflation, widens the current account deficit, and strains public finances. Energy insecurity is no longer a distant risk—it is a recurring economic shock.

Yet, hidden within this vulnerability is a strategic opening. India's biofuel sector—ethanol, compressed biogas (CBG), and biomass—has reached a turning point. What was once a policy experiment is now a credible pillar of energy strategy. The question is no longer whether biofuels can work. It is whether India can scale them fast enough and smartly enough to matter.

India's ethanol blending programme is one of its most notable clean energy achievements. Blending has risen from just 1.5% in 2014 to 20% in 2025—well ahead of schedule. Production capacity has expanded rapidly to nearly 17 billion litres annually.

But success has exposed a new fault line. Demand for E20 blending stands at roughly 10-11 billion litres. In effect, a significant share of installed capacity risks lying idle. This is not a failure of supply—it is a failure to expand demand in parallel. If left unaddressed, this mismatch could weaken investor confidence and slow future growth. India has built capacity. It must now create markets. If ethanol represents progress, compressed biogas represents potential.

India currently has over 130 operational CBG plants producing around 900 tonnes per day. While this demonstrates technical viability, it is a fraction of what is possible. India consumes 31-32 million tonnes of LPG annually—more than half of it imported. At current levels, CBG meets well under 1 per cent of this demand.

This gap is not due to a lack of feedstock or technology. It is a function of policy ambition and infrastructure readiness. CBG can substitute LPG in commercial kitchens, small industries, and transport segments. It can reduce import dependence, create rural income streams, and address waste management challenges.

Brazil's biofuel journey offers a useful lesson in what policy clarity can achieve. With ethanol blending levels of 27-30% and widespread use of flex-fuel vehicles, Brazil created a

stable ecosystem where farmers, fuel suppliers, and automakers operate with aligned incentives. Consumers can switch between fuels based on price, and investors can plan with confidence.

The underlying principle is simple: long-term certainty unlocks long-term capital.

India now needs a similarly clear roadmap beyond E20—one that signals direction, not hesitation. India's ethanol substitution of LPG with CBG has not been without criticism. Concerns around food security, water use, and efficiency have been raised across sectors. These are important issues and deserve careful policy design. But the larger picture is often overlooked. At 20% blending, ethanol has already reduced crude oil imports, saved valuable foreign exchange, and cushioned the economy against global price volatility. In a world where energy markets are increasingly unstable, this is not just an environmental gain—it is economic resilience.

Ethanol is not merely a blending component. It is a strategic buffer.

To fully realise the potential of biofuels, India must move beyond incremental progress to deliberate scale. This requires a coordinated push across policy, infrastructure, and markets.

First, demand creation must become central. Mandating partial substitution of LPG with CBG in commercial and industrial segments can create immediate and predictable demand. Second, infrastructure gaps must be addressed. Investments in compression, storage, and distribution networks are essential to make CBG commercially viable at scale.

Third, policy incentives must reward environmental performance. Linking biofuel production to carbon markets can unlock additional revenue streams and improve project economics.

Fourth, India must expand the scope of ethanol beyond petrol blending. Its use in aviation fuels, industrial applications, and even cooking energy can significantly increase demand.

Finally, a clear roadmap beyond E20-towards E27 and higher—along with accelerated adoption of flex-fuel vehicles, can provide the long-term certainty investors seek. India's biofuel programme has already delivered measurable benefits—lower imports, cleaner energy, and enhanced rural incomes. But its true potential lies ahead.

Without demand expansion, surplus ethanol will remain underutilised. Without scaling CBG, dependence on imported LPG will persist. Without policy clarity, investment will hesitate.

Energy security cannot be outsourced; it must be built domestically and at scale. Biofuels offer India a chance to turn agricultural strength into energy resilience and reduce external vulnerability. In an increasingly weaponised energy world, biofuels are not just an alternative—they are strategic insurance.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

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CONTRAPUNTO

If you've broken the eggs, you should make the omelette

- ANTHONY EDEN

Second Shock Coming?

Iran & Houthis are gearing up for US ground troops. That could be real bad news for the world

A month into the Iran war, three things strongly hint at a possible US ground invasion. First, American troop deployments are increasing. Reports suggest Pentagon is drafting plans for weeks-long ops. These options, reportedly, include limited coastal raids, and the seizure of strategic Iranian islands, in Strait of Hormuz, and potentially even Kharg Island in Persian Gulf. Such moves would mark a huge bet on boots-on-the-ground engagement, a transition that, usually, means a deeper, more dangerous phase in wars. Of course, this will also intensify global energy shocks, and multiply casualties on all sides.

Second, IIRC has lowered the volunteer age for joining the war effort, to just 12. The announcement is stark and symbolic, in terrifying ways. It signals Tehran's expectation of a drawn-out confrontation, and the possibility of a manpower shortage. Nations rarely widen military recruitment pools, unless they anticipate attrition on a large scale. The message is clear: Iran is preparing for endurance, not just retaliation.

Third, Houthis in Yemen entered the war over the weekend, on Tehran's behalf. Would that indicate renewed attacks on Red Sea shipping? If that happens while Iran disrupts traffic through Strait of Hormuz, consequences for global energy markets could be severe. Together, these waterways handle a massive share of the world's oil flows. Experts have warned that oil price at or beyond \$150 per barrel, will deliver huge shockwaves through inflation and supply chain disruptions. Houthis appear to be signalling Washington: any ground operation risks triggering a wider economic confrontation.

But what would be the endgame of a ground invasion? Regime change in Tehran appears to have receded as an immediate objective. A more plausible aim: securing Hormuz. That's something Gulf Arab states increasingly favour: after witnessing Iran's disruptive leverage. Yet, Tehran now insists on full sovereignty over Hormuz, and seems prepared to fight for it. Question, then, is: how long can Gulf states withstand sustained Iranian missile and drone strikes?

Most worryingly, Trump's objectives are unclear. Statements shift weekly, leaving allies and adversaries guessing. Some American conservatives, uneasy about the conflict, now argue for finishing the job quickly. Others believe weakening Iran could dismantle Tehran's network of allied militias, and reshape regional alignments. Mind you, all of this is guesswork by politicians and experts, who don't know what White House is thinking, which, in turn, may not know what, really, it wants anymore.



After The Pause, After The War

Iran can add to instability. But it can't use Hormuz as blackmail forever. US has no good options left. Israel will face a harder Iranian regime. Gulf Arabs have to rebuild, reassess ties. India has to ask itself tough questions

Indrani Bagchi



We are entering the second, more dangerous phase of the current Gulf war - four weeks down, one more week of a "pause" to go. Let's just wish there are no good options left for anyone anymore.

Iran is amassing troops and carriers in the Gulf, while simultaneously signalling to allies, he won't go for ground operations inside Iran. He's being snarky about the Saudi ruler kissing his (Trump's) body parts, while apparently paying heed to Saudi and UAE, who are urging him to "finish the job" in Iran. He has consigned Nato to the trash heap, and tossed in Starmer and Takachi Sanae, for good measure.

Will Trump continue the war, or will he extend the pause? Will US empty its arsenal first, or will Iran? Just the very fact that Iran has disproved every US and Israeli assumption, means the road ahead is less clear. Nobody knows what the next step may be, or even get an accurate sense of the damage so far. There is huge censorship of sharing visuals in Israel and Gulf states. Iran has had no internet for the past month anyway.

Meanwhile, Russian oil is free to buy, as is Iranian oil. China is being eerily quiet, but collecting vital electronic intelligence, about US military operations and strategy from Iranians. Iran now operates on China's BeiDou satellite system. Whether China takes Taiwan now or not, it knows a lot more about US military capabilities, than US knows about China's.

Iran is the Pirate of Hormuz, with its own toll-booth. A much weaker power, battered by almost 60 years of sanctions, wars, and strikes, Iran is following horizontal escalation strategy, and, so far, controlling the escalation pathway in this war. Costs it is inflicting on the world, may be too much to bear. Houthis, Iran's Brahminstra, just joined the war, with attacks on Israel. Iran is indicating it's willing to expand the geography, and add to the instability quotient.

Iran has been under sustained air attack from US and Israel for the past month - it has lost leaders, infra, apparently almost 1,500 civilians, including

kindergarteners. And, in many parts of the world, Iran today holds the sentiment on the street, just by being a power that stood up.

Everybody needs this war to end. Nobody looks close to doing so. But as military analyst John Spencer points out, the "careful" analysts who speak in certainties, or rely on surface analogies, Iran is not Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq. It is not 1968, 2002, or 2003. The context of each is fundamentally different.



Political objectives, from regime behaviour change to regime survival, are different. We know a lot about what has been struck. We do not fully know what remains. More importantly, we do not know what decisions will be made next, by either side. That uncertainty is not a flaw in analysis. It is the nature of war.

We can, and should, imagine a day after this: This is a full-blown Asian crisis. Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore's foreign minister, spoke for every Asian country this

week, when he pointed out that second and third order consequences from the "scarring" of the Persian Gulf, would be far worse for this continent. Take India. Today, we worry about LPG, tomorrow exports will be coming back, and that will be a whole new challenge.

Gulf Arabs are having their moment. Their "multi-alignment" game has made them the biggest casualty of this war. Their infra will take years of rebuilding. In terms of their global space, they will reassess all their relationships, with US, with Iran, and even with Israel, as this war winds down. That is an opportunity waiting for India.

Israel is great on technology and unmatched, regionally, as a military power. But two changes have happened. Israel has serious competition from Ukraine's defence tech industry, which is more *ad-fair* with wars of the future. And, the new leadership in Tel Aviv is likely to be more radical and more hardline. Iran's nuclear weapons future is all but assured.

Iran, though, is in danger of overplaying its hand. It can use Hormuz as strategic leverage only for so long. The world is already finding a way around it. Saudi Arabia has activated its east-west pipeline to load about 7m barrels per day from its Yanbu port, on Red Sea. UAE has also activated its Fujairah pipeline. Assuming Houthis can't manage to disrupt Red Sea shipping, sooner or later, helium will find its way to semiconductor plants and MRI machines. Fertilisers will be made elsewhere.

India can take away certain truths. First, build capacity. Covid, Ukraine, Op Sinocek, Taiwan and the Gulf war have exposed India's vulnerabilities and shortcomings.

Second, we should double down on helping our friends in the Gulf rebuild, UAE, Qatar, and Oman, especially that is a vital investment.

Third, we must ask ourselves a simple question - Why is India hesitating to invest in India? In that answer lies India's future.

Fourth, this is now a world without filters. Heads of state can be taken out to cripple a state. India needs to be prepared for extreme bad days.

Days when we were poor, and needed the bulge pulpit to sound off against the perfidy of great powers, are over. Stay humble. Next election cycle is not the most important.

The writer is CEO, Ananta Centre, New Delhi. Views are personal

Uniform Civil Codes, Written By States, May Be Rewritten By Citizens

Gujarat, like Uttarakhand, is trying to radically change the relationship between law & family. But, results may end up looking quite different. Neither what proponents intend, nor what opponents fear

Akshat Agarwal



In India, the pace of legal change is generally slow. Yet, when change takes place, it is often radical, and overturns long-held assumptions. Uttarakhand's Uniform Civil Code was one such example. Now, Gujarat state assembly too has passed the Uniform Family Code. More BJP-governed states may follow suit.

The question of uniform family law has long been a point of political contention. Often framed as a choice between discriminatory religious family laws and gender equality, these new Codes actually raise more profound questions about the relationship between the law and the family.

At the outset, in shifting family law reforms to the state level, these Codes open a new direction, as most family law has primarily operated at the national level, until now. Uttarakhand's civil code was approved by the President and therefore overrode existing national family law. Gujarat's will probably follow a similar process, and both will comprehensively regulate the relationships of residents in the respective states.

Both Codes introduce uniform rules for marriage and divorce across religious communities. Much of this was directed at provisions of Muslim personal law, which have been critiqued for discriminating against women. Yet, the Codes retain a tense relationship between secular and religious personal laws.

For instance, the Codes do not have their own provisions for solemnising marriage. Instead, they merely require registration of marriages that have been solemnised, either according to religious customs or the Special Marriage Act. It is an inter-faith marriage.

The tension that marriage derives legitimacy from religious law and customs, and not the State, was key to the Supreme Court's rejection of same-sex marriage in 2023. The Codes do not provide a neat answer to this question; thus, whether they comprehensively replace religious law remains uncertain.

This also has implications for heterosexual relationships. For instance, would a Hindu marriage that is validly registered under the Codes, but did not follow essential Hindu ceremonies, still be valid? Moreover, the Codes continue to exclude tribal communities.

Both Codes stipulate detailed procedures for registering live-in relationships, ostensibly to tackle concerns about violence and economic exploitation. Admittedly, questions of fact and evidence are notoriously difficult to prove in informal romantic relationships. But the Uttarakhand rules, released last year, contained extremely involved requirements through a 16-page form. Gujarat may issue similar rules. This raises genuine concerns about State surveillance of such relationships.

family, instead of her parents. The Codes also seem to give courts new powers to deal with the allocation of property, irrespectively if it is jointly or individually owned, at the time of divorce.

Most significantly, the Codes appear to do away with the distinction between separate and ancestral property in Hindu law, thereby effectively abolishing the concept of Hindu joint family property. What will this mean for Hindu Undivided Family (HUF) tax benefits? Even though tax exemptions are dealt with under central income tax law, the concept ultimately derives its legitimacy from underlying family law. Once the concept is done away with under family law, can it still be recognised in tax law?

Moreover, the Codes apply to all residents, even those outside the state. However, what happens if a resident of one state owns property in another Indian state? Now that Uttarakhand and Gujarat have their own regime for inheritance, would the Codes override national and local rules governing immovable property in other states?

Despite its many significant changes, the Codes still leave several questions unresolved, and their provisions raise constitutional concerns. In fact, constitutional challenges to Uttarakhand UCC are already pending before the high court in Nainital. How courts interpret this mean for Hindu Undivided Family may thus determine their actual impact.

Apart from the courts, others may also shape the law, as they navigate its numerous formal requirements. Legal anthropologists often observe how the law is taken up by its own as individuals, communities, and public officials navigate its many potential meanings. This may be especially true for these new uniform family codes, seeking to comprehensively regulate messy human relationships, which have long been intertwined with community interests. Ultimately, as these laws take a life of their own, their eventual impact may end up being neither what their proponents intended, nor what their opponents feared.

The writer is a doctoral candidate at Yale University. Views are personal



Who Wrote This?

AI takes leading role in the love story between readers and doubt, as authors publishers are finding out

Textopocalypse is near, and it has put authenticity in crisis. If any text can be generated by AI, how do we know what is authored? Today, LLMs are becoming better and better at writing. Tomorrow, they may do something more. Right now, as Princeton researchers have established, AI systems mirror the human tendency to put a lower value on AI-generated content. One day, the machines might ditch this hierarchy. Humans might become agnostic about authorship. But that day is not here yet. Artificial hearts and knees are well and fine, but if someone's capable passing off artificial words as natural ones, all hell can break loose.

As Mia Ballard has just found out. In what is being called the landmark, first AI scandal to hit the Big Five of publishing houses, Hachette has pulled her horror novel, *Shy Girl*. Because the internet said, I spy AI has written this, in lines both neat and algorithm-kissed. But by no means is such a Sherlocking foolproof. All the chattering we do, is changing our cadences, after all. Not unlike how Coleridge wrote *Kubla Khan*, when he was, as is politely described, under the influence. There is no way of knowing that those who say they are being totally original, are actually being so. Shakespeare, some pundits say, wasn't, but he also was, it's complicated.

In his essay, *Why AI will never supplant human novelists - or win the Booker Prize*, Ian Leslie answers this, in terms of the fundamental reality of being alive in the world. It's this that lets a novel about dragons feel deeply authentic. This is where authorship is more than a legal or commercial concern. We are engaging in a relationship with the consciousness behind the words. Strip that away, and doesn't literature become just an elaborate ventriloquism act? We read the stories, for the voices. They can lie, but they should not be a lie. Dear reader; this, too, is not written by AI.



Calvin & Hobbes



Big bad bullies

On a malign force that has the world worrying

Jug Suraiya



Early warning signals are flashing. A big bad bully is rolling up its sleeves, and is all set to go into action, making people in many parts of the world fear what the bully will do, and when, and where, he'll do it.

The only predictable thing about the bully say experts, whose job it is to predict the bully's behavioural patterns, is that the only thing that can be predicted to do is the unpredictable, being whimsical, capricious, and contrary to all rules of rationality and logic.

The bully in question is not a person, but a climatic phenomenon, called El Nino, which means Little Boy in Spanish, a name that was given to it by Peruvian fishermen, who first noted it in the 19th century.

El Nino has a sidekick, called the Southern Oscillation, SO for short, and they are tagged together as ENSO.

The disastrous duo work in tandem to hijack that huge weather machine, called the monsoon, on which hundreds of millions of farmers in India, and other parts of South Asia, are crucially dependent. El Nino raises the temperature of the water in the south-central Pacific, while the SO increases the atmospheric temperature in the same region.

second opinion

This double whammy plays merry havoc with the wind currents that propel the rain-bearing monsoon clouds to the mainland. The result is that the monsoon, which is vital not just for farmers, but for entire national economies, gets inordinately delayed, or diverted, like those AI flights, the passengers of which are left clueless as to when or where they'll eventually end up.

Meteorologists in US and in India simultaneously have sounded alarm bells that El Nino, and its SO buddy, are preparing to launch their combined assault in early summer this year, spelling prolonged heat waves, drought, and crop failure, and are urging govts to batten down their hatches the best they can.

To begin with, a name change might be in order: El Nino is too cuddly code for something that evokes fears of such epic fury. El Donald? And its SO comrade-in-arms, Bibi?

Is Our Relationship With Food Karmic?

Brother Dao Hanh

Karm is not fate etched in stone. It is far more intimate and more immediate. It is the sum of our actions: of our body, speech, and mind. Every habit we cultivate, every impulse we repeat, every choice we make, these weave the fabric of our karma. And food, perhaps more than we realise, sits at the centre of this tapestry. Our relationship with food is rarely just about hunger. It is about habit. We build patterns around food. In the rush of modern life, eating has become mechanical. Meals are squeezed between meetings; hunger is repressed by habit; fullness is ignored. We often eat without awareness, and so we overeat. But overeating is not always about food. Sometimes, it is about escape. Emotional eating, reaching for something sweet not

out of hunger, but to avoid discomfort, is a common pattern. Mindfulness changes this. When we become aware, we begin to see a really hungry or a really avoiding something within? Awareness is the first step towards balance. It allows us to listen to the body, recognise fullness, and understand the deeper currents beneath our cravings. Should a spiritual practitioner avoid certain foods? There are no rigid commandments, only awareness. When we are mindful, we begin to see consequences of our actions. Take, for instance, eating meat. It is not about 'should' or 'shouldn't'; it is about seeing clearly, the chain of suffering, impact of our choices. And from that clarity, a natural shift may arise not from guilt,

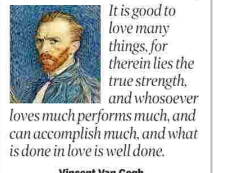
but from understanding. One may adopt a vegan diet, yet remain harsh in speech, restless in mind, or unkind to oneself. True nonviolence begins within. The way we relate to ourselves shapes how we relate to the world. Our outer actions are often reflections of our inner state.

There is no perfect way. Even walking on the earth may harm unseen life. Growing food involves disruption. What matters is direction. If one creates harm, even slightly, one is already on the path. If I eat meat seven days a week and reduce it to six, I am moving towards nonviolence.

It is not about perfection; it is about intention. Human beings are complex. A person may be deeply compassionate in many areas of life, yet unaware in others. Culture, upbringing, and circumstance



Sacred space



It is good to love many things, for therein lies the true strength, and whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is well done.

Vincent Van Gogh

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Drug reality

Solutions beyond seizures needed

PUNJAB'S ranking among the top states in drug seizures is a statistic that invites both acknowledgment and unease. At first glance, rising recoveries suggest an administration tightening its grip on narcotics networks. But these numbers reveal a deeper paradox. Punjab accounts for just 2.3% of India's population but nearly 44.5% of heroin seizures, underscoring its centrality in the drug trade. The huge scale of drug seizures points not just to policing efficiency, but also to the sheer volume of narcotics flowing through the state. With 25.3 drug-smuggling cases per lakh population, Punjab leads the country and trafficking cases far outnumber those of consumption. In 2023, the state registered 11,589 NDPS cases, placing it among the highest nationally. The human cost is no less troubling: Punjab recorded the highest number of drug overdose deaths in India, with 89 fatalities in 2023.

Catching drugs, however, is not the same as curing addiction. Seizures highlight enforcement strength but also expose a resilient ecosystem sustained by geography, unemployment and cross-border networks. Trafficking routes have adapted swiftly — from traditional channels to drone-based deliveries — often outpacing conventional policing. The result is a cycle where crackdowns disrupt supply temporarily, but rarely dismantle it.

More critically, the demand side remains inadequately addressed. Addiction in Punjab is deeply intertwined with agrarian distress, joblessness and limited opportunities for the youth. Without sustained investment in rehabilitation, mental health care and community-based interventions, enforcement risks becoming a revolving door. Punjab's high seizure ranking, therefore, is less a badge of honour than a warning. The focus must shift from how much is caught to how many are cured. Only then can the state move from containment to lasting recovery.

Disclosure of identity

SC intervenes to shield rape survivors

THE Supreme Court's indignation at the disclosure of a minor rape survivor's identity is wholly justified. It is unfortunate that a stern reminder had to be given, decades after clear legal safeguards were put in place. This reflects a deeper malaise within the justice delivery system: a disconnect between law and its consistent application. Back in 1983, the insertion of Section 228A into the Indian Penal Code sought to shield survivors of sexual offences from the devastating consequences of public identification. This protection was reinforced in the landmark *Nipun Saxena v. Union of India* (2018), which categorically barred any form of disclosure — direct or indirect — that could reveal a victim's identity. Yet, despite this unambiguous mandate, lapses continue to occur even within judicial orders.

The Court's observation that such failures stem from "general indifference" and possibly a lack of awareness is a serious indictment. Courts are not merely arbiters of disputes; they are custodians of constitutional morality and human dignity. When judicial records themselves expose survivors to stigma, the system risks worsening their ordeal. In a society where victims of sexual violence often face ostracism and lifelong trauma, anonymity is a lifeline of sorts. The disclosure of identity can lead to social exclusion, harassment and psychological distress, punishing the victim rather than the perpetrator.

The normalisation of such lapses shows an abysmal failure to recognise the unique vulnerabilities exposed by sexual offences. The apex court's directive to circulate its judgment among all high courts is a necessary corrective, but it must be accompanied by institutional accountability. Judicial training, sensitisation and stricter compliance mechanisms are a must. Ultimately, safeguarding a survivor's identity is about preserving dignity, strengthening trust in the judicial system and affirming that the law stands firmly on the side of the vulnerable.

ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

CHANDIGARH, TUESDAY, MARCH 30, 1974

Meaningful cooperation

THE Indo-US Economic and Commercial Sub-Commission has explored — and successfully to a great extent — fresh avenues of cooperation between the two countries. Its two-day deliberations in New Delhi pointed to a new realism that had been missing from the economic ties all these years. The Americans now show greater appreciation of Indian viewpoints on trade and aid, even though they cling to their favourite concepts, however controversial and outdated. The Sub-Commission's main object has been to assess various commercial fields where relations between New Delhi and Washington could be strengthened. As a result of the fruitful negotiations, possibilities of a rise in the export of Indian goods to the US and of American investment in India have improved considerably. The joint communiqué said: "Both sides recognised the importance of this area of practical and clear-cut rules for the entry of foreign investment and the stability of these once investment had taken place." The American delegation wanted certain clarifications on India's investment policies in the context of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act and the guidelines issue under it. Finance Minister C. Subramanian has clarified the Indian position in this regard. He told the forum of financial writers in New Delhi on Sunday that foreign investment would be confined mainly to areas where substantial exports were possible and that foreign know-how would be brought only if it permitted the development of indigenous technology. Indo-American economic ties would get the necessary boost once Washington shows the requisite awareness of the needs of developing countries.

India's Shia, BJP & Iran

The saffron party courted the community on realising that 'Muslim brotherhood' was a myth

RADHIKA RAMASESHAN
SENIOR JOURNALIST

AMID the gloom and doom enveloping the world as Iran holds out against the US and Israel — and Lebanon as well as the West Bank are being flattened like Gaza — comes a flake of news that should be cheered for the sake of humanity and sanity. Thousands of miles from Iran, the Shias of Kashmir, Ladakh, Lucknow, Hyderabad and Bengaluru have risen in spontaneous solidarity for their community in the Middle East. Iran, like Iraq and Azerbaijan, is a Shia-majority country surrounded by Sunni-dominated nations.

The support was not confined to protests — there was an initial spurt in Kashmir and Lucknow — but included donations that were sent to the Iranian embassy in New Delhi to be routed to Tehran. The Shias regard the late Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the first major casualty of the US-Israel assault, as a spiritual mentor on a par with the Pope. Kashmir's spiritual affinity with Khamenei is even stronger because he had visited the Valley and Karnataka in 1981, long before he became the Supreme Leader. His trip was part of Iran's religious and ideological outreach to India after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

It seemed as though the Shias, based in cities where their population is sizeable, needed no prompting to open their hearts — and coffers. Women sold their jewels to raise cash and gave copper vessels, including the cherished *tasbeeh*, the traditional *tasbeeh* meant for a diners' quartet. Children chipped in by breaking open their piggy banks; a report said an 18-year-old girl gave away a two-gram gold biscuit gifted on her birthday by her parents. Lucknow's Sunnis — remember that Uttar Pradesh's capital has occasionally been wracked by Shia-Sunni conflicts —



CONFLICT: The Sunni-Shia divide is deeprooted in Uttar Pradesh. (1)

offered "quiet support", according to a Shia cleric. This implied that they didn't block the pro-Iran gestures. The Iranian embassy acknowledged the outpouring of help.

No political party — not even the BJP — opposed these acts, even though they seem to have disconcerted active proponents of an India-Israel axis. Indeed, in UP Shias have had a good relationship with the BJP; this might surprise those propagating the theory of a "Muslim brotherhood" at work during an election. The BJP and its earlier avatar, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), assiduously courted the Shias on realising that the "brotherhood" notion was a myth — Sunni voters mattered more to the Congress and the "secular" versions of the Socialists because they vastly outnumbered the Shias. The Shias were bereft of a political leadership.

As per the 2011 Census, Muslims account for about 14.2 per cent of India's population. Although no separate count of Islamic sects is officially available, a ballpark estimate from academics like Ali Khan Mahmudabad, who heads the political science department at Ashoka University, puts the Shia share at 15-20 per cent of India's Muslim population. Lucknow has 20 per cent Shia population, which influences election outcomes. In the 1967 Assembly elections, the Lucknow (West) seat, with a large Shia electorate,

Shias based in India needed no prompting to open their hearts and coffers when Iran was attacked by the US and Israel.

was won by the BJS candidate, Lalu Sharma, who trounced Congress' Ali Zahir, a Shia.

Former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was an MP from Lucknow, and Lalji Thandon, Vajpayee's constituency minder who was a three-time MLA from an Old Lucknow seat, never missed a soiree hosted by the Shia elite and engaged with the cleric politically. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who represents the Shias, is popular with the Shias despite the community's misgivings about the BJP.

On the other hand, Shia clerics' grouse is that CM Yogi Adityanath rarely meets them. Does the Shia-BJP bonhomie, in whatever measure it exists now, mean that the issues that bother Muslims at large are of little concern to the sect?

Part of the reason is that in UP, the Sunni-Shia divide is deeprooted. It often erupts during Muharram in the form of skirmishes; the joke is that Shias can-

not decide who is the bigger adversary: the pro-RSS-BJP Hindus or the Sunnis. There were spells of unity between the sects, visible after the Babri Masjid demolition and the anti-CAA protests, but the camaraderie was short-lived. Those on the periphery or unfamiliar with the heartland's Muslim politics cannot comprehend that it never works on a simple communal binary.

Pausahali Lass, the Germany-based author of *Tasting Faith: Jesus of India — Unveiling Stories, Sharing Recipes and Preserving their Vibrant Legacy*, articulated the fear that Delhi's deeper engagement with Tel Aviv might be foiled by Muslims here. In a piece in *The Times of India* (March 11), she said the mourning processions in Kashmir and elsewhere depicted Khamenei as a "spiritual guide whose death demands public response".

"This is not just a symbolic matter. Rather, it is deeply rooted theological loyalty that now finds expression in political activism directed against India and the US... Women in *chadors* vowing martyrdom, anti-Israel chants, signal a form of radicalisation that goes beyond political disagreement to ideological commitment shaped by religious identity and global alliances." Lass added.

Such comments on the current developments in the Gulf and Iran overlook a vital factor: India's civilisational links with Iran go back a long way. The connect, celebrated

in lore and validated by history, was jeopardised by the growing proximity of the Modi regime to Israel. However, considering the ramifications, the Indian government quickly reset the equation.

Pragmatism was spurred by India's realisation that unless it reached out significantly to Iran and not merely put out anodyne statements or offered token aid, the country was in for a grave fuel shortage. Hence could the political subplot framed by the unrest among Shias be ignored. UP goes to the polls in 2027. The last thing the BJP would wish for is a polarisation of Muslim votes towards its principal opponent, the Samajwadi Party. These circumstances overrode the temptation to put all the eggs in the US-Israel basket, if only to appease the BJP's hardcore, Hinduva-wedded voters.

A high point in the Delhi-Tehran relationship was the visit then Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to Delhi and Lucknow in 1995, the first by an Iranian head of state after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Then PM PV Narasimha Rao broke protocol to receive the guest at the airport. Rafsanjani later addressed a joint session of Parliament with an ovation which former Foreign Minister and PM I K Gujral described as "unprecedented".

The Iranian President made it clear that he meant well for India on every score. He endorsed India's secularism at Lucknow's Imambah, snubbed Pakistani journalist who raised questions about the Babri Masjid, and emphasised his virtual neutrality on the Kashmir dispute in a one-on-one with Rao.

Iran's significance for India cannot be overemphasised. Its interventions at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation were important. Even if its submissions were not overly pro-India, Tehran stood as a buffer against the Saudi-led cabal which tilted towards Islamabad on Kashmir. After the Islamic Revolution, Shia-majority Iran, which was ringed by Sunni-dominated UAE, needed allies, especially because the US tried hard to isolate the existing regime. Therefore, it extended a hand of friendship to India.

Will the amity stand the test of the global churn?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

People who are the enemies of all Muslims are trying to cause disunity in the Islamic world. — Ali Khamenei

No escape from Everest Base Camp

VISHAL JAITLEY

MY wife holds a black belt in taekwondo, while I have a mixed record in online chess. Hitting the gym is not part of my dreams either. Still, I couldn't oppose her proposal of trekking up to the Everest Base Camp (Nepal) at a height of 5,364 metres. Hailing from the plains of North India and currently living in Brisbane (Australia), where the highest lookout point within a 50-km radius is well below 200 metres, the task of trekking for 13 days to reach an altitude of above 5,000 metres was Herculean.

Remembering Panditji's advice at the time of our *saat* phere nearly 30 years ago, and recently having read books on the midlife crisis, there was no way I was going to speak my mind. But then I watched a video showing an eight-seater plane landing at Nepal's Lukla Airport on probably the world's shortest civilian runway. There was no comparison with the A380-type long-haul planes I had been aboard, but still, I kept my thoughts to myself.

The very next weekend, we went out for dinner at an Italian restaurant by the riverside, where I initiated a conversation about our previous trip to Leh. I reminded her about the high-altitude sickness I had developed soon after landing at Leh from Chandigarh. "Onwards and upwards," she said as we finished our risotto. And I gulped down my views along with the Tiramisu dessert.

Then a cunning plan came to my mind and I contacted my mother-in-law. I whispered that my wife planned to fly to Kathmandu and then return straight to Brisbane — without visiting her parents in India. Straightaway, her phone rang louder than ever before. I pretended to read a book while she talked to her mother. The plan seemed to have worked well until I heard my father-in-law saying in the background, "Kyon rok rahi ho, bhagyaan?" These words came from someone who always believed, "Jo sukhi chhaju ke chubare..." Since then, I have never gifted him his favourite hair gel.

With no *jeeran-nekha* left and the clock ticking faster, it was time to showcase *bahaduri*. After six days of trekking around the picturesque Himalayas, we bowed at the boomerang-shaped rock at the Everest Base Camp. After my wife's celebratory taekwondo flying kick, a sip of the Nepali Khukri rum was well worth our efforts.

In the lap of Everest and its slightly smaller sister peaks — Pumori, Lhotse, Nuptse and Makalu — we gave each other a commemorative hug.

The writer is a government officer in Australia

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Losing a nation's soul

Refer to 'Keeping your enemies closer' (*The Great Game*); the observation that India appears to have strayed from Buddha's Middle Path is both relevant and troubling. This path is not a posture of convenience; it is a test of courage and compassion. It cannot be walked by those guided only by strategic survival. When nations begin to choose sides without a clear moral voice, they may safeguard interests, but risk losing their soul. In this context, Mirza Ghalib's words are a reminder: "Ragon mein dardite phirne ke hum nahin kayal, jo aankh hi se na tapka vo lahu kya hai" (If the blood of innocents does not evoke visible grief, moral clarity, or even discomfort, then what flows within us is not blood).

KK GARG, CHANDIGARH

US not invincible

Refer to 'Keeping your enemies closer'; India must follow the Middle Path without falling into the trap of superpowers. Donald Trump is fond of trampling upon the sovereignty of those nations and their state heads who do not follow his policies blindly and applaud his domineering gestures. Iran has surprised many who had believed so far in the military invincibility of the US. The Iranians have fought well, despite suffering a huge number of casualties among its top political brass and military commanders.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

Focus on savings, not penalties

Refer to 'Minimum balance'; charging customers, especially those with limited means, for failing to maintain a minimum balance undermines trust and goes against the goal of financial inclusion. Banks should move away from such punitive practices and adopt fair, transparent, and customer-friendly policies. Instead of penalties, they should focus on encouraging savings and supporting customers during financial difficulties. A strong and responsible banking system is one that protects its customers, not penalises them.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

No impactful governance

With reference to 'The cost of India's UPSC fixation'; while the civil services remain prestigious, certain structural issues deserve attention. Regular salary hikes, assured, time-bound promotions risk fostering complacency, inflated egos, and, in some cases, corruption. Additionally, the ecosystem around UPSC preparation — particularly coaching institutes — often thrives on exaggerated success narratives. This creates immense pressure on aspirants and deep frustration among those who fall short, despite years of effort and sacrifice. If even a fraction of officers had consistently delivered impactful governance, the nation's progress would be far more visible.

RAM KUMAR, FERROZEPUR

Educate cab drivers

In this era of cab aggregator platform (Ola, Uber, etc.), cab drivers need to be educated they should not take undue advantage of passengers after the ride starts and the cab is already booked. Also, passengers should not keep on tolerating unfair practices, as every such successful attempt at overcharging increases their motivation to fleece people. After my daughter faced such a situation where the cab driver demanded Rs 500 extra to increase the AC cooling, I forwarded the specifics to the police hoping that after police warning, the cabbies focus on an honest earning rather than making a quick buck out of someone else's adversity.

VISHAL PANESAR, LUDHIANA

Humanity is still alive

Refer to 'One man's courage in a sea of apathy'; years ago, my father, got badly injured in a train accident. For nearly two hours he lay unattended, indifferent people just passed by. But two God-sent young men appeared from nowhere, lifted him, took him to the hospital and disappeared as quietly as they had come. We never got the chance to thank them. My father recovered. And more importantly, the belief survived that humanity is still alive.

SUMAN B BALLI, PHAGWARA

Himanta Sarma's masterstroke in Assam



SANJOY HAZARIKA
INDEPENDENT COLUMNIST

THREE years ago, Himanta Biswa Sarma, then just two years into his first term as a BJP Chief Minister of Assam, had ensured a crucial strategic win that would stand him in good stead in the future. A key number of the state's 126 constituencies were redrawn, using demography and religious markers to strengthen the BJP's position and diminish that of his political foes. As a result, his principal adversary, Gaurav Gogoi, the Congress MP and now state Congress party president, was forced to shift base.

It was a masterstroke, the significance of which was missed by many political leaders as well as media commentators at the time. Today, as state elections loom in Assam, Sarma's sleight of hand is now evident. Seats where Muslim electors were either a majority or had crucial votes and which were seen as pro-Congress became Hindu-dominant or were reserved for Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes, depriving the Congress of safe constituencies.

At the time, the CM told journalists: "The NRC was unsuccessful and the Assam Accord did not live up to expectations. Delineation for redrawing Assembly constituencies can be an exercise through which we can safeguard the future of

Assam for two decades by at least ensuring the state Assembly is less affected by demographic changes."

Political analyst Yogendra Yadav recently described the process as one of gerrymandering, but acknowledged that few had paid attention to it over the years. Politically, Sarma has been a step ahead of his opponents much of the time.

The reference to the NRC was to the National Register of Citizens, which was held in Assam (the only state in the country to have it) to establish who were bona fide Indian nationals and, conversely, who were not.

As is well known, Assam has been at the vortex of a bitter and occasionally bloody campaign to identify and drive away 'illegal immigrants' said to have come from Bangladesh—a process that has consumed time, energy and harmed goodwill among religious groups since the 1970s.

The NRC turned up, to everyone's surprise, some 19 lakh people, who enumerators said, could not prove their genuineness — the process was through legacy documentation of ancestors — but the largest group excluded was Hindus and not Muslims, as is widely assumed. Even this was not conclusive and those left out of the picture have not been given a chance to prove their status.

Also, the Assam Accord of 1985 between student agitators and the state and Central governments laid down a cut-off date for immigrants — those who came after 1972 could not qualify for citizenship, thus, virtually creating two levels of citizenship for



ADVANTAGE SARMA: The welfare vote is going to count in these elections. PTI

Indians in Assam.

Thus, while these tortuous issues remain unresolved across Assam, the election tempo is yet to pick up. The BJP says that it is expecting to win its third consecutive victory. Home Minister Amit Shah, whose road show in Guwahati created traffic snarls, said the party would get 90 seats.

However, the party has been stung by rebellions by local leaders who were denied tickets and who have come out strongly against the Chief Minister and his allies.

Others have remained silent, like a former state BJP president. The defection of long-time Congress leader Pradyut Bordoloi to the BJP (a two-time Congress MP, he was given the prized Assam seat of Dispur, where the state's capital complex is located) stunned the Congress but also caused angry ripples in the public realm about switching allegiances.

A burst of memes featuring washing machines and Bor-

doi did the rounds, although it is unclear whether the public irritation on this issue will affect the outcome in a BJP stronghold. Among others, Bordoloi is facing Mira Borahakur Goswami, a former BJP leader who switched to the Congress several years ago.

What will have an impact is that the Opposition, under the leadership of Gogoi, state Congress chief, and local regional parties have stitched together an alliance that will ensure that the Opposition vote is not divided.

Thus, they are fielding candidates who will be supported by the entire alliance. But the Opposition suffers from limited budgets, unlike the BJP juggernaut, which has hired buses, organised extensive rallies and a social media blitz and pushed door-to-door visits.

However, there is much public interest in contests involving some newcomers, including 26-year-old Kunki Chowdhury, the youngest

candidate in the state polls. She holds a masters degree in educational leadership from London. Her father started a private university in Guwahati. She has been campaigning door-to-door on issues that have long affected Guwahati — floods, drainage, garbage disposal and parking, creating a mess in the city despite infrastructure development.

Her BJP opponent Vijay Kumar Gupta is 72 and a longtime party worker. The media is positioning her as a Gen Z candidate. Gupta's statement about converting Guwahati, one of the country's messiest cities, into something akin to 'Switzerland, Shimla and Shillong' has drawn tart reactions on the Internet. Some of them note that the city is often swamped by waterlogging even after a brisk shower.

The sharpening divide between Hindus and Muslims, pushed by rhetoric over the years from the CM and other state leaders, is another factor dominating Assam's political arena.

The state government has made efforts to clear government land of illegal settlers. In a majority of these evictions, Muslims of Bengali origin have been targeted. During the drives, occasional clashes have broken out with wailing families, angry men and grieving children whose studies have been shattered.

The government says they are illegal settlers and they have been pushed out following the due process and court orders. The issue of alleged Bangladeshis, whom the BJP refers to as *ghusbat* or infiltrators, is expected to come up again during the closing stages of the election campaign.

Despite many public declarations by PM Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and CM Sarma, the issue remains far from resolution, with little verified data on the actual numbers of 'immigrants' and few deportations (Bangladesh does not accept those identified as its nationals). In addition, many confuse Indians of Bengali origin with foreigners, with phrases like 'Mijee' bandied about.

Yet, despite this bluster, the Assam Gana Parishad, which is the BJP's junior partner, has given 13 seats out of its 26 to Muslim candidates — pointing to a tacit understanding on the issue. There are limits to rhetoric in a complex state where Muslims comprise about 36% of the population — the largest proportion of any territorial unit in the country, barring the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

Significant support for Sarma, nicknamed 'Mama' by his followers, is expected to come from tea garden workers, among the biggest voting blocks in the state, and from first-time voters who have benefited from an array of popular scholarships and grants for school and college students as well as modest payments into bank accounts of nearly four million women, much on the lines of Bihar's Nishit Kumar.

A university professor underlined this: "The welfare vote is going to count, young women in college are not now dependent on their parents and the young see a lot of promise in a younger politician like Himanta. It's an aspiration of promise."

The sharpening divide between Hindus and Muslims is another factor dominating Assam's political arena.

How oil shock has put economy under pressure



ANINDYO CHAKRAVARTY
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

BEFORE the Iran war began a month ago, we were importing crude oil at roughly \$70 a barrel. Back then, each dollar cost Rs 91, so each barrel cost Rs 6,370. Since then, the average cost of our crude imports has risen to about \$110, and the average USD-INR exchange rate has spiked to Rs 92.50. That works out to Rs 10,750 per barrel.

Each barrel contains 159 litres of crude. This is refined to produce diesel, petrol, ATF naphtha and other products. Petrol and diesel, together, account for 60% of the output of Indian refineries. Out of this, 70% is diesel and 30% petrol.

Both petrol and diesel are lighter than crude. So, a barrel of crude can be theoretically converted into 170 litres of petrol and diesel. That means, the average input cost of crude to produce each litre of petrol used to be Rs 37 before

the war. That has risen to nearly Rs 60 now. If you add other costs — refinery overheads, storage, distribution and marketing costs — then each litre of petrol cost Rs 43-44 to produce in February and it costs Rs 66-67 now.

Back then, oil marketing companies (OMCs) were getting Rs 55 per litre for petrol and diesel. This gave them a margin of Rs 11-12 on each litre of fuel they produced. But, till a couple of days ago, the situation reversed — OMCs began losing Rs 11-12 per litre of petrol and diesel.

With crucial Assembly elections coming up, the government could not allow OMCs to raise prices. So, the Centre cut the Special Additional Excise Duty (SAED) by Rs 10 per litre on both petrol and diesel. Simultaneously, an export tax was levied on diesel and ATF to discourage refineries from diverting their output away from the domestic market.

Now, OMC losses have dropped to Rs 1-2 per litre. Even if one assumes that Indian refineries are sourcing crude at less than what the petroleum ministry's estimates show — and this is very likely — they are, at best, breaking even.

What about the Centre? Estimates suggest that the net impact of the excise duty cuts



REVERSE: Oil marketing companies, once earning profits on fuel sales, now stare at losses. REUTERS

and the export tax levy will cost the government Rs 5,500 crore every fortnight. Pump prices might be raised once West Bengal votes, but by then, the price of the Indian Basket of Crude Oil — the average price of what Indian refineries pay — might rise further. In that case, the Modi government will find it difficult to increase the SAED.

Some energy pundits believe that energy prices will stay at the current levels, even if the war ends. That is because the damage to key refineries in the Gulf will take years to fix. So, even if crude supplies return to normal, the international price of petrol

and diesel will remain high.

This will have a significant impact on the domestic price of petrol and diesel in India. Indian refineries are paid a 'trade parity price' (TPP) for petrol and diesel, which is based 80% on what it would cost to sell imported petrol in India, and 20% on what a refinery would earn if it exported all its fuel.

Note that this is significantly higher than the actual cost of producing petrol and diesel in India. For instance, the TPP for a litre of petrol currently is about Rs 80 while that of diesel is more than Rs 85. If refineries were allowed to charge this, they would make a decent profit, but that

would mean petrol would cost Rs 108 in Delhi and diesel Rs 98 per litre. If the excise duties were to be restored, the price would rise to Rs 118 for petrol and Rs 108 for diesel.

Again, this too assumes that the rupee would stay at this level against the dollar. If our currency weakens further, then both the cost of crude and the trade parity price for petrol and diesel will rise further. That might force the government to not only give up on the SAED, but it might have to cut other cesses and taxes as well. If just the current rate of drop in oil tax revenues continues for all of 2026-27, then the Centre would lose Rs 1.3 lakh crore. That will cause a 4.6% shortfall in the Centre's net tax revenues. Some of it might be offset by higher dividends from oil PSUs, but the net impact would still be about 4%.

The Modi government will face another major dilemma. Every \$10 increase in the price of crude adds 0.3 percentage points to retail inflation. Crude sustained at \$110 would mean retail inflation going up by 1.2 percentage points. On the face of it, that should add to the Centre's GST earnings, but on the flip side, it could reduce direct tax collections as corporate profits and household incomes contract.

Already, corporate profit growth has slowed down significantly. The combined net profit of the top 500 companies that make up the NSE 500 index grew by just 4.3% in the third quarter of 2025-26, which is a sharp drop from the 14% growth in the first quarter. Even when adjusted for extraordinary income, net profit growth has dropped from 17.7% in the first quarter to 11.5% in the third.

Many brokerages and investment banks are expecting corporate earnings in India to contract by 10-15% if the Iran war disruptions continue. Indian companies will look to protect their margins by further cutting wage costs. White-collar workers could end up being the biggest losers and that, in turn, will cause middle-class consumption to contract.

It is a vicious cycle that would impact the revenues of consumer-facing companies. The only way to sustain economic growth would be for the Centre to spend more by increasing the fiscal deficit. Increased government borrowing could push up interest rates and further impact investments and consumption. This is probably the worst economic crisis that PM Modi has faced so far. Only a quick end to the war can normalise the situation.

Only a quick end to the war can stabilise markets. Until then, uncertainty will dominate the economy.

QUICK CROSSWORD

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8					9	
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17					18	19
21		22			23	
24					25	

ACROSS

- Defensive wall (7)
- Crash-land at sea (5)
- Begin to suspect (3,4,2)
- Silvery-white metal (3)
- Line of parental descent (4)
- Causing no distress (8)
- Character (6)
- Intense mental effort (6)
- Entitled to be chosen (8)
- Prevent (4)
- Impart new colour to (3)
- On the contrary (3,4,2)
- Ending in disaster (5)
- Fail to heed orders of (7)

DOWN

- Sham (5)
- Item in auction (3)
- Eager (4)
- Abduct (6)
- Clear and distinct (8)
- Till it's all over (2,3,4)
- Actively involved in person (5-2)
- Damage (9)
- Productive (8)
- Boundless (2,3,2)
- Elaborately decorated (6)
- Tensely cogent (5)
- Weapons of war (4)
- Rabble (3)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Goodwill, 5 Acme, 9 Bossy, 10 Grenade, 11 Put a damper on, 13 Amends, 14 Knight, 17 Haute cuisine, 20 Tidings, 21 Evict, 22 Care, 23 Bludgeon.

Down: 1 Gobi, 2 Obscure, 3 Ways and means, 4 Logjam, 6 Chair, 7 Eternity, 8 Keep one's head, 12 Pathetic, 15 Genuine, 16 Mussel, 18 Under, 19 Stun.

SU DO KU

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

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR
MARCH 30, 2026, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 9
- Chaitra Purnashti 17
- Hijri 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 12, up to 7:10 am
- Shoola Yoga up to 4:51 pm
- Magha Nakshatra up to 2:48 pm
- Moon in Leo sign

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	27	20
New Delhi	31	21
Amritsar	28	20
Bathinda	28	20
Jalandhar	28	20
Ludhiana	28	20
Bhiwani	30	20
Hisar	30	20
Sirsa	28	20
Dharamasala	23	10
Manali	14	03
Shimla	18	07
Srinagar	17	08
Jammu	29	15
Kargil	13	06
Leh	14	03
Dehradun	30	15
Mussoorie	22	12



Frequently you have a clash between the more sterile letter of the law and the justice that underlies it...

Harold H Greene

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

-Rammath Goenka

MEDIATION SIGNALS RISE, TABLES CLAIMED, NOT LAID, WAR FRONT SETS THE PACE

DIPLomatic signalling is intensifying across West Asia, but the gap between such overtures and reality is widening. Mediation is being offered, channels are opening and multiple actors are rushing to claim space at the negotiating table...

The arrival of USS Tripoli, carrying some 3,500 sailors and marines, shows the hard edge behind the messaging. The Americans have confirmed its deployment as Washington weighs its next move.

Efforts to contain escalation are becoming increasingly precarious, with no clear diplomatic track on offer. Countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are positioning themselves to open channels...

Managing rivalries, securing energy flows and stabilising a fragile region ultimately depends on more powerful stakeholders already party to the conflict and their willingness to opt for the path of diplomacy.

This is the key change. The war is no longer confined or linear. It is becoming multi-fronted, with the possibility that non-state actors can shape escalation as much as states.

NOT IDEAL, BUT NECESSARY: T'GANA'S ELDER CARE LAW

THE Telangana Employees Accountability and Monitoring of Parental Support Bill, 2026 has been passed by the Telangana government, broadly in line with the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007.

The move reflects a pressing need, especially in a country that often invokes the ideal of matrudevo bhava, pitrudevo bhava, yet increasingly falls short in practice.

Jesus radiated the lustre of a chosen being, which powerfully affected those blessed to see him that day. He was welcomed into the city to happy cries of 'Hosanna'...

This raises a difficult question: can legislation alone address what is essentially a moral crisis? Existing laws, including the central Act and similar measures in states such as Assam, Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Himachal Pradesh, have not fully alleviated the problem.

QUICK TAKE

PUFF NESTS

ACROSS Ecuador, Poland, Mexico and New Zealand, birds such as Darwin's finches, blue tits, house finches and song thrushes have been found collecting cigarette butts and placing them in their nests.

SONAM Wangchuk's detention under the National Security Act (NSA) and the manner in which the Supreme Court dealt with the petition filed by his wife, Gitanjali Angmo, leave several unanswered questions.

The order of detention was passed on September 26, 2025, alleging that Wangchuk was indulging in activities prejudicial to the security of the State...

While in normal circumstances, given the record of the court prior to 2014, the petition would have been dealt with forthwith, keeping aside all other matters...

Upon detention, the detenu has certain procedural rights, entitling him to make representations to the state government and an advisory board.

The manner in which the proceedings were adjourned from time to time is evident from the fact that, after Wangchuk's detention, a petition for his release was filed on October 2, 2025...

The matter then saw little movement through December and early January due to repeated non-listing or paucity of time. Substantive hearings only commenced from January 8, 2026...

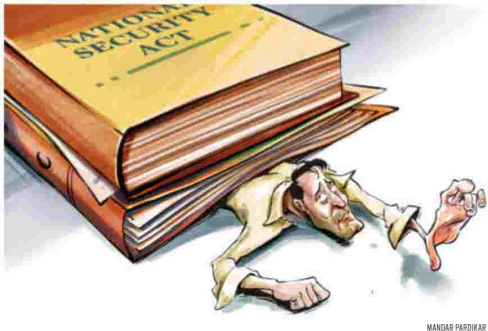
The case shows how delayed court action and repeated adjournments can undermine justice, leaving important questions about liberty unanswered when detention orders are revoked before final judgement

LOOKING BACK AT JUSTICE IN SONAM WANGCHUK'S CASE

KAPIL SIBAL



Senior lawyer and member of Rajya Sabha



MANOJ PADHARI

Human freedoms are precious. They need to be protected through a court system that cherishes such freedoms. Surely, there is a sense of immediacy that must be reflected in the orders of the court...

This is not the first time that the Supreme Court has dealt with preventive detention in a somewhat casual manner. After the abrogation of Article 370, Omar Abdullah, Feroz Khan Noon and Mehbooba Mufti were detained under the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA), 1978...

government time to respond. The State claimed that the sensitive security situation did not warrant their immediate release. The court sought a status report from the government.

Article 21 is the heart and soul of the freedoms enshrined in the Constitution. They cannot be casually dealt with, and legal challenges must be swiftly remedied either way.

Similarly, Feroz Khan Noon's petition challenging his detention under the PSA

PALMS, PASSOVER, PROMISE



RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

he would die there, but what was the significance of that festival? It falls this year from the evening of Wednesday, April 1 to Thursday, April 9 which lets me convey warm Passover greetings to all Jewish readers.

Passover, called Pesach in Hebrew, commemorates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, where they were enslaved by the Pharaohs. They were so crushed and exhausted by their daily forced labour and whippings that they were in no mental state to seek their god Yahweh, or think spiritual thoughts.



Palm Sunday marks the day when Jesus entered Jerusalem to observe the Jewish festival of Passover which resonates with Indian belief that god, from time to time, comes to save people from atrocities. The gathering involves a retelling of the exodus and eating special foods that evoke the supreme sacrifice

According to the Shemot or Book of Exodus in the Torah, Yahweh commanded Moses to tell the Israelites to slaughter a lamb and mark their door frames with its blood, and eat the lamb for dinner. For that night, he would send the Angel of Death to execute the tenth plague, in which he would smite all the firstborn in Egypt.

Hence, the name Passover. This resonates with Indian belief, as in the idea that god himself comes to save us from age to age.

The chief Seder items, which Jesus, too, would have eaten, are maror or bitter herbs, recalling the suffering of the Jews in Egypt. Their word for Egypt is Mitzrayim, 'the narrow place', from which Hindi gets the word 'Miser' for Egypt.

The second must-have on the Seder plate is charoset, a sweet, brown mixture symbolising the brick and mortar enslaved Jews used to construct buildings in Egypt.

Moses says in Deuteronomy 24:18-19: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you are harvesting in your field, and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."

(Views are personal) (shebaba@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Overloading economy

Ref: India's missed and messed opportunities (Mar 29). The column should be an eye-opener with these facts being hidden by the general public. Moreover, the burden on the economy can be managed by regulating soaring electricity generation expenditure and dole handouts.

Disconnected diplomacy

Ref: At crossroads of global trust (Mar 29). S Jaishankar's balancing act has kept India's strategic options open - a small achievement in a fragmenting world. Yet, Pakistan's mediation success exposed a deeper gap: protocol expertise without domestic political grounding eventually produces diplomacy disconnected from strategic instinct.

Policy seriousness

Ref: Cue in tech solutions to break queues (Mar 29). Queue management through technology is not a distant aspiration - Tirupati and Vaishno Devi have already demonstrated it works at scale. The solutions exist. What is missing is the institutional seriousness to implement them consistently across government services.

Inflation burden

Ref: Fuel price cushion tough to maintain if crude keeps rising (Mar 28). Oil marketing firms in India have demonstrated robust profitability under market-linked pricing, attributing their current stress to policy restraint. By delaying retail price adjustments, the State effectively transfers the burden of inflation management onto them.

Denied growth

Ref: Transgender who? (Mar 29). A narrow definition combined with lack of self-identification, pushes trans individuals further to their closets, when they should be made active participants of Viksit Bharat. Regressive constitutional interpretation combined with legislative and administrative apathy speaks volumes about the same.

Jewar airport is useful but market economy needs a bigger boost

Inauguration of the Noida International Airport at Jewar in Uttar Pradesh is a piece of good news at a time when most happenings, from the protracted conflict in Iran to the fear of shortages in India, are unpleasant. The second international airport in the Delhi-National Capital Region, Jewar has a 3,900-metre runway that is capable of handling low-visibility operations; it can also function during winter fog disruptions. Built at an estimated cost of around Rs 11,200 crore, it has a terminal for rapid passenger processing. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) granted the airport its aerodrome licence this month along with approval for "all-weather operations". This clearance is given when the Instrument Land-

ing System (ILS), navigation aids, runway lighting, and air traffic systems are in place. Inaugurating the airport, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rightly pointed out that airports are not merely amenities but catalysts for progress. The Noida airport will benefit a vast region encompassing Agra, Mathura, Aligarh, Ghaziabad, Meerut, Etawah, Bulandshahr and Faridabad. With 160 airports, air connectivity in India is now reaching not just metropolitan cities but also smaller towns, he said. Speaking on the occasion, Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu said the project is being developed as an "aerotropolis", which will integrate cargo infrastructure to help locally manufactured goods access domestic and global markets.

If the operations are carried out as planned, industrial growth in the country's largest state will certainly get a leg up. Plus, the proposed Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) facility, which will be spread over 40 acres, will generate jobs. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who faces Assembly polls next year, is also bullish about Jewar. "This airport will boost investment, trade and industrial development in north India, while also generating large-scale employment." It is heartening to notice that top leaders at both the Centre and in states are keen on promoting the aviation sector, but this boost must be comprehensive, reflecting in all aspects of the sector—from infrastructure building to operations. That, alas, is not

happening. "The current government has made air travel accessible for the common Indian," the Prime Minister said. He spoke about the expansion of the Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) - UDAN ("Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik"), which was launched in October 2016. The government has already approved a modified version of the scheme with a total outlay of Rs 28,840 crore. But the problem is that the scheme has been a failure, which is not surprising because it is essentially anti-liberalisation. The government must realise that market realities cannot be ignored in its bid to promote anything, whether a sector or people. The fundamental issue with UDAN lies in its structural design. By relying heavily on subsidies

and fare caps, the scheme distorts pricing mechanisms that are essential for the sustainability of the aviation sector—indeed, the entire economy. Many routes under UDAN have struggled with low passenger demand, leading to frequent cancellations or withdrawals by carriers. Airlines, operating on thin margins even under normal conditions, find it difficult to maintain profitability on routes where demand does not justify capacity. Therefore, the success of projects like the Jewar airport will ultimately depend not just on their physical infrastructure but on the broader ecosystem in which they operate. The market economy must replace dirigisme, which endeavours to foster industrial growth and meet socioeconomic goals.

LETTERS

UN needs gradual reforms

The article "War, peace and the future of (United) Nations" (THI, March 29) makes for a balanced assessment of the UN's limitations in a fractured world. However, scrapping the present structure entirely seems unrealistic. A practical way forward could be in introducing gradual reforms like expanding the number of permanent members to reflect contemporary realities, introducing more transparent decision-making processes, and strengthening the General Assembly's role in preventive diplomacy. Only sustained diplomatic engagement, not radical overhaul, can make the global body UN more effective in preserving peace.

M Banathi, Bengaluru-560076

Big five must limit their veto authority

This is further to the article "War, peace and the future of (United) Nations" (March 29). It raises a concern that has become impossible to ignore: the United Nations, as currently structured, is better suited for deliberation and not for any decisive intervention. The veto power of permanent Security Council members was a conscious compromise in 1945. Meaningful reform requires permanent members to voluntarily limit their veto authority in cases of mass atrocities. That demands political will that currently does not exist.

Abbharna Barathi, Chennai-23

Reform the Security Council

This refers to the article "War, peace and moral courage" (paramount...) (THI, March 29). The piece rightly highlights the UN's constrained role in preventing conflicts, urging bolder leadership from powers like India and the US. Yet, true progress demands more than rhetoric—reforming the Security Council veto mechanism and bolstering preventive diplomacy through neutral forums could be impactful. Nations must prioritise multilateral funding for early-warning systems over unilateral posturing. Only such pragmatic steps will restore the UN's moral authority amid rising global tensions.

S M S Azamem, Sri Vijaya Puram (Port Blair) - 744011

Constructive change alone can help sustain peace

I went through the article "War, peace and the future of (United) Nations" published on March 29. A practical way forward would be in strengthening regional cooperation, empowering neutral mediators, and encouraging consensus-building rather than dependence on veto powers. Incremental reforms, such as expanding representation in the Security Council, could also make the institution more credible. Constructive change, not rhetoric, will sustain peace.

K Sakuntala, Coimbatore-641016

Cybercrime cops leave senior citizens in the lurch

A group of senior citizens on a Kerala trip tried to book a hotel in Kanyakumari through Google. Their driver conducted a man posing as hotel staff, who asked for an advance of Rs4,000, which was duly paid. The fraudster then claimed he would refund the amount but asked them to resend it in two parts—Rs2,500 and Rs1,500. Sensing a scam, they threatened to report him, and he quickly deleted his Google listing. The victims filed a cybercrime complaint that was later transferred to Cyberabad as they are Hyderabad residents. Shockingly, instead of tracing the fraudster using transaction details and phone numbers, police demanded the victims' Aadhaar cards and bank statements. Why must victims provide themselves before the culprit is traced? Fearing misuse of data, they refused and dropped the case. This apathy shows cybercrime authorities are not serious about investigating smaller frauds and that too those involving senior citizens.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad-103

Conflicts of West Asia are never resolved

This is further to your March 27 editorial "The stalemate in West Asia is not a good augury". The Editorial column rightly brings out the current situation in West Asia. In West Asia, quiet has never meant resolution, only preparation for the next round of attacks, while peace never means peace in the region. It could be a potential threat to the world. Conflicts of West Asia are never resolved; rather they pose a serious threat to world peace. We can never see peaceful settlement of Gaza or recognition for the Palestine State. The editorial rightly points out that the war on Iran has been a huge miscalculation on the part of Washington. The focus of the war has shifted to the Strait of Hormuz. While US President Donald Trump has paused all attacks on Iran till April 6, Tehran has reiterated that the war will end only on its terms. Iran has turned this into an energy war by blocking the passage of vessels carrying oil and gas through the Strait. A pause in the war never means real time peace and settlement. The US wants to bring in a regime change in Iran as it wants a leader who will get with its demands. Regime change will happen only when people of Iran rebel against the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. What does the present stalemate hold for the future world order? Only time will tell.

Parimala G Tadasi, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

BAF welcomes move to implement KAOMA Act through Ordinance, urges swift rollout

BENGALURU: The Bengaluru Apartments Federation (BAF) has welcomed the State Government's decision to implement the Karnataka Apartment Ownership and Management Act (KAOMA) through an ordinance, following an assurance by Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar on the final day of the budget session in the Legislative Assembly.

Issuing a statement, BAF President Satish Malysa said, "We are indebted to the Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar and leaders of all parties for bringing the KAOMA discussion to the forefront in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly. We also thank the Chief Minister and officials of the Urban Development and Parliamentary Affairs Departments for their sustained efforts over the years in shaping this crucial Act."

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

All political parties must stand united when external dangers threaten the country

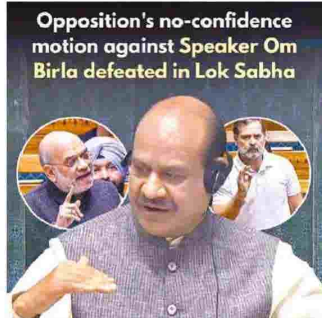


RAVULAPATI SEETARAMA RAO

Parliament is a tool for preserving democracy and it should be treated so and not as an ornament. Laws that benefit the people must be shaped and used through open debate. When the Lok Sabha Speaker and Rajya Sabha Chairman conduct their respective houses of people's representatives in an orderly, impartial way and in the public interest, laws for development and welfare can be drafted and implemented to truly reach the nation. There's no point repeatedly invoking memories of past days and comparing today's Speaker to the late Speaker Ananthasayanam Ayyangar or the Chairman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. It's not necessary to boast that representatives in their time never crossed the line. Circumstances change with time. People's behaviour changes with passing of time. Unexpected developments can produce extreme consequences. Merely criticizing that democracy is turning into one party rule and assuming the outcomes will be different is

a mistake. Members of the people's houses must conduct themselves with basic natural justice, dignity, and respect, while the presiding officers must run the sittings respectfully and properly as well. The recent developments haven't gone too far yet, but if the two houses continue to be run without change and representatives do not alter their conduct, it will fuel a powerful perception that democracy is nearing its end in the country.

The no-confidence motion (under Article 94C of the Constitution) proposed to remove incumbent Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla was defeated on March 11 by a voice vote, making it necessary to reassess the situation. But the defeat of the motion did not resolve the problems that had arisen in the House. Debates were heated and at times embarrassingly uncomfortable to watch. A spirit of conciliation was absent on either side. In the past, even when proceedings were intense and both sides grew passionate, viewers still saw efforts by the treasury and Opposition benches to adopt a spirit of compromise for the sake of public welfare. In earlier instances, even amid fierce debate, there was a sense that leaders were trying to be accommodative. That attitude is missing now; what we see instead are increasingly bitter confrontations between the two sides. Those who once sought conciliation have fallen silent; those who provoke have grown more brazen. When the leaders



Opposition's no-confidence motion against Speaker Om Birla defeated in Lok Sabha

Members of the people's houses must conduct themselves with basic natural justice, dignity, and respect, while the presiding officers must run the sittings respectfully and properly as well. The recent developments haven't gone too far yet, but if the two houses continue to be run without change and representatives do not alter their conduct, it will fuel a powerful perception that democracy is nearing its end in the country

entrusted with bringing both sides together fail to try, or when every leader is supposed to try but the efforts are ineffective, who can do anything about it? When a party in power, through its cabinet, appoints representatives to the House, it must act within the constitutional framework and follow the procedures that have been established. But if, up to now, a party in power has been attempting to present its majority as unassailable and to control all members—whether in the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha—

thereby stifling debate and leaving presiding officers with no room to maneuver, and if the Opposition is refusing to yield or to engage constructively and is behaving as if there is no responsibility on it to respond, then it is clear that leaders on all sides must change their approach. When the opposition moved a resolution to remove Jagdeep Dhankar as Rajya Sabha chairman, he resigned from the vice-president's post for some reason without any occasion arising from that resolution. When

that happened, the opposition again brought a no-confidence motion seeking to remove Speaker Om Birla. But the Speaker ruled that there was credible information that some Congress Lok Sabha women members might do something against Prime Minister Modi, so there was no need for the Prime Minister to answer in the House; the ruling enraged the opposition and they introduced the motion. It was defeated. Getting to the point, the opposition says the Speaker is not allowing them to raise important issues that they want to be discussed in the House, and that even when they are speaking, the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi's microphone, is being cut off. Outside the House they level charges and the ruling party tried, with figures and arguments, to show that those charges were unfounded.

In particular, they accused the Speaker of cutting Rahul's mic while he was trying to refer to that former army officer M N Naravane wrote about Modi in his book. They also faulted him for not allowing Rahul to speak on numerous occasions—saying he was stopped about 20 times (and citing an incident in February when he was not allowed to speak after a dispute). They even claimed the opposition was prevented from criticizing a resolution thanking the President. The government rebutted these points, arguing that they were incorrect. The opposition alleged they were given only 56 per cent of Zero Hour time.

The ruling party must take the initiative, make a determined effort, and create an atmosphere in which war-related issues can be faced together.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

The burning highway: Rectifying the fatal flaws in Indian bus transportation

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

"The quality of a nation is often judged by how it protects its citizens on the move; on Indian roads, that protection is currently a vanishing mirage."

India's road network, the second largest in the world, is also one of its deadliest. The recent tragedy in Markapuram, where passengers were burnt alive following a collision, is not an isolated freak accident. It is the predictable outcome of a transport ecosystem plagued by regulatory apathy, poor vehicle design, and a lack of safety enforcement. To prevent such "rolling coffins" from claiming more lives, we must examine what ails the system and adopt global best practices.

What ails Indian bus transport? The primary issue in Indian bus transport is the dichotomy between state-run and private operators. While state transport undertakings (STUs) often suffer from aging fleets and poor maintenance, the private sector is frequently characterized by a "profit-at-all-costs" mentality.

- Poor body building standards:** Many private buses are built on truck chassis by unorganized workshops to save costs. These structures lack "roll-over" strength and are often made of highly flammable materials (wooden flooring, rexine seats, and plastic interiors), which turn the vehicle into a furnace within seconds of a collision.
- Fatigue and driver over-exploitation:** Drivers often work 12-16-hour shifts without adequate rest to meet tight schedules. In the Markapuram incident, fatigue or high-speed maneuvering of the tipper truck and bus are likely contributors.
- Lack of emergency exits:** Indian buses frequently have blocked emergency exits and making them inaccessible. In the event of a fire, as seen in this tragedy, passengers are unable to evacuate before smoke inhalation or flames overtake them.

Global best practices-A roadmap for safety: Across the globe, countries with low road fatality rates have implemented stringent "safe system" ap-



The tragedy in Andhra Pradesh is a clarion call for the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. We cannot continue to treat road deaths as mere statistics or "acts of God." Technology to prevent these deaths exists; what is missing is the political will to prioritize human life over industry profit margins. Until we enforce a "safety-first" culture, our highways will remain a gamble with death

proaches that India must emulate. Sweden's "vision zero": Sweden pioneered the "vision zero" philosophy, which operates on the premise that humans make mistakes therefore, the transport system must be so designed that those mistakes are not fatal. This includes "2+1" roads with a central cable barrier to prevent head-on collisions, the exact type of accident reported in the news item. European Bus Construction Standards (UN ECE R66): The European Union enforces the R66 regulation, which ensures the "superstructure" of the bus remains intact during a rollover, maintaining a "survival space" for passengers. Furthermore, all materials used in the interior must be fire-retardant.

Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS): In many developed nations, heavy vehicles are mandated to have Autonomous Emergency Braking (AEB) and Lane Departure Warning (LDW). If a driver dozes off or fails to see a tipper truck ahead, the vehicle automatically applies brakes.

What needs to be done in India?

- To stop the recurring nightmares on our highways, a multi-pronged overhaul is required:
 - Mandatory Fire Suppression Systems:** Every long-distance bus should be equipped with automated fire detection and suppression systems (FDSS) in the engine compartment and interior.
 - Enforcing the Bus Body Code (AIS-052):** The government must strictly enforce that all buses, especially private ones, are built only by accredited bodybuilders using fire-retardant materials.
 - Electronic Logging Devices (ELDs):** To combat driver fatigue, India should mandate ELDs in all commercial vehicles to track driving hours and ensure mandatory rest

(The writer is a former OSD to Union Civil Aviation Minister)

The Statesman

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the Friends of India - founded 1818

Redefining Identity

India's latest amendment to its transgender rights framework signals a decisive turn in how the state understands identity - not as something lived and asserted, but as something to be verified, certified, and ultimately, controlled. This shift is striking because it departs from the constitutional trajectory set by the Supreme Court in NALSA v. Union of India, which affirmed self-identification as central to dignity and personal liberty. That judgment did not merely recognise a 'third gender'; it located gender identity within the domain of individual autonomy, insulated from bureaucratic gatekeeping.

The new amendment, by contrast, moves identity back into the hands of institutions - medical boards, district authorities, and official certification bodies. The government's argument is not without logic: Welfare systems require classification. Benefits must be targeted.

In a country where resources are finite and vulnerabilities are layered, the state seeks clearer categories to ensure that those facing the harshest forms of marginalisation are not crowded out by broader or more fluid definitions. Administrative clarity, in this view, is a tool of social justice.

But clarity, when imposed from above, often comes at the cost of exclusion. By narrowing the definition of who qualifies as a transgender, the amendment risks leaving out those whose identities do not conform to medicalised or traditional frameworks - particularly non-binary and gender-fluid individuals. More fundamentally, it transforms recognition from a right into a process. Identity becomes something one must prove, rather than something one possesses.

This has consequences that extend beyond paperwork. In a society where transgender persons already face barriers in education, employment, and healthcare, the introduction of certification layers may deepen, rather than ease, access. A person denied recognition is not merely excluded from benefits; they are pushed further into invisibility, their existence rendered administratively uncertain.

There is also a deeper constitutional tension at play. The logic of self-identification is rooted in privacy and dignity - principles that the Supreme Court has repeatedly expanded in recent years. Replacing that logic with medical verification raises an uncomfortable question: can the state both recognise a person's identity and simultaneously subject it to institutional approval? The answer will shape not just transgender rights, but the broader relationship between the individual and the state.

The amendment, then, is not a minor recalibration. It reflects a competing philosophy of governance, one that prioritises order over autonomy, and definitional precision over lived complexity. Whether this model delivers more effective welfare is an open question.

What is clearer is that it redefines the terms on which recognition itself is granted. India now stands at a crossroads. It can either continue along a rights-based path that trusts individuals to define themselves, or it can move towards a system where identity is something the state confirms. The choice will determine not only how transgender citizens are seen, but how citizenship itself is understood.

Thin Mandate

Denmark's latest election has delivered a result that is numerically decisive yet politically hollow. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen remains at the centre of power, but the authority that once underpinned her leadership has visibly thinned. Leading the largest party with just over a fifth of the vote, she now faces a landscape where electoral victory does not translate into governing strength.

This is not an unfamiliar pattern in European parliamentary systems, but the Danish case is particularly instructive. For nearly a decade, Ms Frederiksen has embodied a model of pragmatic social conservatism - tight on immigration, expansive on welfare, and steady during crises. That formula once consolidated broad support. Today, it appears to have reached its limits. Voters have not decisively rejected her; they have simply stopped reinforcing her.

The fragmentation of the Danish Parliament reveals more than just electoral arithmetic. It reflects a deeper recalibration of political expectations. Issues such as the cost of living, environmental strain from intensive agriculture, and long-term welfare sustainability have shifted the debate inward. Even the geopolitical noise surrounding Greenland, amplified by disruptive figures like President Donald Trump, failed to override domestic anxieties. The electorate, in effect, has signalled that competence in crisis is no longer sufficient; it must be matched by clarity in everyday governance.

Into this vacuum steps Lars Løkke Rasmussen, whose Moderates now occupy the pivotal middle ground. His position is not merely tactical but emblematic of a broader European trend: the erosion of binary politics and the rise of centrist brokerage. Whether he aligns left or right is almost secondary; what matters is that policy direction will now be negotiated, not declared.

This moment also underscores a structural shift in European politics, where electoral outcomes increasingly produce negotiation-heavy governments rather than decisive mandates. As party systems fragment, the centre of gravity moves away from voters and toward post-election bargaining, subtly redefining where democratic power is actually exercised.

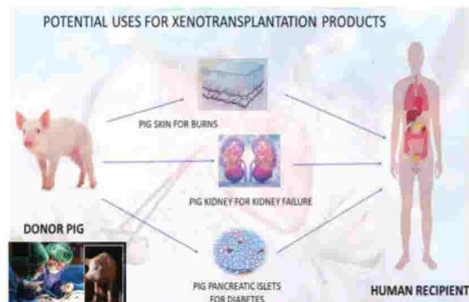
The likely outcome - a centrist coalition stitching together ideologically diverse partners - will ensure continuity but dilute decisiveness. Such governments are often stable in form yet cautious in function, prioritising consensus over ambition. In Denmark's case, this may translate into incremental policy adjustments rather than bold reform, particularly on contentious issues like agricultural emissions or welfare restructuring.

What emerges, then, is a subtle but important shift. Denmark is not experiencing political upheaval; it is undergoing political compression. The distance between competing blocs has narrowed, and with it, the scope for decisive mandates. Power has not changed hands, but it has changed character.

Ms Frederiksen may yet secure a third term, but it will be defined less by leadership than by management. The electorate has not withdrawn trust entirely, but it has placed conditions on it. In doing so, Danish voters have delivered a quiet but firm message: stability is valued, but authority must now be earned anew, not inherited from past performance.

Porcine salvation

Pigs have emerged as the preferred source for xenotransplantation because their organs closely resemble human organs in size and structure. They are easy to obtain. Pigs breed twice a year, sometimes thrice, with litters averaging eight to twelve piglets. Cloning of pigs is easily doable and their genomes can be edited by a pair of molecular scissors known as 'Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats'



Pigs, in general, do not enjoy much respect in modern society. An exception, however, is found in George Orwell's story 'Animal Farm,' where the pig is portrayed as an intelligent and persuasive animal who inspires other animals to aspire to a better future. However, in Hindu mythology, the pig occupies a position of reverence. The boar or Varaha is worshipped as an avatar of Lord Vishnu. An avatar is believed to descend to Earth to protect righteousness and eliminate evil.

According to Hindu mythology, Lord Vishnu assumed the form of Varaha to rescue the Earth after the demon Hiranyaksha submerged it in the cosmic ocean. In recent times, the pig has re-emerged as an avatar of a different kind - one with the potential to save millions of human lives in urgent need of kidney transplants.

Thousands of kidney patients die due to the lack of availability of suitable kidneys for transplant. The demand for kidney transplants for patients with acute renal failure has been increasing at a rapid rate in recent years, while the availability of donors is astonishingly small.

According to current statistics, in India, an estimated 2,00,000 patients require kidney transplants every year. However, only about 4 per cent of them can finally have a kidney transplant, leaving a huge gap between supply and demand.

Bridging this gap only with human donors is impossible due to various ethical and medical issues. This shortage is not unique to India; globally, only about ten per cent of patients in need receive organ transplants. Addressing this crisis poses a formidable challenge for scientists and healthcare professionals worldwide.

The primary alternative for survival in such cases is dialysis - a painful and demanding procedure. In conventional dialysis, one needle withdraws blood from

the patient while another returns the filtered blood to the body. For dialysis to be effective, reliable vascular access is essential. However, dialysis cannot reverse kidney damage, and ultimately, transplantation remains the only definitive solution. For decades, scientists and medical professionals have been striving to resolve the global organ shortage. Recently, a promising solution has emerged through the use of genetically modified pig kidneys, as reported in several major scientific publications.

The transplantation of organs from one species to another is known as 'xenotransplant', originating from the Greek word 'xeno' meaning foreign or alien. It is to be noted that attempts at kidney xenotransplantation date back to the 1960s, with the groundbreaking research done by Professor Keith Reemtsma of Tulane University in the US, using kidneys of chimpanzees. One of the patients survived for about nine months, which was considered to be a feat at a time when their dialysis access was extremely limited.

Pigs have emerged as the preferred source for xenotransplantation because their organs closely resemble human organs in size and structure. They are easy to obtain. Pigs breed twice a year, sometimes thrice, with litters averaging eight to twelve piglets. Cloning (a process that creates a genetically identical copy of an organism, cell or gene) of pigs is easily doable and their genomes can be edited by a pair of molecular scissors known as 'Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats' or, in brief, CRISPR.

Owing to these advantages, scientists believe that pig organs are the best source for human xenotransplantation to address the organ shortage crisis. Supported by advances in gene editing and immunosuppressive medicine, eGenesis, an American-based

company, has demonstrated that its organs could survive for long periods in the bodies of primates.

Genome editing or gene editing is a technique that enables changing an organism's DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid). In simple words, DNA is like an instruction manual for life processes. It contains all the instructions for building and running the life processes of all living things. It is a double-stranded, twisted ladder-shaped molecule that stays inside the nucleus. There is another kind of molecule known as RNA (ribonucleic acid) that also carries genetic information and helps carry out DNA's instructions by making proteins, which are the building blocks of life.

Gene editing operates much like editing a manuscript, correcting misspellings, deleting or replacing words, and enables the addition, removal, or alteration of genetic material at specific locations within the genome. There are other methods also available for gene editing, but scientists have found this method to be much faster, cheaper, more accurate, and more efficient than other

methods. In the initial phase, gene editing was performed on pig DNA to eliminate genes incompatible with the human immune system. Four such problematic genes, GGTAL, CMAH, BGALNT2 and PERV, were thus removed from the DNA of the pig. The gene GGTAL was removed because this creates an antigen that the human immune system rejects. Antigens, as we know, are substances that cause the immune system to respond when introduced into the body.



SUPRAKASH CHANDRA ROY

The writer, an author, was Editor in Chief of the journal Science and Culture for about two decades

Viet Nam News

Teachers need further training in the digital age

One consistent viewpoint in the Ministry of Education and Training's policy planning is that technology is a tool and teachers are the decisive factor. In current policy, teaching staff is placed in three core positions.

First, teachers are the centre and subject of education innovation. We do not consider AI or technology a threat or replacement for teachers. Rather, we believe that teachers are masters of technology that serves educational goals. This viewpoint is consistent with the spirit of Resolution 29-NQ/TW, confirming that teaching staff is the key factor determining the success or failure of fundamental and comprehensive educational reform. AI can assist in teaching literacy, but only teachers can inspire and cultivate character in students - this is a core requirement that cannot be transferred.

Second, teachers are the highest priority in our strategy for improving capability. A project approved under Decision 131/QĐ-TTg sets a target of providing 100 per cent of teachers with training on digital skills and information security to help them effectively use technology and AI, so as to reduce their administrative workload and help them focus on their expertise.

Third, teachers' status is built and protected by a legal framework. The development of the Law on Teachers aims to expand professional autonomy, encourage the application of new technologies and link the requirement to improve skills with appropriate salary and allowance policies. This is a strategic question in terms of workforce management in the context of rapid technological development.

Using a former approach, focusing only on defining who is responsible, we would struggle to keep up with the pace of AI development and digital transformation.

Teacher training colleges play a fundamental role as initial training centres, ensuring that graduates possess the mindset and capabilities to master technology. They also serve as research institutions, assessing the suitability of technology and AI applications for students' psychology and development, preventing indiscriminate and counterproductive educational practices. The ministry's training system works as a coordinator, while State management agencies are responsible for developing and issuing a digital competency framework for teachers and monitoring the quality of training programmes, ensuring consistency and effectiveness in implementation

nationwide. In terms of practising and updating technologies, businesses are an important resource. Amid rapidly changing technology, businesses provide tools and practice platforms to test out new trends. The public-private partnership model not only helps reduce pressure on the State budget but also increases the practicality of training activities.

At present, the ministry is finalising a circular introducing the digital competency framework for teachers and educational administrators, which is expected to become a legal document applied nationwide. The framework is based on three core principles: open-ended and tiered design to suit diverse conditions and abilities of teaching staff; a focus on teachers leveraging technology and AI to create more effective lessons and assess students more accurately; and teachers' adaptability and self-improvement.

Letters To The Editor

Landmark step

Sir, I refer to the news report 'SC flags entrenched disadvantages' in denial of PC to women in Armed Forces' (March 25). The recent judgement by the Supreme Court of India on women short service commission officers is a landmark step towards substantive gender justice within the armed forces.

By recognising that the evaluation of their ACRs was shaped by a flawed assumption that these officers would never be considered for permanent commission, the Court has exposed a deeply entrenched system. For years, women officers were assessed without the prospect of career progression, inevitably impacting their merit and future opportunities.

The Court's decision not only corrects this historical injustice but also restores dignity to hundreds of dedicated officers who served with commitment despite institutional limitations.

Equally significant is the direction to grant pensionary benefits by deeming them to have completed 20 years of service. This

ensures financial security and acknowledges their contribution to the nation. By invoking its extraordinary powers, the Court has reaffirmed that equality must be meaningful, not merely symbolic. This judgment will go a long way in fostering a more inclusive and fair framework in the armed forces.

Yours, etc., Sanjay Chopra, Mohali, 25 March.

All aspects

Sir, The recent case of a gruesome death in RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, caused by the malfunctioning of a lift, raises several critical questions about the seriousness and responsiveness of authorities. The lift allegedly lacked an operator, alluding to negligence at the hospital's end.

The PWD (Electrical Wing) is entrusted with the maintenance of these lifts, and the aspect of potential oversight or neglect in reporting must be thoroughly investigated. Furthermore, the Health Department, which recently faced backlash over the case of missing eyes of a deceased patient in Barasat Medical College and Hospital, must

be held accountable and asked why such lapses are so frequent and are increasingly becoming emblematic of the state's healthcare system.

Additionally, the lift manufacturing company should be summoned and investigated for any potential defects in design. Strict accountability and a close watch on all players involved in the ecosystem, instead of fixating on an individual aspect, is key to correcting and preventing such harrowing cases.

Yours, etc., Shrestho Ghosh, Kolkata, 25 March.

Paradox

Sir, Your edit 'Sanctions Waiver' published today rightly exposes the paradox underlying the Treasury Department's decision to permit Iranian oil sales while ostensibly enforcing sanctions. By authorizing Indian purchases of Iranian crude, Pakistan's involvement, and the principled constraint in favor of pragmatic expediency.

The Strait of Hormuz analysis convincingly demonstrates how geopolitical logic can

override doctrinal consistency, particularly when supply disruptions threaten global markets.

However, the author's central insight merits amplification: sanctions designed to constrain adversaries become tools of selective enforcement when interpreted through strategic advantage rather than stable principle. India's position exemplifies this contradiction most sharply.

As a nation historically positioned to absorb Iranian oil, India gains immediate commercial benefit from ambiguous rules that permit sanctioned violations under the guise of market stability. Yet this flexibility reveals an uncomfortable truth about American energy policy: strategic partnerships and inflation prevention now supersede the disciplinary function sanctions were meant to serve.

The deeper question the article implies but doesn't fully articulate is whether selective enforcement of sanctions strengthens or undermines the credibility of sanctions regimes themselves.

Yours, etc., K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru, 24 March.

Ganga Girls - The River's Daughters

RAJA MURTHY

"The river is flowing, flowing down to the sea. Mother carry me, your child I will always be. Mother carry me down to the sea..."

Ojibwena American women

From Lake Superior's primordial shores, from the mighty Mississippi and Missouri river women in rivers of the North American heartland prayed to Mother Akia and mermaid-like Nibinnu spirits.

Great rivers connect cities and continents, people, and cultures. Nari Nauka ('Woman's Boat') - India's first training programme for female river rafting guides - is connecting training for a livelihood to training for living a better life.

In India, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Scotland and Costa Rica, top river rafting veterans from the US-based 'Worldwide Women of Whitewater' are training young women to be masters of their rafts and kayaks as masters of their lives, conquer fears, gender barriers, self-doubts and weakness causing problems in the work they do, and with whom they work.

Nari Nauka's third edition is running from March 20 to 28 in the ancient Himalayan gateway town of Rishikesh. No coincidences, I often say, only the Law of Cause and Effect at work. Nothing happens 'by chance'.

I practice Vipassana alone in a heavenly abode between Nanda Devi and Drona Giri - two of India's tallest and revered Himalayan peaks. I live below towering cliffs in a mountain forest, beside the silvery Dhauri Ganga river flowing to Rishikesh 300 kms away.

Alone in the mountains, I am sometimes asked: 'are you not afraid?' No, I reply. Vipassana practice reduces the ego and self-centeredness. Fear reduces when thinking more about the safety, welfare of others than oneself.

Likewise, for young women who began their own individual journey to freedom from fear. They are where I am, in Uttarakhand, the beautiful Himalayan state called 'Land of the Gods'. The 14 Nari Nauka pioneers came from villages along the Ganges, the sacred river considered daughter of the Himalayas.

The Ganga Girls

Among the pioneering 14 women was 23-year-old Priyanka Rana from Sirasu, a scenic village 20-minutes' drive from Rishikesh. She grew up like other 'water babies' by the Ganges - children revering the river. 'Maa Ganga has always been a source of peace, strength and healing,' she said.

Small of stature and big of heart, Priyanka passed gruelling training, physical tests, and the government's river guide exam. She became the first female safety kayaker with Red Chillies Adventure, a gold standard company in India's fast growing adventure sports industry (Rs 16



The Ganga Girls

lakh crore/US\$ 19 billion turnover in 2025 - IMARC Group).

Co-founded by Arvind Bhardwaj and Vipin Kumar Sharma, Red Chillies owns a rare TripAdvisor 4.9 rating - higher than the iconic Taj Mahal Palace (4.7) and The Oberoi (4.8) in my home city of Mumbai.

With Red Chillies Rafting and Nari Nauka trainers, Priyanka and other Ganga girls learnt to read the river's boil lines, hold ferry angles against hydraulics, shout clear commands to paddlers amid the spray-splashed mayhem of 'Return to Sender' and 'Wall' Grade 4 rapids. They learnt rescue and self-rescue in the water. After a fall, learn to haul yourself back.

Red Chillies's Vipin is confident girls can succeed as rafting guides. 'I believe we have to follow our heart in what we do in life,' he says.

Follow your heart and gain support of universal forces. The nine-day Nari Nauka's this March is unfolding during the nine-day Navratri festival of warrior goddess Durga. Nine returning graduates are mentoring nine new women. Organizers happily see this cosmic symmetry.

"Serendipity," said rafting veterans Elisha McArthur and Jess Ransom when I said I was titling their story as 'River's Daughters'. They told me of their senior colleague Bridget Crocker's memoir titled 'The River's Daughter'.

In 'River's Daughter', Bridget shares how she battled life's turbulent currents. She survived traumatic relationship breakdowns, betrayals. She faced death on the Zambezi river in the African wilds. She fought storms arising in the impermanence of all things.

"When you can control your boat in the river, then you can also control your life outside India's leading female kayaker Naina Adhikari declared in the award-winning documentary 'Ganga Girls'. Naina began her river adventures as a terrified 13-year-old. A decade later she represented India in two kayaking World Championships and two World Cups in Germany and the Czech Republic.

Self-discovery becomes the greater inner adventure. Naina and her Ganga sisters are discovering how courage comes not merely from harnessing the power of rivers or mountains, but from emotional self-dependence - from within.

The author's 'Mind Book: The Mind Age Version' is available worldwide as paperback via Amazon.in, and as free ebook from www.globetogod.blogspot.com

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

Two shameful words

There is a familiar feeling that is so shameful that the English had no word for it. It is the feeling of joy at others' misery. Your wealthy neighbor's shiny mansion, compared to which your modest house seemed a hovel, is suddenly wrecked by a cruel tornado; you feel a sudden surge of malicious pleasure that is immense, but you will never publicly own it.

What about the other nasty feeling when you feel unhappy because somebody you know has had a good break and enjoying it greatly? Your colleague wins a lottery and decides to go on a lavish world tour; it makes you miserable to think of his luck while you save pennies for a modest tourist spot in your own country. Once again, the Germans have come to our rescue with a word, Gluckssmerz, which is yet to enter the English dictionary.

It means misery at others' joy, a disreputable sentiment that many of us feel but are reluctant to admit.

I begin with these two squalid sentiments because I want to meditate on how contrary they are to our role as social beings. When we choose

to live in a society, with all its benefits like security, order, support and conveniences, we agree implicitly to care for others around us, assuming they would care for us. To enjoy their misery or resent their happiness contradicts that implicit agreement.

When we lived in the woods as hunter-gatherers, we covered others' backs because that is the way we all survived. Later, as we learned agriculture and lived as farming communities, we needed to share seeds and water and put our shoulders together to produce our food. When industry came and revolutionized our communities, giant factories and workshops put us together to produce goods. Now, as many industrial societies are moving in the service economy phase, we are seeing a new trend: technology is allowing many to work, individually, in an isolated fashion, from home.

As Artificial Intelligence seeps into every fiber of our society - education, medicine, industry, research, even sports - many of our collective efforts would become more individualized and the threads that bind us together as a community may become more threadbare.

Fifty years ago, when I started my first job, I took a bus to my office and in the evening took another to come home. A small number of passengers glanced at the newspapers in their hands, but most talked to each other, if only to ask the time or

comment on the weather. Some who took the bus at the same time often, immediately resumed a conversation they had started earlier, if only to curse an unloved politician or bless a triumphant soccer team. People, I surmised with surprise, just loved to talk to one another.

Now, when I take a bus or a train, let alone a longer trip on a plane, I see few people talking to others. They quickly turn on their mobile, tablet or laptop in utter indifference to their fellow passengers. Our shining new technology has become our shield and armour, protecting us from the uncertain consequences of an encounter with a stranger. The truth is that the stranger is not even separated from us by six degrees of difference; perhaps it is a neighbour, a friend's friend, a teacher in a local school you met once, a pharmacist who helped you during your mother's illness.

This weakening of social bonds is not a sign of individual apathy and awfulness. It is the result of our work-life, family needs, social practices, convenient technology and the private habits that result from all of these. If we don't like to be alienated more and more from the people around us, we have to clearly improve some of our social arrangements. That may take some time and awareness. But we can, individually and thoughtfully, look at the quality of our life. If we think our life will



Illustration by: Debarata Chakrabarty

be better by regaining some features of the past, such as closer links with our family members, close neighbours, professional colleagues and the interesting people we meet in casual groups, we need to adjust our life and style. We need probably to talk more to the people around us, listen to their stories, understand their concerns and respond to their problems, less with ready-made solutions than with genuine empathy.

Let us return to those dismal words: schadenfreude, where people enjoy others' misery, and that not-yet-English word, Gluckssmerz, where people suffer at others' happiness. Those shameful feelings

we would never admit, but these unquestionably stain our less generous hours. They happen because we allow our links with people around us to shrink and shrivel. If instead we can build links that are congenial and cordial, and even empathetic and endearing, we can truly enjoy others' joy and commiserate with others' misery.

If that happens, we may fortunately find others too would truly share our sorrow and, readily and genuinely, exult in our happiness and good luck.

The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 30 March 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

J. B. Hobbs towers among English cricketers in ability and experience, and he has just written a rebuke to pessimists which should do good. The Australians have been formidable since the War, and many writers on the game have done their best to perturb English players into believing that they should abandon all hope of ever again winning Test matches. This does English cricket no good. Soldiers who go into battle with no higher hope than by hook or crook to escape defeat cannot be expected to do great things. Hobbs points out that England has what Australia has not - good medium and slow bowling. And Australian critics are themselves pointing out that Australian batsmen would not get their big scores in inter-State matches if Australian bowlers were really good. It is not wise or necessary to be depressed in advance; and should the Australians repeat their great performances of recent years it will not be necessary to be depressed even then. The national character has proved itself again and again superior to much greater calamities than defeat on the cricket fields.

News Items

DRUSES ACTIVE

FRENCH TROOPS ENGAGED NEAR DAMASCUS

Paris, Mar.

A message from Beirut states that in the environs of Damascus a French column while proceeding from Sedmaya to Niyeh encountered hostile bands. Convoy tanks preceding the column engaged a powerful body of rebels at Barze and killed thirty.—Reuter.

FINANCIAL REFORM

SEPARATION OF ACCOUNTS FROM AUDIT IN U. P.

Allahabad, Mar.

It is officially announced that as an experimental measure, the system of complete separation of accounts from audit in the United Provinces will be introduced from April 1 next. The Finance Secretary to the Government, in a circular letter to all heads of departments, writes:—"The unsatisfactory nature of the present system of combined accounts and audit has been increasingly evident since the introduction of the Reforms and the need for remedying it has been a matter of urgency." The rules in connexion with the separation are published, and as a result, the Accountant-Generals' office here will be broken up and the pay and accounts offices will be established in each department separately, at Allahabad and Lucknow.

ECONOMIC CONFERENCE

BRITISH MEMBERS OF LEAGUE COMMITTEE

(British Official Wireless).

The first session of the preparatory committee for the International Economic Conference is due to open in Geneva on April 26. Sir Hubert Smith, of the Board of Trade, Sir Arthur Balfour, President of the Committee on Trade and Industries, and Mr. W. T. Layton, editor of the Economist, are the three British experts who have already accepted the Council's invitation to take part in the discussions. In addition Mr. Arthur Pugh, President of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, has just been nominated by the workers' group of the governing body of the International Labour Office to represent the workers' point of view on the Committee.

PRINCE OF WALES

SLIGHT OPERATION FOR EAR TROUBLE

London, Mar.

The Prince of Wales has undergone a slight operation for recurrent ear trouble, a sequel to an attack of influenza. Relief has followed the operation.—Reuter.

Crossword | No. 293419

Crossword puzzle grid with clues and solutions. Includes 'Last Saturday's Solution' and a grid of numbers.

ACROSS

- 6. One wallows in river (5)
7. 'Tree person' on plantation (8)
9. From what we hear, they may be just fools? (8)
10. Description of alternative energy for the most part (5)
11. Compulsive boozer's consuming interest is drawing (4,4)
12. One of the glitterati pits a famous surgeon (6)

- 13. Recalled endless sex party with bit of tit for fat (4)
15. It's great when complainant keeps quiet (5)
16. Shadow bans earl from online business (4)
18. Encourage boy to keep up looking left and right (5)
20. Triple-layered, the mower has to be varied slightly (5,3)
23. Large Greek with large son (5)

- 24. Awfully engaging? (8)
25. He is getting irritated with nun's bright outlook (8)
26. Get finally turned on - seeing a bit of leg (5)

DOWN

- 1. Charlie and I see her sadly becoming more tacky (4,2,7)
2. Love the sound of Cats as an alternative to opera (6)
3. Author Shirley managed to support kid (6)
4. Retired pilot caught stealing European tableware (8)
5. Gene Vincent's entertaining show (6)
6. Cock-up on the catering front? It cost an inheritance (4,2,7)
7. He petty criticizes government line in African state (7)

- 14. Slowcoach tires too easily (8)
15. Muslim nurse is upset about America (7)
17. I lean out the work of G&S (5,3)
18. Edible tuber provided by animal lover (6)
21. Sorts out ceremonies in the auditorium (6)
22. Bug in more ways than one (6)

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



The Free Press Journal
Founder Editor: S Sadanand

Extracting value from waste

Out of sight, out of mind, has been the paradigm for India's solid waste management practice, although the law, the municipal Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 mandates a scientific process of collection and disposal. Data on SWM from 2023-24 indicate that about 65,300 tonnes of municipal waste is dumped everyday without treatment, while another 5,000 tonnes is not collected at all. These are data reported by states, relying on weak reporting systems, and most likely underestimated. The Union government wants to turn over a new leaf — again — and is poised to implement the upgraded SWM Rules for 2026 from April 1. As a statement of intent that is more detailed in its scope than previous iterations, the rules must be welcomed. Yet, they have little chance of succeeding for a variety of reasons, chiefly the absence of political will, low capacity of civic bodies, especially in smaller towns and rural areas, an indifferent consumer goods and retail sector, and urban residents who look upon waste as an externality for which they bear no responsibility. The new rules want to change all this through an online, portal-based system of reporting of average waste generation, collection, treatment, and materials recovery by local bodies, pollution control authorities and waste-to-energy systems, and details of bulk waste generators (who must secure responsibility certificates from the local body for a fee). Urban local bodies have detailed tasks, the most important of which is involving the community in managing waste through a decentralised framework. These provisions are promising, but the rules falter when they prescribe penalties in the place of incentives.

The provisions are promising, but the rules falter when they prescribe penalties in the place of incentives

For the MSW Rules to work at the community level, an appeal to enlightened self-interest may work better than top-down prescriptions that have failed so far. Sheer economics ensures that all waste with residual value has always been segregated and sold, even at the level of households. Thus, the four-way segregation of waste prescribed by the new rules could produce well-demarcated streams of biodegradable waste (making compost or biogas at different levels) and recyclable or combustible waste, if citizens are incentivised. Germany, for instance, has a successful plastic bottle return programme that pays back a deposit of 25 cents per unit, which makes it attractive for anyone to collect such bottles. By contrast, plastic waste is an orphan in India because of its sheer volume and low prices. Lack of enforcement on the sale of banned single-use articles leaves piles of unrecycled trash outside cities. New mandates for industry to use less plastic fuel and report their performance could make a difference, if compliance is monitored. The depressing reality is that many cities lack robust systems — including prosperous ones such as Bengaluru — reflecting the low priority waste management enjoys in practice. Community monitoring of MSW Rules 2026 may hold the key.

Women's long march to equality

The march of women in India's armed forces has been less a steady parade than a courtroom relay, with the baton repeatedly passed to the Supreme Court. It is to the Court's credit — and the services' discomfort — that many of the rights women officers now enjoy have been judicially secured rather than institutionally granted. The latest verdict, holding that women serving as Short Service Commission (SSC) officers cannot be denied Permanent Commission (PC) across the Army, Navy and Air Force, is yet another milestone in this reluctant evolution, marking a decisive shift toward substantive equality in military careers. One can only wish the armed forces had anticipated the inevitability of reform and initiated these changes themselves.

The Court's ruling is significant not merely for its outcome but for its diagnosis: the denial of PC was rooted in "systemic discrimination". Women officers, it noted, were assessed for years on the assumption that they had no long-term future in service. This presumption shaped their performance appraisals, limiting opportunities and, perversely, later being used against them when avenues for permanent commission were finally opened. By lifting the arbitrary annual cap of 250 women officers eligible for permanent commission and questioning opaque evaluation criteria, the Court has sought to restore fairness to a process long skewed against women. Importantly, it has also extended limited pensionary benefits to those who had already left service, acknowledging that justice delayed cannot entirely become justice denied, even if restitution remains partial.

This intervention must also be read in the context of the changing nature of warfare itself. A month into the ongoing conflict in West Asia, the world has witnessed how wars can be waged without the mass deployment of ground troops. India's own Operation Sindoor was another such instance. Precision strikes, drone warfare and cyber operations have redefined combat, eroding the traditional arguments used to exclude women from long-term military roles. If wars are increasingly fought through consoles and coordinated intelligence rather than sheer physical endurance, the rationale for discrimination collapses under its own weight. The Court has, in effect, nudged the armed forces towards aligning policy with reality. Yet, judicial pronouncements, however progressive, cannot substitute for institutional conviction. True equality will be achieved not when courts compel change, but when the services themselves internalise it as a matter of principle rather than compliance.



HerStory

DEEPA GAHLOT

It is coming to the end of Women's Month, and March 27 is celebrated as World Theatre Day. It is perhaps worth pondering why there are still so few female playwrights when, in other forms of creative writing, women are making major inroads.

In India, there have been social and cultural biases against women in show business. Through the mid-20th century, women were not permitted to act on stage; men performed female roles. And until education for women became more widespread, women were kept away from the literary world.

A search for the reasons behind the gender gap in writing even today reveals filtering processes that exclude women. Access to language was a major hurdle, since formal education in classical languages (like Latin or Sanskrit) was historically restricted to men. As high-art drama was written in these languages, women were systematically excluded from the canon.

Women were often relegated to closet dramas—plays written to be read at home rather than performed in public. Writing for a public audience was seen as a breach of modesty, leading many women to write anonymously or not at all.

The plays taught in schools and universities are overwhelmed by men

(Shakespeare, Beckett, Brecht, Ibsen, Miller). This creates the conditioning that only men's voices have value and indirectly discourages women from attempting to write for the stage.

Because men held positions of power (producers, directors, and critics), the standard for a "good play" was often based on a male perspective. Work that focused on domesticity or female interiority was frequently dismissed as inconsequential.

Work by women is seldom produced on mainstream stages. Smaller, experimental, and fringe groups are where plays written by women are more often found.

In India, the playwright is also often the director of her work and, like Nadra Zabeer Babbar—a prolific playwright and theatre-maker—may also carry the additional responsibility of running a group. She has written 18 plays so far (recently published), spurred by the lack of original scripts.

Purva Nareesh—playwright, director, producer (also a musician, dancer, and occasional actor)—has written a slew of successful plays such as Aaj Rang Hai, Ladies Sangee, and Bandish. She says:

"Women constantly feel oppressed by the system. They are marginalized in a patriarchy, so when they start writing, they take



up subjects rooted in that experience. They bring in concepts that are anti-patriarchy and immediately face resistance because the system itself is deeply patriarchal.

Sometimes this pushback energises them, but for most, it exhausts, intimidates, or silences them. Very few persist. Another issue is that when women begin writing, their craft may still be developing, even though their urge to express marginalization is strong. Their subjects can become overly angst-ridden or agenda-driven, and are often dismissed—what in Hindi is called kanghi-choti writing."

The financial stakes in theatre are much lower than in cinema, but even here, women playwrights

struggle to break through.

"What are your issues, what is your world, what is your lived reality, what are your fantasies—everything originates from your journey," says Purva.

"The challenge is to not be reduced to a woman who writes only about women's issues, while still writing about them without being myopic. That is a fine balance and an unwanted responsibility.

We don't have the male gaze, but we are shaped by it. We must ensure our response is not short-sighted. Experience must be understood, analysed, deconstructed, intellectualised, and then re-presented—not as a verdict, but as a question that opens dialogue.

The women playwright operates in that space—her work begins as reaction, but must evolve beyond it."

Despite these difficulties, some women have crafted trailblazing plays—not enough to transform the landscape entirely, but enough to be counted. From Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim (935–1002), Aphra Behn (1640–1689), Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965), to Caryl Churchill, Lynn Nottage, Yasmina Reza, Paula Vogel, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Yael Farber in contemporary times.

In India, the list includes Swarnakumari Devi (1855–1932), Cornelia Sorabji (1866–1954), Bharati Sarabhai (1912–1986), Rasheed Jahan (1905–1952), Mahasweta Devi, Dina Mehta, Usha Ganguli, Sai Paranjpye, Nadra Zabeer Babbar, Manjula Padmanabhan, Shanta Gokhale, Polle Sengupta, Anupama Chandrasekhar, Purva Nareesh, Divya Jagdale, Feroze Jalla, Trisha Patel, Manaswini Lata Ravindra, Iravati Karnik, Manjima Chatterjee, Annie Zaidi, and Veena Bakshi.

They have all worked towards representing women's perspectives on stage, alongside progressive male playwrights.

It is not a race, but women's stories—told in their own voices—will help level the playing field.

Deepa Gahlot is a Mumbai-based columnist, critic and author

West Asia war pushes India rapidly toward ASEAN pivot amid stress

West Asia conflict disrupts supply chains, pushing India to strengthen ASEAN healthcare and economic partnerships



South By Southeast

PATRALEKHA CHATTERJEE

On a Friday evening in early March, inside Bangkok's Shenanigans Irish Sports Bar, a Thai band—the Bangkok Beatles—sang: "Hey Jude, don't make it bad." Everyone joined in; many danced.

At the same time, a war with global economic consequences was unfolding in West Asia. It began on February 28, 2026, with US-Israeli strikes on Iran, the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and senior officials, and Iran's retaliation.

Iran effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz—the narrow sea route that carries one-fifth of the world's oil and gas. The Thai government responded with emergency energy-saving measures, asking civil servants (except frontline staff) to work from home.

When I asked an elderly Thai man humming along whether the conflict had affected him, he replied with one word: "plastics." He was in the plastics business—a key link in the pharmaceutical supply chain. Plastics are made from petrochemicals shipped through the Strait of Hormuz. With the route disrupted, the impact had already begun.

Four weeks on, the conflict shows scant signs of easing. The Hormuz blockade has become partial, with

Iran allowing limited passage for some ships, including those from India. However, disruption continues to ripple through global pharmaceutical supply chains and healthcare systems.

For India, this has meant immediate stress. Pharmaceutical exports face logistical bottlenecks and potential losses of 2,500–5,000 crore if Gulf routes remain constrained. Rising petrochemical and energy costs are pushing up drug production prices and tightening margins in the generics sector.

Across Southeast Asia, healthcare systems—dependent on imported medicines and global supply chains—are facing higher procurement costs, shipping delays, and the risk of shortages, particularly for temperature-sensitive drugs.

Thailand's Public Health Ministry has rolled out a three-phase contingency plan. Notably, India features in this crisis strategy.

According to The Nation, a Thai newspaper, "Authorities estimate that current medicine stocks will last three to four months. However, price increases are inevitable. There is particular concern over anticoagulants such as Warfarin, imported from Israel. While supplies remain stable for now, contingency plans are in place to source alternatives from India, China, and Europe if needed."



Malaysia, too, reportedly has only one to three months of medicine stocks.

The impact extends beyond pharmaceuticals. International patient inflows from West Asia to India have dropped sharply due to airspace disruptions and instability. Many Indian hospitals rely on medical tourists from the Gulf and are now facing revenue pressure, with some projecting a 15–20% decline in international business.

In response, hospitals are pivoting towards Southeast Asia and other regions. Apollo Hospitals, for instance, is leveraging its long-standing partnership with Indonesia's Mayapada

Healthcare Group, which includes clinical training, digital tools, and the Batam hospital project.

Manipal Hospitals is also increasing its focus on Southeast Asia. Telemedicine is emerging as a key trend, enabling patients to consult doctors remotely before travelling, allowing for better planning of treatment.

However, this pivot will not be easy. ASEAN countries present both opportunities and competition. India faces strong rivals in medical tourism, particularly Thailand, Singapore, and increasingly Malaysia.

Despite its reputation as the "pharmacy of the world," India faces

upstream vulnerabilities. It depends heavily on active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), many sourced from China, as well as petrochemical inputs tied to global oil and shipping networks.

Historically, 40–50% of India's crude oil imports have passed through or near the Strait of Hormuz.

The Association of Indian Medical Device Industry (AIMeD) recently noted:

"In costs for medical devices have surged—nearly 50% for critical plastics and over 20% for packaging and diesel-based power. Prolonged disruptions risk production halts, hospital shortages, and price inflation."

The industry also remains dependent on imports for specialised, high-grade polymers that meet regulatory standards.

Clearly, challenges loom. But the crisis also presents an opportunity to deepen ASEAN-India cooperation. From strengthening supply chains to enhancing regional health security, both sides can emerge as resilience partners in an increasingly uncertain world.

Patralkha Chatterjee is a writer and columnist who spends her time in South and Southeast Asia, and looks at modern-day connections between the two adjacent regions. X: @Patralkha2011

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Above the public
Our "people's servants" are demanding a separate enclosure for the IPL opener at Chinnaswamy, claiming they cannot sit alongside ticket-paying members of the public. Earlier, they said they could not stand in long queues for tickets. The deputy chief minister and the Karnataka assembly speaker back lawmakers elected by the same public. Even BJP MLAs have demanded free passes. Irrespective of ideology, entitlement unites them, reducing public service to privilege and convenience.
Dr AB Sai Prasad, Bengaluru

Policy matters
Recent developments in West Asia raise concerns about India's evolving foreign policy posture. India has long upheld a balanced, principled approach, but perceptions of leaning towards one side in a complex conflict have

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VIP entitlement
Apropos "Howzzat! MLAs bat for VIP pavilion" (March 28, 2026), the demand for special seating at the Chinnaswamy Stadium shows how quickly privilege overshadows public spirit. Legislators who insist they cannot sit with ordinary fans forget democracy thrives on shared spaces, not velvet enclosures. Setting aside hundreds of complimentary tickets and creating a VIP pavilion diminishes cricket's joy, which unites people across divides. Public representatives must lead by example and show sport belongs to everyone, not a privileged few truly.
K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru



diluted that image. Pakistan's renewed diplomatic visibility has drawn attention. India must preserve moral credibility through neutrality, dialogue and strategic autonomy to safeguard long-term influence.
Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Build relationships
The shift away from marriage as a default path reflects changing social values. People now choose freedom and self-definition over tradition, not rejecting values but rethinking them. While independence grows, so does isolation. As traditional structures weaken, individuals must build meaningful relationships. Society must balance personal freedom with belonging to avoid emotional detachment and preserve human connection.
Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Gig welfare
India's gig economy is expanding, creating jobs for urban and migrant youth. NITI Aayog's 2022 report, India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy, estimated 7.7 million gig workers in 2020-21, projected to rise to 23.5

million by 2029-30. The Maharashtra government plans a social security board for gig workers and another for the unorganised sector. Effective implementation of the Code on Social Security, 2020 remains crucial to ensure timely and real benefits.
Dattaprasad Shirodkar, Mumbai

Urban renewal
Powai Lake water is no longer potable due to sewage inflow, though it was built to meet the city's dire needs. Neglect and untreated discharge worsened its condition. The BMC now plans to make the lake sewage-free with a treatment plant and environmental upgrades. Restoration and public amenities may improve civic sense and revive its future potential as a water source.
SN Kabra, Mumbai

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



إذا ما أتتنا الريح من نحو أريحي
أنتنا برياًه فطاب هويها
(ام خالد السريه)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

When the wind reaches us from the direction of his land,
it carries his fragrance and its blowing turns sweet.

Umm Khaled Al-Numayryyyah
(Medieval Islamic poet)

Opinion

Israel-Lebanon security calls for cooperation, not control

YOSSI MEKELBERG



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With alarming frequency and rather quickly, the border between Israel and Lebanon can shift from calm to high-intensity conflict. Until the late 1970s, this frontier remained relatively quiet, despite the fact that the two countries have technically been in a state of war since the end of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict and have never signed a peace treaty. Early tensions largely took the form of skirmishes involving Palestinian militants affiliated with various factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization. However, after the PLO was forced out of Lebanon in 1982, resistance to Israeli occupation became a defining pillar of the newly established Lebanese Shiite militant movement, Hezbollah. This narrative of resistance also provided a powerful pretext for the Iranian-backed and financed organization to develop a military force that not only rivaled the Lebanese Armed Forces

but, in several respects, surpassed it. Unlike the confrontation with Iran, in which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has clearly articulated objectives that extend beyond neutralizing nuclear and missile capabilities to include the prospect of regime change, one of the stated aims in Lebanon is, at least in principle, the exact opposite of creating the conditions for the Lebanese government to take control of the country. Israel seeks to degrade Hezbollah's military capacity and, in doing so, also enable the Lebanese state to reassert control over the territory between the Blue Line, the UN-demarcated ceasefire line, and the Litani River, about 30 km to the north. The strategic objective is to establish a buffer zone separating Israeli territory from Hezbollah's operational reach. Yet, pursuing this objective through overwhelming military force carries significant risks. Strikes that extend beyond Hezbollah's military infrastructure, resulting in large-scale casualties,

including civilians and children, and emergency personnel, while destroying houses and civilian infrastructure, risks producing precisely the opposite of their intended effect. Rather than weakening Hezbollah's position, it reinforces its excuse for remaining a military force, without active resistance to it by the government or the Lebanese population. The risks would be even more pronounced if Israel were to initiate a large-scale ground offensive, potentially leading to a prolonged occupation of southern Lebanon, an outcome with a long-lasting and fraught historical precedent. This approach reflects a deeply embedded security paradigm within Israel's political and military leadership: the conviction that only direct control over territory can ensure lasting security, rather than reliance on the capacity of the Lebanese state or its armed forces. Although both sides can be accused of violating the November 2024 ceasefire

before the latest escalation, Hezbollah's actions went beyond a limited or localized breach. Instead, they signaled a deliberate re-entry into sustained hostilities, likely aligned with Iranian strategic interests and encouraged by Tehran. Hezbollah's leadership is unlikely to have acted without anticipating a forceful Israeli response, particularly at a time when Israel is engaged in a war with its chief opponent, Iran, and still has to concentrate forces in Gaza and the West Bank. The challenge along the Israel-Lebanon border lies in reconciling two competing logics: the immediate demands of security and the longer-term requirements of political stability. Military force may offer short-term deterrence, but without a credible political framework, it risks perpetuating the very conditions that give rise to recurring conflict. Only by shifting from a paradigm of territorial control to one of cooperative security can a more durable and stable equilibrium emerge along this volatile frontier.

The risks would be even more pronounced if Israel were to initiate a large-scale ground offensive against Lebanon



COURTESY: AMARJID PISHANJANIAN, AL-ANBASTI

The EU has had success after success since European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen's second term began in December 2024

Europe turbocharges trade liberalization agenda

ANDREW HAMMOND



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The old adage among travelers and commuters is that one often waits a long time for a bus or train, then two or three arrive at once. Turning to the global landscape, the same appears true of EU trade deals. After years of painstaking negotiations with key powers, the EU has had success after success since European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's second term of office began in December 2024. Only earlier this week came the latest breakthrough with a deal agreed with Australia. This adds to the recent EU agreements with Mercosur in South America and India, plus also a Brexit reset deal with the UK, closer to home in Europe. Key targets on the horizon include the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Of course, the EU has long had some of the largest economic networks in the world. For instance, even before the recent deals of von der Leyen's second term, the EU benefited from around 75 partners and more than \$2 trillion in trade ties.

In addition, the region has sought to double down on its economic links with the rest of the world following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022; plus wider new uncertainties, including the policies of US President Donald Trump's second term since January 2025. The shifting landscape was showcased by the Australia deal this week, which came after talks had collapsed in October 2023 during Joe Biden's US presidency. Von der Leyen alluded to the extra stimulus for a deal now, saying that "none of us is immune to the shocks, both geopolitical and economic, including that the war in Iran brings to our populations." Given this geopolitical insecurity, Canberra and Brussels also announced a new defense partnership. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said this will provide a framework for the EU and Australia to cooperate in agendas including defense industries, maritime security, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism, and combating hybrid threats such as disinformation.

As a bloc, the EU was Australia's third-largest two-way trading partner in 2024 as well as the sixth-largest export destination. The bloc was Australia's second-largest source of foreign investment in 2024. Moreover, Australia's strategic value is rising fast for the EU. This is not least because it is home to the world's third-largest reserves of rare earth elements and is the top global producer of lithium, a keystone of battery production for electric vehicles. In 2024, EU exports to Australia totaled around €37 billion (\$42 billion) in goods and €28 billion in services. The agreement could boost that by about a third in a decade, the European Commission estimates, through tariff liberalization on almost all EU goods and many services which could save around €1 billion a year in duties. The Australia deal this week follows hot on the heels of the EU's agreement with India earlier this year. This latter deal between the powers covers around 2 billion people and about a quarter of global gross domestic product.

The India deal is a huge prize for the EU given that the emerging market power is forecast to best both Japan and Germany to soon become the world's third-largest economy, behind China and the US. The Indian middle-class consumer market, alone, will reach about 95 million by 2035, larger than the population of Europe's biggest economy, Germany. The EU also hopes to expand cooperation with India in clean energy. The trade deal builds on bilateral frameworks including the Clean Energy and Climate Partnership, first signed in 2016, which coordinates joint efforts on renewable energy, energy efficiency and clean hydrogen. Green hydrogen, in particular, has become a growing pillar of cooperation, with both powers identifying it as central to their long-term decarbonization pathways. Taken together, the EU's trade liberalization agenda is growing in momentum. Von der Leyen and her commission colleagues will now double down with negotiations with other key targets, including the GCC.

Opinion

Behind the policy 'trilemma' hindering Africa's growth

HAFED AL-GHWELL



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continent's low-income countries face annual adaptation funding gaps of more than \$300 billion. Meanwhile, international public adaptation finance continues to decline, falling to roughly \$26 billion. Africa cannot build factories if its cities are underwater or starving.

Industrialization, the second body, is driven by the need for economic sovereignty. Exporting raw materials without value addition limits fiscal capacity and job creation. Manufacturing offers scale, productivity gains, and revenue stability. Curiously, manufacturing employment in sub-Saharan Africa has tripled since 2000, yet the sector's contribution to gross domestic product has stagnated, revealing a pattern of false starts rather than sustained maturation.

Infrastructure, the third body, is an enabler with its own gravitational force. Roads, ports, energy grids, and digital networks underpin both adaptation and industrialization. Yet the scale of need remains vast. The annual infrastructure financing gap for the continent is now estimated between \$68-108 billion — holding back growth and job creation for millions.

Besides, investment requirements reaching well beyond current spending

levels, costs of capital remain among the highest globally. As a result, public budgets face constraints from rising debt service, often far exceeding infrastructure spending itself. Private capital shows interest, but hesitates in sectors with long payback periods, particularly climate-resilient projects. Infrastructure promises connectivity and growth, yet its financing structure pulls economies toward debt exposure and fiscal vulnerability.

Interaction among these three bodies produces outcomes that resist simple explanation. Debt-financed infrastructure perfectly captures this dilemma. Governments borrow to build transport corridors or energy systems. Repayment requires accelerated industrial output.

Competitive industry, in turn, demands low-cost energy, often sourced from carbon-intensive fuels.

Climate shocks then damage the very infrastructure built through borrowing, restarting the cycle under worse conditions.

Africa's development will not follow a straight line. It will curve, accelerate, and occasionally reverse. Success will depend on reading those movements early and responding with precision rather than waiting for a balance that never arrives.

Science offers an unusual but apt metaphor to frame the policy "trilemma" crippling Africa's long-term development. In physics, the three-body problem describes a system where three gravitational forces interact in ways no equation can reliably predict. There is no simple equation to predict what will happen in such a system; it is chaotic, sensitive to initial conditions, and prone to unpredictable collapses.

Put simply, any small shift will produce cascading consequences, which means achieving stability will never be permanent. This is playing out across Africa, as countries attempt to juggle climate adaptation, industrialization, and infrastructure development demands, with infrastructure constraints alone estimated to reduce the continent's per-capita economic growth by over 2 percent annually.

For decades, however, African policymakers have been handed a spreadsheet and asked to solve a quadratic equation, when the continent's development trajectory is akin to being trapped in a three-body universe. Growth projections assume orderly sequencing. Investment frameworks assume predictable trade-offs.

But reality behaves differently. Climate adaptation, industrialization, and infrastructure do not move in isolation. Each exerts its own pull, distorting the others. Any meaningful strategy, therefore, resembles navigating turbulence rather than the precise, technocratic execution of a plan.

Climate adaptation, the first body, is an anchor tied to survival. Across the continent, rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and extreme weather events are not future risks but present disruptions.

Extreme weather events now rank as the top long-term global risk, with floods in southern Africa. Agricultural systems strain under worsening drought cycles. Coastal infrastructure faces repeated damage from worsening floods. And public budgets

are continuously diverted toward resilience rather than expansion.

What is more, adaptation will not deliver immediate financial returns, even if it determines whether any long-term investment will endure. Despite that urgency, global finance continues to prioritize mitigation, with only a small share directed toward adaptation, often through debt instruments that deepen fiscal pressure.

In turn, resource allocation becomes defensive, not developmental, even as the

Climate adaptation, industrialization, and infrastructure do not move in isolation

Africa's development will curve, accelerate, and occasionally reverse

Poll leaves Denmark's leaders walking a political tightrope

THOMAS BERT HENRIKSEN



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overseeing buoyant economic conditions, voters have turned their backs on Frederiksen, Rasmussen, and Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen. They have shifted their support toward anti-immigration parties, particularly the Danish People's Party on the right, as well as toward the Socialist People's Party on the left.

A striking feature of the election campaign was that issues such as animal welfare in pig production and the protec-

tion of clean drinking water overshadowed concerns about the current oil crisis or global security. Immigration also remains a strongly divisive issue and may evolve in the coming years into a broader debate about migrant workers, who currently account for around 10 percent of total employment.

Another defining moment of the campaign was the debate over the Social Democrats' proposal to introduce a wealth tax of 0.5 percent on fortunes above 25 million kroner (\$3.9 million). Frederiksen expected the proposal — intended to finance an ambitious reform to cap smaller schools' class sizes at 14 pupils — to boost support. Instead, it triggered strong opposition from businesses and startups. The election results imply that Denmark

will not introduce a wealth tax.

Even so, with its strong economy and highly developed welfare state, Denmark might have been expected to avoid the political polarization and fragmentation seen elsewhere. But no party received more than 22 percent of the vote, and all 12 parties that stood in the election will be represented in parliament. The Danish parliament has never been more fragmented.

While Frederiksen's Social Democrats remains the largest party, the Liberal Party is now smaller than the Socialist People's Party and is increasingly challenged by other right-leaning parties, such as the Liberal Alliance. This shift in party allegiance probably reflects Danish voters' increasing alignment with issues rather than ideology.

The greatest risk Denmark faces may be Trump or the Kremlin, but a return to 1970s-style instability, characterized by frequent elections — roughly every two years — and weak economic performance. Fortunately, Denmark's strong tradition of cooperation and broad parliamentary consensus on major issues provides some grounds for optimism that the country can manage its growing political fragmentation.

Never expect gratitude from voters. Winston Churchill learned that bitter lesson when he lost the 1945 UK general election in a landslide, despite having inspired the West to victory over the Nazis. Now Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, one of the few world leaders to stand up to US President Donald Trump, has seen both her party and governing coalition go down to defeat — though she may yet return as prime minister in a new coalition.

At a time when many European countries are struggling to cope with the challenge posed by populist and nationalist parties, Denmark under Frederiksen's government appeared to be an exception. Following the 2022 election, a majority government was formed by unifying the political center. The two traditional rivals of Danish politics — the Social Democrats and the liberal "Venstre" (it actually means "left," even though it is on the right party — joined with the newly established Moderates, led by the former Prime Minister and Venstre breakaway Lars Løkke Rasmussen, to form a durable parliamentary majority.

The government was unique in Danish political history. Denmark has a long

tradition of minority governments. Indeed, previously, no Danish government comprising parties from both sides of the political aisle had ever completed a full term in peacetime. So Frederiksen's achievement in this regard was remarkable. But as they say in the medical profession, the operation was successful, but the patient died.

The experiment in a variant of what the French call cohabitation has now been rejected, despite broad agreement that

the government delivered stability, increased defense spending to 3.5 percent of gross domestic product — without raising a single tax or cutting public spending elsewhere — and maintained Denmark's role as one of Ukraine's most reliable allies.

Another achievement was the government's steadfast handling of the profound rift with the US following Trump's bullying over Greenland. And although the government was born out of a sense of crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has benefited from strong economic tailwinds, with booming growth supporting a near-historic expansion of fiscal space.

And yet, despite forging broad parliamentary consensus on defense, managing major foreign policy challenges, and

The Danish parliament has never been more fragmented

Voters are increasingly aligned with issues rather than ideology

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Established in 1987 by
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ARAB NEWS

is a daily international newspaper published by the
SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY

Founded in 1973 by
His Highness & Muhammad Al Hafiz

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EDITORIAL: general@arabnews.com
MARKETING: marketing@arabnews.com

TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440076

PRINTED AT: HALA PRINTING CO., RIYADH

Bahrain 200 Fils; Iran 200 R; Egypt LE 3;
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Jordan 250 Fils; Kuwait 200 Fils; Lebanon 1000

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SUNDAY OPINION

Consider the humble mine, possibly Iran's greatest weapon



The British Royal Navy blows up a mine off Ismailia, Egypt, during clearing operations in the Suez Canal on Aug. 30, 1974.



Dutch soldiers inspect a sea mine found off the coast of Holland during World War I.



An Egyptian frogman dives into Port Said harbor with a mine detector on April 24, 1974. U.S. Navy frogmen trained members of the Egyptian Navy to familiarize them with U.S. demolition methods and equipment.

BY ALEXANDER WOOLY

President Donald Trump may get his wish of a reopened Strait of Hormuz, but that doesn't mean the waterway will be safe for transit. The reason: It's likely lined with mines that take ages to clear.

Consider the best historical analogue, the Suez Canal, circa 1974. For seven years, Egypt had closed the passage owing to wars with Israel, trapping at least 14 ships and impairing the global flow of oil. Once Egyptian President Anwar Sadat agreed to reopen it, the physical project took a year and an international fleet of minesweeping ships, helicopters and explosive ordnance divers led by the United States. The moment finally came in June 1975, when Sadat cut a thin chain across the waterway's entry. He called it "the happiest day in my life."

Trump is looking for such a day with limited success. Last week he gave the Iranians 48 hours to "FULLY OPEN" the strait "WITHOUT THREAT" or else have their power plants obliterated. The regime replied by threatening to lay "various types of naval mines" throughout the Persian Gulf. U.S. intelligence officials reportedly suspect there are at least a dozen Maham 3 and Maham 7 limpet mines under the Strait of Hormuz.

The president has now given Iran until April 6 to open the strait, but it'll take longer still. Doing so without sweeping would be dangerous. Shipping companies will doubtless want reassurance that the job is complete before running their tankers through the passage. Getting holed below the waterline presents a greater possibility of sinking than getting hit by a drone or missile does. Not to mention the potential environmental catastrophe.

Sea mines had gotten used to being overlooked. While increasingly high-tech and deadly, they are uncool and unsexy, unlikely to feature in a White House war-porn sizzle reel. They are small, silent, sitting on or tethered to the seabed, where they wait, about as active as a sea urchin. They are usually autonomous, leave-and-forget, indiscriminate weapons. Less shock and awe, more sloth and yawn.

Like their land equivalent, sea mines linger long after conflicts conclude. More than 80 years later, unexploded German sea mines from two world wars regularly wash ashore in Britain. Others are caught by fishermen's nets. I remember one instance aboard a minesweeper in the Irish Sea when we sent divers to locate a dummy mine only for them to resurface saying they'd discovered the exercise mine and an unexploded German one.

After World War II, a ragtag group of Japanese seamen and small naval vessels spent years clearing the country's coastline. Many were killed in the process, while survivors felt abandoned by their deposed imperial government and the U.S. occupation force, which offered little assistance. It is a well-known episode in Japan, and features as subtle, pointed commentary in the Oscar-winning "Godzilla Minus One," in which a group of sailors tries to defeat the

monster by rolling mines into its mouth.

The weapon has always been an unpleasant surprise, but it has been around for years, possibly first deployed by the Chinese more than six centuries ago and later by the Europeans in the 16th century.

Militaries use mines because they're asymmetrical. Scatter a hundred across the Strait of Hormuz, and neither the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier nor a giant LNG tanker will likely chance to come close. Even bluffing or simulating mine-laying can be enough to instill fear or caution and draw inordinate resources from an enemy. Ships may try to run through, but it would be an enormous risk. Aircraft carriers and guided-missile destroyers are helpless in the face of them. Historically, vessels that go to the assistance of a mined ship frequently end up damaged or sunk too.

For decades, clearing the weapon was blue-collar work, one part "Hurt Locker," another part "Deadliest Catch." Today it is done by ships with specialized, sophisticated remotely operated systems that detect, locate, classify and neutralize mines. In an era of hyperactive geopolitics, the work is slow and tedious. Seawater is notoriously difficult to see through, making it hard to find a small object sometimes buried into the seabed like a flounder.

If mines are unsexy, so are the means to counter them. Naval officers don't become admirals by spending their careers in minesweepers. Mine warfare is an orphan, receiving the floor sweepings of defense budgets. This may soon come to haunt governments and shipping companies, which depend on the flow of oil, gas and commodities.

If you are a defense contractor building something for today's Navy, it's important your weapons system has a "U" in its acronym. UUVs, USVs, UAS, MUM-T, XLUVV — future conflicts will feature unmanned, or uncrewed, platforms in the air, on the ocean's surface and underwater.

But many of these new capabilities can also claim another "U" — unproven, at least in combat. The Iran war has caught the U.S. and NATO navies at a bad time, short on ships and transitioning from old technologies to new. The longtime guarantors of freedom of navigation have made valiant efforts but appear overstretched, ready to snap. All this, moreover, against so-called second- and third-rate enemies.

During World War II, the U.S. Navy built hundreds of minesweepers. It's now down to a handful. The service has retired most of its Avenger-class conventional ships, some of which were deployed to the Persian Gulf before their decommissioning last year. Four remain stationed in Japan.

In their stead for the Mideast are untested platforms and technologies. After years of delays, the Pentagon managed to equip Freedom and Independence-class littoral combat ships with mine countermeasure capabilities — unmanned air, surface and underwater vehicles that can detect and destroy naval mines at a distance. As I and many others have written, to date the LCS have been disastrous. The ships combine a lack of weaponry of the sort a frigate or destroyer would have with serious defensive vulnera-

bilities, structural defects and routine and embarrassing mechanical breakdowns. The Navy has even admitted the ship would be overmatched against a peer competitor like China, noting that it "does not provide the lethality or survivability needed in a high-end fight."

The U.S. operates three LCS with countermeasure packages in the Mideast, intended to replace the retired Avenger-class. Except these ships seem to have been heading in the opposite direction. As the defense news outlet the War Zone recently reported, two of the three assigned to the Middle East aren't in the region — as of March 18, they were in Singapore, after having first stopped in Malaysia, apparently for routine maintenance. The third was reportedly the Indian Ocean. The upshot: Until the U.S. recruits minesweeping assets from elsewhere, it won't have a lot of options in the Gulf.

In some ways, then, Trump was right to demand that the Europeans clear the strait. During the Cold War, mine clearance was considered too dull and unglamorous for the Americans. It thus fell to the Belgians, Dutch, French and British continued to push minesweeping technologies and experimentation into the 1990s, even as their fleets contracted.

Yet their capabilities have mostly mirrored those of the U.S. in recent years. In late 2025, the British Royal Navy decided to stop its permanent deployment in the Persian Gulf, a mission it had carried out for decades, and abandoned its last standing frigate in the region to rot in Bahrain. It also recently sent home its last remaining minehunter in the region.

This month London indicated it has aerial minesweeping drones, also untested in combat, and is considering deploying them to the strait. British officials have also met with counterparts from France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Canada and the Netherlands to discuss reopening the strait.

Meanwhile, potential adversaries like China, Russia and North Korea can learn much from U.S. and allied unpreparedness for mine warfare. The West has tipped its hand about a vulnerability in its otherwise impressive and comprehensive war-making ability. In the future, enemies could lay defensive minefields to protect themselves or weaponize a key chokepoint — say, the approaches to either end of the Panama Canal. They could lay offensive barrages around Taiwan as a precursor to an invasion or install offensive fields around Guam, Pearl Harbor or a U.S. base in Japan at Yokosuka or Sasebo.

The Iranians appear to have done so to great effect. The Strait of Hormuz has become a political, diplomatic and economic minefield. Trump is keen to bluster through it. He'll find that even once it's open for business, merchant ships will tiptoe — until someone comes along to clean up the mess.

Alexander Woolley, a former British Royal Navy officer, is a director of the research job AidData at William & Mary. He is the author of "Battleship Yamato: The Ship, The Myth, The Legend," forthcoming in August.

Olympians earn the IOC billions. Guess who it almost never pays.

BY TYLER MARTIN

When I was 11, I drew the Olympic rings on a scrap of paper and taped them to my ceiling. Five badly drawn circles on the back of juice-stained homework hung above my bed like a heavenly shrine. At night I fell asleep staring at them. In the morning, before the sun was up, I looked at them again and dragged myself to practice.

I played water polo, which is many things — violent, exhausting, confusing — but financially lucrative is not one of them.

When you are young, that doesn't matter. The dream does. The rings, the anthem, the village and dedicating yourself to something gloriously irrational. Pay is beside the point, which was convenient, because there wasn't any.

Ten years ago, my dream came true. I competed at the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics as a member of the Australian water polo team.

This year's Milan Cortina Winter Games have ended, and basketball's March Madness is in full swing. College sports were, until recently, the other great cathedral of supposed amateur virtue. For decades, the NCAA sold the same line that the Olympics still does to the vast majority of its athletes: play for love, be grateful for the opportunity, let others get rich. But college athletes are now paid by the system they help make valuable. A mid-tier Division I player in football or basketball can earn \$150,000 or more through sponsorships, and now, direct payments.

Olympians deserve a similar deal. The International Olympic Committee, which reported \$7.7 billion in commercial revenue for the 2021-2024 cycle, needs to start sharing a defined percentage with athletes. IOC revenue comes mainly from broadcast rights and sponsorships, and the organization says it redistributes 90 percent to "assist athletes and develop sport worldwide." But that money moves through a line of bloated institutions: organizing committees, international federations, national Olympic committees and the rest of the Olympic bureaucracy.

A share of IOC commercial revenue should be set aside for athletes. The blackout rules should end so athletes and the brands that back them can speak during the window when the world is paying attention.

In the National Football League and the National Basketball Association, the players' share of league revenue is protected up front, with roughly half set aside for athlete salaries. With the Olympics, money reaches an athlete only if an international federation or national Olympic committee feels inclined to share it. The only direct funding for athletes from the IOC is through Olympic Solidarity scholarships, a modest program that helped 1,560 athletes train for the 2024 Paris Games, where 599 ultimately competed. \$66 million has been allocated for these scholarships for the 2025-2028 cycle.

The freestyle skier Eileen Gu, with six Olympic medals and roughly \$23 million in annual endorsement earnings, is proof that stars can thrive anyway. But she is not the right test case. The test is the athlete that is good enough to make the Games, good enough to attract an audience, but not famous enough to earn real money.

Take Kely Cashman, an American Alpine skier who competed in Milan Cortina. Cashman effectively runs a small business to stay in the sport. On her website, she sells merchandise, pitches sponsors and asks supporters to help fund her travel costs, noting that a chunk of her training and career costs are not covered by her governing body. She is also a barista at her family's coffee shop in the offseason. That is the reality for too many Olympians: They fashion a patchwork of side hustles and direct appeals just to remain in the system.

What's more, the Olympics fence off the athletes' best chance of better compensation. During the two weeks of the Games — the only time most athletes get noticed — companies that sponsor athletes cannot even allude to the Olympics in advertisements unless they've paid the IOC to be an official partner. Team USA's Milan Cortina audience notes that "iconic" Olympic imagery such as a medal or podium is off-limits.

In 15 years of Olympics training, the most I was paid was about 20,000 Australian dollars a year from Water Polo Australia through a government program for elite athletes. No IOC revenue ever reached me directly. My teammates and I were not full-time athletes so much as full-time bankers, teachers, real estate agents and airport baggage handlers. We had to fit 30-hour practice weeks and six months of travel around whatever work we could squeeze in.

I started my own business, and on game days I'd be handling customer support for someone who wanted to tear my head off, hours before getting in the pool to line up against a 6-foot-7 Eastern European who wanted to do the same. At one world championship, with six games in six days, I stayed up past 2 a.m. answering emails.

Change should start with the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. A share of IOC commercial revenue should be set aside for athletes. The blackout rules should end so athletes and the brands that back them can speak during the window when the world is paying attention.

The more than 11,000 athletes who will compete in those Olympics deserve to help create some of the rewards from the value they help create.

Tyler Martin, a graduate student at Stanford University, was a member of Australia's 2016 Olympic water polo team.

OPINION

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

EDITORIALS

What's at risk if Virginia mandates collective bargaining

CITY AND county leaders across Virginia, from both parties, are right to panic about the bill the General Assembly has sent to the governor's desk that would compel local governments to engage in collective bargaining.

If the bill is enacted, elected community leaders would lose significant autonomy to national unions and bureaucrats in Richmond. The inevitable result would be higher property taxes across the commonwealth.

Gov. Abigail Spanberger (D) has until April 13 to decide whether to sign the bill into law. It's shaping up as a significant test of her focus on affordability, her willingness to stand up to overreach from the left and her campaign promise not to repeal the right-to-work statute that has made Virginia an attractive place to do business.

Virginia used to prohibit collective bargaining for state and local employees. In 2021, Democrats changed the law to allow local governments to engage in collective bargaining. Fewer than 20 jurisdictions have chosen to do so, and it hasn't gone well where it's been tried.

That's why unions made this bill their top priority during the legislative session. It requires collective bargaining for wages, benefits and working conditions for state and local government employees.

To issue new regulations and oversee bargaining, the bill establishes yet another state agency — a Public Employee Relations Board — with the power to rule

against local governments in forced arbitration.

The legislation requires state and local employers to turn over to unions the personal contact information of their employees, including home addresses, cellphone numbers and emails, so that they can be pressured to become dues-paying members. The bill also requires state and local governments to let unions hold mandatory, closed-door meetings for all new hires — with taxpayers required to pay for the time.

Adding insult to injury, state legislators included language to block their own staffers from unionizing, so they wouldn't need to deal with the hassles created by their law. And of course, the legislation doesn't give local governments any extra money to fund the new commitments that will arise from the scheme.

The Virginia Association of Counties, a nonpartisan group, is pleading with Spanberger to veto the bill. The mayors of Virginia Beach, Norfolk, Chesapeake, Portsmouth, Hampton, Newport News and Suffolk wrote a joint letter in January expressing opposition.

Fairfax County, the state's largest, offers a cautionary tale. The collective bargaining agreements it reached after the 2021 state law have contributed to surging personnel costs and massive budget shortfalls, which led supervisors to raise taxes.

The Center for American Progress, a liberal D.C. think tank, claims this power grab is about "overcoming the state's Jim Crow past." In truth, the ban on public-

sector bargaining was the result of a 1977 decision by the state supreme court. That was 13 years after the Civil Rights Act.

The president of the Virginia Association of Counties, Prince William County Supervisor Victor S. Angry (D), and four of the seven mayors who signed that letter opposing the bill, are Black.

Prince William County Schools is another local government entity that chose to engage in collective bargaining after the 2021 state law. But School Board Chairman-at-Large Babur Lateef, a Democrat who supports collective bargaining, opposes the state bill. "If your number one goal of being elected was to do something about affordability, this goes in the exact opposite direction, and you will be putting a burden on the Virginia taxpayer like we've never seen," he said.

Federal government employees are not allowed to collectively bargain for wages or health or retirement benefits. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the signer of the National Labor Relations Act and a tireless champion of private-sector unions, didn't think public employees should be able to collectively bargain at all. He thought that elected officials should control government employment.

Collective bargaining is supposed to be about giving workers the power to get a bigger chunk of their employer's profits. Government doesn't make profits, and the employer of government workers is ultimately the taxpayer. Throwing open the gates for these unions is an invitation for higher taxes and bloated bureaucracy, not a more affordable Virginia.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ask this question on a first date — or brace yourself

Following the Feb. 1 letters package "Flirting is trickier than ever. Here's how to approach it," Post Opinions asked readers: "How soon do you bring up politics when getting to know someone? Is a first date too soon?" Here are some of the responses.

After a few encounters with a person, I simply ask, "Do you lean left or right?" If they lean to the right, I never bring it up again.

Peggy Jones, St. Louis

Don't wait past the second date to bring up politics. Save yourself from the possibility of a nasty surprise.

James Hey, Dixon, Illinois

Some people lead lives devoid of politics and may connect with someone on a completely different level. But look at the city in this newspaper's name. In this polarized area in this polarized society, a first date is too late.

Eric Greene, Annapolis

I do not allow MAGA into my life. I would not have anything to do with anyone who supports anything about this administration, so I ask about politics the first time I speak to someone. It is a dealbreaker for me.

Liz Rubin, St. Petersburg, Florida

Why waste a fourth, third, second or even first date to find out your political beliefs are incompatible? Better to be upfront in your profile and eliminate an unnecessary first date in the first place. Or wear a bright-red MAGA hat in your picture and the seeker can swipe left or right accordingly.

Bruce Berkowitz, Boston

Bring up politics with people immediately. Thereby, you can get a sense of whether to continue the relationship — or whether it's possible to change the person's mind.

Bernard Cleyet, Salinas, California

The duration of time to wait (or not) is inversely correlated with one's purpose for bringing up politics in the first place. On a first date, one would hope listening is for learning rather than for formulating an argument.

Steve Muratore, Rochester, New York

I used to believe that somebody's politics were not a dealbreaker. For decades, I had a broad mix of friends and clients, and more often than not when we had a conversation, we found that we shared a lot of the same values, even if we differed on solutions.

That is no longer the case. It is nearly impossible to look at what is happening in this country and believe that our values have not diverged. People are being wantonily killed by federal agents in American streets. Few of those named in the Epstein files, including the sitting president, will likely ever see justice. It's as though people on the right will jump through any hoop to justify what has happened, rather than take a hard look at what we have become.

It's a cliché because it's a truth inherent to our time: If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention!

At this point, I won't even go on a first date with someone without an idea of their political leanings. If you are MAGA, it's a hard no. Not because of "politics" but because our values are so far out of alignment that it's not even worth considering.

Angela McLaughlin, Chico, California

If you're a "likes to talk politics" person, maybe broog it up sooner and in a lighter political topic and see what kind of response is elicited — not just the words but also the vibe of the response. In the dating world, I find politics isn't the best topic to engage in, though I've had dates where I've gotten into it with someone who knows what they're talking about, and it's very stimulating. Sometimes, different points of view can even be exciting. (You know what they say about opposites attracting!) Just remember it's a date and not a "win this discussion war" event.

Paul Enfield, Clovis, California

Politics is a touchy subject, especially at the old folks' home where I live. You either stay away from the subject altogether, or you are told by others who are the rabid Trump supporters and to avoid them especially. The attitude is let them eat and socialize with others of their ilk.

What's most troubling about the erosion of civility, consideration and kindness is that we are supposed to be — and we are — bound together in our last years of life, caring for each other through illnesses, encouraging each other to enjoy our remaining time together, and

uniting in love and unity without politics, war and incivility affecting so much of our existence.

Kathy A. Megyeri, Washington

A great match on paper

Reading the March 22 Business article "Thousands have swooned over this MAGA dream girl. She's made with AL," I wondered: Where are the Mills Brothers when we need them?

I'm gonna buy a paper doll that I can call my own. A doll that other fellows cannot steal. And then the flirty, flirty guys with their flirty, flirty eyes.

Will have to flirt with dollies that are real. When I come home at night, she will be waiting.

She'll be the truest doll in all this world. I'd rather have a paper doll to call my own.

Than have a fickle-minded real live girl.

Robert Castrodale, Chelan, Washington

The man behind the curtain

Keith R. Riechburg's March 23 online column, "Only a certain type of leader wants his face everywhere," noted that President Donald Trump, "a real estate mogul with a clear edifice complex," has plastered his face on government buildings and added his name to the Institute of Peace and the Kennedy Center.

Before Trump, one's reaction to a three-story banner displaying the image of a sitting president staring down from the facade of the Robert F. Kennedy Department of Justice Building might have been to conclude it was an act of a leftist guerrilla theater group attempting to portray a menacing authoritarian.

Displayed as it is with Trump's imprimatur, it speaks rather of the Wizard of Oz: authority whose power is manifested by the invocation of fear and illusion.

David Sussman, San Jose

The March 24 front-page article "Preservationists seek to halt Kennedy Center renovation" left me reeling from the egotism of both renaming this iconic cultural center and the flimsy narrative that it requires \$200 million in repairs and alterations. I commend Rep. Joyce Beatty (D-Ohio) and Greg Werkheiser, founding partner at Cultural Heritage Partners, for their efforts to block the shutdown of this grand performing arts center.

We need Democrats to win big in November so Congress has the power to paraphrase Lloyd Bentsen's famous statement to Dan Quayle in the 1988 vice-presidential debate: "Mr. President, you're no Jack Kennedy."

Gilbert Whisman, Jamestown, North Carolina

President Donald Trump has indicated on Truth Social that, for his first time in office, he will attend White House Correspondents' Association's annual dinner next month.

Trump turned every American journalist into a domestic war correspondent on Jan. 6, 2021, and does so again every time he declares the free press enemies of the people. He employs a tactic used in war: dehumanizing one's enemies. He does this often with industry reporters, mostly women and mostly of color.

The association should disinvite Trump from the correspondents' dinner — or say they're shutting it down for remodeling until 2029.

Robert Vukovic, Salton City, California

Complete and total, and incomplete and partial

In his March 25 column, "In their brakes of chicken, Trump and Iran tap the brakes at last," David Ignatius reported on President Donald Trump's threat to "obliterate" Iran's power plants. This comes amid similarly worded threats and Trump's claim last year that U.S. strikes had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear capabilities. It obliterates me how many times a country that has to be obliterated has to be obliterated before it has been obliterated.

Ridley Nelson, Great Falls

Post Opinions wants to know: Do you have experience dating someone with different political beliefs? How did it go, and what did you learn? Send us your response, and it might be published as a letter to the editor.

wapo.st/purple_dating

Letter submissions

Send letters to letters@washpost.com. Submissions must be exclusive to The Post and should include the writer's address and day and evening telephone numbers. Because of the volume of material we receive, we are unable to acknowledge submissions; writers whose letters are under consideration for publication will be contacted.

Yet another step toward state capitalism

THE U.S. government became the second-largest shareholder in an Australian mining company last week. If there's a compelling case to gamble taxpayer money like this, the Trump administration hasn't made it.

The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation announced plans Wednesday to convert a \$31 million loan to Syrah Resources, which operates a graphite mine in Mozambique, into a 20 percent equity stake. The move is an attempt to counter China's control of the world's supply of graphite, which is essential for rechargeable batteries that power electric vehicles and energy storage systems for the U.S. grid.

"In today's era of global competition, economic security is national security," said Ben Black, the head of the federal

agency. In other words, the administration is seeking to compete with China on critical minerals by imitating Beijing's state-controlled management of resources. What could go wrong?

The administration has already used taxpayer dollars to buy equity stakes in other critical mineral companies, such as Trilogy Metals, Lithium Americas, MP Materials, Vulcan Elements, Korea Zinc and USA Rare Earth. It's also entered into an agreement to take a 10 percent stake in Intel, the chip manufacturer, and secured a "golden share" of U.S. Steel while negotiating the acquisition of that company by Japan's Nippon.

There may be a case for limited government intervention to guarantee the supply of certain inputs into products crucial for national security. But a better way to ensure that happens is

reducing trade barriers with allies rather than allowing bureaucrats to bet on which firms might be successful.

These deals are especially problematic when the companies have business connections with administration officials or close allies of the president. Syrah, for example, is closely tied with Elon Musk's Tesla. But they also distort the economy by boosting projects that might not make sense economically. And taxpayers will be left holding the bag if the company fails.

China's control of critical minerals is a serious issue, but having Uncle Sam as a minority shareholder in a foreign mining operation won't solve it. Getting out of the way of innovators, and allowing private money to flow more freely between friendly nations, would do more.

Ohio's drag on free speech

OHIO REPUBLICANS are racing to protect the public from a sinister threat: men in wigs and sequined dresses. In reality, it's a heavy-handed attempt to chill constitutionally protected expression.

The state House of Representatives passed a bill on Wednesday to criminalize drag shows that take place outside specified venues. The legislation's sponsor, state Rep. Angela King (R), argued that the purpose of the legislation is to protect children from "premature sexualization" and "the erosion of their innocence."

Ohio law already prohibits the dissemination of obscene materials or performances to minors. The bill would expand those restrictions to performances outside an "adult cabaret," such as a nightclub or sex shop, that features "performers or entertainers who exhibit a gender identity that is different from the performer's or entertainer's biological sex using clothing, makeup, prosthetic or imitation genitals or breasts, or other physical markers."

Violations could result in a felony charge and up to 18 months in prison.

Defenders of the law insist that it leaves wiggle room for "appropriate drag" — that is, performances that they do not consider "obscene." But what that would mean in practice is unclear because Ohio's obscenity law is extraordinarily vague: It includes anything whose "dominant appeal is to prurient interest" or whose "dominant tendency is to arouse lust."

Giving the government far-reaching power to punish speech that crosses some arbitrary line inevitably means



A performance in 2023 during the "Mimosas & Heels Drag Brunch" at the Public House in Norfolk, Virginia.

people will shy away from going anywhere near that boundary. That censorship, plain and simple.

It's also paternalistic. Any reasonable person understands that drag shows are inappropriate for children — not just because they are usually sexually explicit but also because they include crude humor and lots of alcohol. Parents are entirely capable of keeping their kids away from those events without the government's help. They're also capable of making their own decisions about bringing their kids to public events that might feature drag performers, such as Pride parades.

Ohio would not be the first red state

to enact restrictions on this form of entertainment. Tennessee, Texas, Florida and Montana have passed similar laws, though the latter two are currently blocked by courts. Last month, a federal appeals court in Texas ruled that the state can enforce its law. The U.S. Supreme Court recently refused to take them up, a challenge against Tennessee's statute.

However someone feels about drag queens, those are unfortunate losses for the First Amendment. If performers think they can make a living by cross-dressing in settings that aren't funded by taxpayers, why should the government have any say in the matter?

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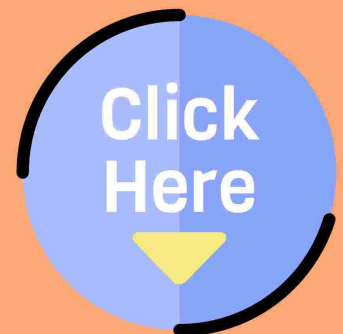
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As Trump circles a Cuba deal, this must come first

BY ROBERTO GONZÁLEZ

President Donald Trump has been presiding over a startling turn in U.S. policy on Cuba. In January he announced that Washington would “work a deal” with Havana, which is facing one of its most severe economic crises in decades. Earlier this month, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel confirmed that talks were ongoing. Then, on March 16, the same day Cuba was hit with a total power grid collapse, Trump moved beyond dealmaking language.

Speaking to reporters at the White House, Trump was expected to have the “honor of taking Cuba in some form.”

Should the administration be right that Cuba has been so weakened, it may have on its hands the rarest of geopolitical openings. That opening should not be wasted. Before Washington offers any sanctions relief or diplomatic thaw, it should state one condition in public and without ambiguity: the unconditional release of all Cuban political prisoners.

A government that seeks dollars while jailing dissidents is not reforming. It is refinancing repression. Cuba still imprisons hundreds of people for political reasons. Even after last year’s Vatican-brokered agreement to release 553 prisoners, rights groups could verify only about 200 protest-related detainees among those freed. The United States has continued to cite the unjust detention and torture of Cubans who joined the major nationwide protests in July 2021, and independent monitors say many families still face surveillance, intimidation and arbitrary restrictions.

The categories are telling: peaceful protesters, independent journalists, artists and civic activists. An independent journalist, José Gabriel Barrenechea, was sentenced in January to six years in prison after joining a peaceful street protest during a blackout in 2024. Families of prisoners of conscience report worsening harassment and denial of adequate medical care.

Any negotiation that treats their imprisonment as a secondary matter would only legitimize repression.

Unconditionally release all Cuban political prisoners.

Conditioning engagement on liberty is a staple of American statecraft. During the Cold War, the Jackson-Vanik amendment denied unconditional trade benefits to Soviet-bloc regimes that restricted emigration; a White House fact sheet later called it “an extraordinary success” in securing freedom of emigration from the Soviet Union and its successor states.

That standard survived the Cold War. In 2012, President Barack Obama kept Myanmar sanctions in place, even while acknowledging reforms, because of “remaining political prisoners” and persistent serious abuses. By 2016, when he finally terminated the nearly two-decade national emergency with respect to Myanmar, the White House cited “the release of many political prisoners” as part of the reason.

And there is even more recent evidence of this approach bearing fruit. This year, under intense U.S. pressure, Venezuelan officials released opposition figures, activists and other political prisoners. High-profile releases began at Washington’s request and by late February a leading legal rights group said more than 540 political prisoners had been freed since Jan. 8, shortly after President Nicolás Maduro was ousted. Reuters later reported that Caracas had bowed to Trump administration demands and released hundreds as part of a desire for broader normalization with Washington. The releases were incomplete and uneven, but there is precisely the lesson: Pressure works best before relief is banked.

That is why Havana’s concessions must come before any handshake, not halfway through the process and not buried in a confidential side understanding. Prisoners released beforehand are leverage realized. Prisoners promised afterward are often little more than a press strategy.

For Trump, this is also a question of legacy. He can pursue an opening that leaves Cuba’s bravest citizens behind, or he can establish a standard worthy of both American interests and American principles. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has already placed sanctions on Cuban officials over the unjust detention and torture of protesters. A release-first policy would match action and rhetoric with leverage and make clear that U.S. engagement is meant to strengthen the Cuban people.

If this truly is Havana’s moment of weakness, the United States should begin where every free nation ought to begin: not with the regime’s balance sheet, but with the names on its cell doors.

Roberto González is chief advocacy officer at the Human Rights Foundation and an adjunct professor at Fordham University School of Law.



WASHINGTON POST STAFF ILLUSTRATION, JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES, ISTOCK

The unreligious religiosity of Christian identity politics

BY MATTHEW SCHMITZ

Jane Fishback is a different kind of Republican candidate. At appearances across the state of Florida, where he is seeking the Republican nomination for governor, he fluently uses Gen Z slang and leans into a memeable form of religiosity. At a recent event, Fishback, a Catholic, stood before a cheering crowd of young men as he kissed an icon of Christ the Redeemer. “I will never kiss the wafers,” he said, referring to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, one of Judaism’s holiest sites. “But I will kiss our Lord and Savior.”

It’s hard to imagine a member of the Moral Majority-era religious right doing the same thing. But Fishback distinguishes himself from conventional politicians by asserting his Christianity in baroque and confrontational terms. He does not just invoke Christian themes. He draws a line between Christians and non-Christians, as in his comment about the Western Wall.

Fishback’s religious rhetoric is part of an emerging form of Christian identity politics. Like a number of prominent influencers, he interlaces elaborate expressions of Christian piety with criticisms of Jewish supporters of Israel. Many of these influencers are “trad Catholics,” Catholics drawn to the traditional Latin mass and alienated from the church hierarchy. They are creating a religious right distinct from the one that was once led by evangelicals.

Candace Owens, for example, attends the Latin mass and spins her anti-establishment and anti-Jewish fantasies while sitting in front of an ornate crucifix and a gothic reliquary containing a stone associated with the cult of St. Michael the Archangel. (She recently said that she has not yet been confirmed in the Catholic faith with which she publicly identifies.)

Megyn Kelly, another Catholic, has likewise grown more demonstrative in her piety as she has grown more critical of pro-Israel Jewish commentators such as Ben Shapiro and Mark Levin. In December, she announced to the world that she was about to pray the rosary “like virtually all Christians do.” (About half of Christians are non-Catholic.)

This political Catholicism has turned Fishback, a financier with a history of legal and money troubles, into a rising star of the Christian right. His opponent, Rep. Byron Donalds, is favored to win the August primary. But a February poll found Fishback drawing support from 32 percent of Republican voters age 18-34, compared with just 8 percent for Donalds. With millions of TikTok views and a young and enthusiastic following, Fishback is poised to thrive as an antiestablishment influencer.

Far from being a sign of resurgence in faith, Christian identity politics is a symptom of religious decline. As one observer has noted, the fact that Americans are growing more secular and less religiously literate has made religion more salient as a marker of political difference, even as invocations of it become less informed.

This irony was already evident during Donald Trump’s first presidential campaign and term, in his unidomatic citation of “Two Corinthians” (most Christians would say “Second Corinthians”) and his decision to hold up a Bible in response to public disorder in 2020. (When a reporter asked, “Is that your Bible?” Trump memorably replied, “It’s a Bible.”)

But the new Christian identity politics differs from Trump’s fairly conventional civic religion. Fishback kisses an icon rather than lifting a Bible. He punctuates his remarks not by saying “God bless America” but by proclaiming “Christ is king.” Like Owens and Kelly, he seems to prefer distinctive and striking expres-

sions of belief to the familiar and reassuring.

It isn’t a coincidence that all these figures have thrived on video-based platforms in the age of social media. Visual media incentivize more striking and extreme displays of religious identity. In the 1970s, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan remarked on how people had come to look down on religious figures who tried to blend in by wearing everyday clothing, “the plain-clothed priest or plain-clothed nun.” Instead, he said, young people wanted “massive costumes and vestments” — the kind of thing traditional Catholicism specializes in — because they prized the “far out” and “very unconventional.”

Something similar is true today. Holding up rosaries at rallies and kissing icons on the campaign trail is a form of religious expression optimized for a culture based on images rather than text. As Americans spend less time reading and feel less reverence for the written word, the Bible will lose ground to non-textual expressions of faith. This is partly a story of Catholic devotions replacing Protestant piety. But the new Christian identity politics also breaks with the understated style of older Catholic politicians like Jeb Bush. It has less to do with fine points of doctrine than with a general attraction to the outre.

Even the richest expressions of faith can be used as little more than badges of belonging. Wielding Christianity in this way is likely to unsettle non-Christians, but it will be no less distressing to many believers. Like taking the Lord’s name in vain, it is misuse of a holy thing. Viewed in this light, Fishback’s problem is not that he is too religious. It’s that he isn’t religious enough.

Awakenings is a weekly newsletter on religion. Sign up at wapo.st/awakenings

Teens are ‘predicting’ March Madness. That’s a problem.

BY MICK MULVANEY

As March Madness heats up this week, millions of Americans will wear their brackets, watch buzzer-beaters, and, increasingly, put money on the games. I will be among them.

But this year more than ever, some of the most active bettors may not even be old enough to legally place a wager in most states. That’s because more and more sports betting is happening not on regulated sportsbooks but on “prediction markets” — platforms such as Kalshi and Polymarket that insist their “sports event contracts” are entirely different from sports betting.

They aren’t. If you can stake money on whether a team covers the spread, hits the over/under or wins outright, the label doesn’t matter. For users, the experience is indistinguishable from sports betting. And during March Madness — a tournament built around college campuses and young audiences — that purported distinction is dangerous.

In most states, legal sportsbooks require users to be 21 or older. Prediction markets allow users as young as 18 to stake money on sports.

The companies behind prediction markets prefer not to discuss this. Instead, they describe their products in the language of finance. They talk about “contracts,” “price discovery” and even “truth machines.” In reality, these plat-

forms mostly facilitate sports gambling.

And unlike state-licensed sportsbooks, prediction markets are not bound by consumer protection frameworks such as a minimum age requirement of 21 and wager dispute recourse. They do not follow the same state-by-state rules, do not contribute comparable tax revenue to local communities and do not consistently provide the same responsible-gaming safeguards such as gambling addiction support.

The law is clear. States have the jurisdiction to regulate sports betting. But prediction markets argue they are regulated by the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, an agency created to regulate agricultural and financial derivatives, not nationwide online gambling. Congress never tasked the CFTC with setting guidance for sports betting, and the Supreme Court ruled in 2018 that authority rests with states.

Yet prediction markets are now offering sports-related wagering across the country, including in jurisdictions like my home state, South Carolina, that have not yet chosen to legalize sports betting at all.

The result is a system that undermines state policy decisions and the guardrails those policies put in place. States that have legalized sports betting did so deliberately, establishing age limits, creating new tax revenue and ensuring operators meet strict licensing standards. Prediction markets sidestep those requirements entirely.

The age issue is particularly hard to ignore. For years, policymakers debated the minimum age for sports betting, often landing on 21 to protect younger users. Prediction markets have effectively reset that threshold to 18 — not through legislation but through regulatory gamesmanship.

States are starting to fight back, paving the way for a legal showdown at the Supreme Court. On March 20, Nevada secured a court order forcing Kalshi to immediately stop offering sports-related bets on its platform. A few days earlier, Arizona filed criminal charges against Kalshi, accusing the company of operating an illegal gambling platform.

The legal volleys, though, could take years to play out. Meanwhile, prediction market operators are rushing to lure underage users. The companies have focused aggressive marketing on college campuses, targeting the teenagers who are too young to legally gamble on sportsbooks. On social media platforms such as X, TikTok and Instagram, Kalshi and Polymarket dole out payments for posts featuring their markets. In one case, they even courted a 15-year-old influencer.

March Madness will come and go. Brackets will bust. Champions will be crowned. But the regulatory gap exposed by this tournament will remain — until policymakers choose to address it.

When 18-year-olds can risk money to “predict” the outcome of a game that they cannot legally bet on in the same state, the issue isn’t what we call it. It’s that the system isn’t working.

Mick Mulvaney was the director of the Office of Management and Budget and acting White House chief of staff in the first Trump administration. He is the executive director of Gambling Is Not Investing.

GEORGE F. WILL

Gladiatorial combat, a.k.a. the midterms

NOMINEE, n. A modest gentleman shrinking from the distinction of private life and diligently seeking the honorable obscurity of public office. — Ambrose Bierce, “The Devil’s Dictionary”

Candidates in this year’s elections will soon be bouncing around like corn being popped. By November, the nation might long for a rebirth of political reform.

In 1876, although Rutherford B. Hayes was Ohio’s governor and the Republicans’ presidential nominee, he doubted even the propriety of attending Ohio Day at the Philadelphia celebration of the nation’s centennial. Fifteen decades later, ambition is no longer dormant. But what are candidates ambitious to do? As politics has become more tribal, it has become more gladiatorial, and the satisfactions of catharsis — the expression of animosities — have supplanted expectations of agendas for governing.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a liberal with a conservative disposition (he thought conservatism is a disposition), once said, “Liberals are people who would like to see things improved, and conservatives are people who would like to see things not worsened.” Today, many voters at both ends of the ideological spectrum primarily want the same thing: to see the other side lose. Theoretically, people vote, then the results have consequences. Actually, today, voting is its own consequence: catharsis.

In this era of presidential dominance, voters thinking (if they do) about midterm congressional elections might wonder, what’s the point? Adam J. White of the American Enterprise Institute writes that presidents use Congress’s inertia to justify their own assertiveness, “but this gets the situation backwards. The defining fact of our era is: Congress won’t act, because Presidents will.”

The vast majority of House seats are, in normal times, which means most of the time, secure for the parties currently holding them. And all but three states have two senators from the same party. This means that incumbents’ job security depends primarily on avoiding primary challenges — to Democrats from the left, to Republicans from the right. As Yuval Levin says in his book “American Covenant,” often “winning a primary now involves effectively committing not to negotiate or bargain with the other party.” So, for both parties, the crucial promise is to not do what member of Congress should do, which is bargain.

Today’s presidential dominance serves Republicans because their party’s raison d’être is nothing but subservience to the president. The Economic Innovation Group’s Sarah Eckhardt, Connor O’Brien and Ben Glasner report that in 2024 Donald Trump received a larger portion of the vote than in 2020 in 90 percent of counties. But without him on the ballots in 2026, will his voters bestir themselves?

Trump, himself a highly caffeinated creature, has been caffee for the electorate: a stimulant, who in 2024 updated the axiom that higher voter turnout is better for Democrats. Last spring, David Shor, a data scientist, calculated that if more people had voted, Kamala Harris would have fared even worse. Trump would have won the popular vote by almost five points instead of 1.4 points, and in doing so would have won five states he lost (Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Virginia). The electoral vote outcome would have been 355-183 instead of 312-226.

Trump, however, will never again be on a ballot. So, what is the foreseeable political residue of Trump, who, in his Louis XIV (“L’État, c’est moi”) mood, has said, accurately, “I am MAGA?” AEI’s Timothy P. Carney has examined Pennsylvania (“arguably the ‘swingiest’ of white states”) and discerned an alignment: the working class becoming more Republican, upper-middle-class suburbanites becoming more Democratic — that is not symmetrical.

The Democrats’ gains are largely from former Republicans switching parties out of disgust with Trump. The Republicans’ gains include many former blue-collar Democrats, but “more disaffected nonvoters” — that is, a disengagement of the working class becoming more Republican, upper-middle-class suburbanites becoming more Democratic — that is not symmetrical.

“Many of those former Republican voters are now firmly country club Democrats, while many of those working-class voters never quite became Republicans — they were simply Trump voters.” Thus, when Trump disappears, “the country club will still be very Democratic — but the working-class whites will go back to being missing white voters.”

Now, never underestimate the Democrats’ ability to make a sow’s ear out of a silk purse. As an Israeli diplomat once said of the Palestinians, they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. If many Democratic candidates try to pump up deflated hysterias — democracy is dying, the planet is frying — they can make themselves resemble a (to recycle a phrase) basket of deplorables. Failure is a choice.

Contrary to what Trump says, Iran is not begging for a deal to end the war. That's the problem.
BY NICHOLAS KRISTOF | PAGE 3



Prediction markets teach us to look at the future as gamblers rather than as citizens. Is that what we want?
BY DAVID WALLACE-WELLS | PAGE 4

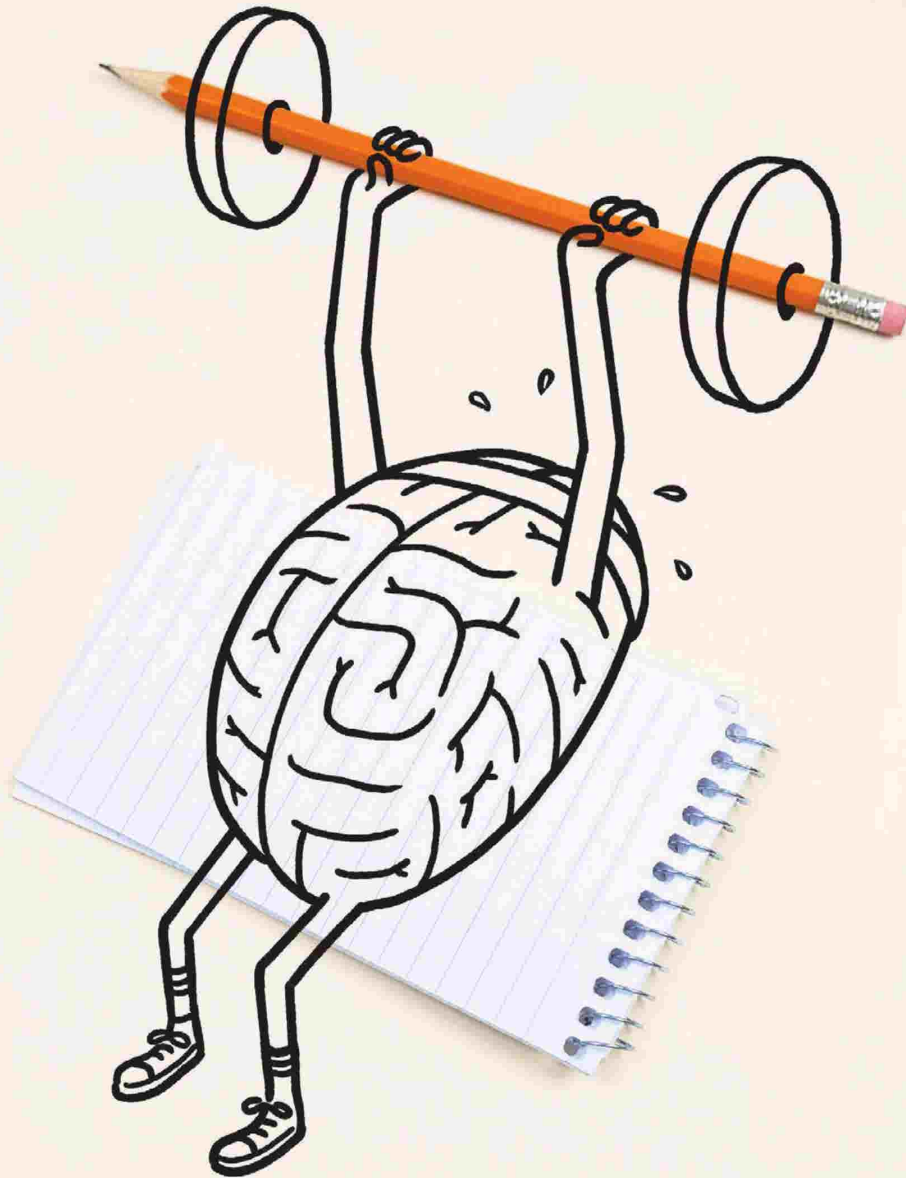
In the end, 'Queer Eye' didn't change hearts and minds. Just haircuts and drapes.
BY ROSA RANKIN-GEE | PAGE 10

IDEAS | CONVERSATION | ANALYSIS

Sunday Opinion

The New York Times

SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2026



Separate from your phone. Embrace critical thinking.
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A COGNITIVE MANIFESTO FOR THE A.I. ERA

BY CAL NEWPORT | PAGE 6

OPINION

The Casino That's Eating the World

David Wallace-Wells

A writer in Opinion and for The Times Magazine.

LAST month, as American forces gathered in the Middle East in obvious preparation for an attack on Iran, you could've made a small fortune gambling on when exactly the bombing would begin.

One user on the prediction site Polymarket — where you can wager on an increasingly large share of human events, from the trivial to the tragic — made \$553,000 on bets placed right before Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was killed by U.S. Israeli strikes. Another user was quickly flagged by observers on X as having made \$2.4 million by placing bets on different aspects of the military operation.

In another context, these bets would trigger an insider-trading investigation, and indeed someone in the Iranian military might well have treated the bets as a form of actionable intelligence. But what is the average American meant to do with this kind of news, observing that big spike in betting activity and guessing that it might well mean someone with inside information is sending a clear signal? One intuitive answer would be: Bet on it yourself. What's the point of knowing anything, after all, if you don't put some skin in the game?

This kind of proposition used to seem, to many, obviously grotesque. But increasingly it seems stiched unmistakably into the cardsharp logic of American life. In theory, prediction markets are pretty straightforward: They're online marketplaces where people can buy and sell stakes in futures of various kinds such as they might trade stocks.

This month, for instance, for 92 cents you could have bought a future that paid off a dollar if the Ryan Gosling movie "Project Hall Mary," which opened on March 20, had a Rotten Tomatoes score of 93 percent positive or higher on the morning of March 23; for 8 cents, you could have bought one that paid off a dollar if that didn't happen. (The score ended up being 95 percent, and those holding that future collectively took more than \$2 million home.) Each market sustains trading on those futures, and the result is effectively a collective forecast of a future outcome: When a future is trading at 50 cents, the market is telling you it is an even bet; when it goes to zero, it has essentially concluded it is impossible.

For a long time, these online prediction markets were, like online sports betting, so tightly regulated as to be inaccessible to the average person in most of the United States, though enterprising would-be gamblers could gain access to sites with VPNs. But after a series of ambiguous legal victories and the arrival of a friendlier presidential

administration, they have leaped into the legal gray area and exploded not just in popularity but in visibility as well.

Their boosters tell us, grandly, that the sum of all those bets gives us our best forecast of the future — even a workable approximation of the truth. They also offer an intriguing implicit philosophy: that we should relate to the future not as citizens or moralists, problem solvers or advocates, but as gamblers, each of us surveying the horizon of possibility somewhat indifferent to human outcomes and looking instead for a betting edge.

The markets don't concern only matters of grim geopolitical consequence, such as when Iran might lose control over Kharg Island, when China might invade Taiwan or how many different countries Israel will attack this month. No, they offer lighthearted action, too, such as whether the vacuous YouTuber MrBeast will be the Democratic presidential nominee in 2028 (he won't be legally eligible to run until 2036), or about what words would be said in an episode of "The Late Show" (even after the interview in question had already been taped), about just how high the temperature will rise one Tuesday in Miami or how much snow might accumulate the next day in Manhattan, on when the United States might confirm the existence of aliens, whether the price of Bitcoin will be up or down in the next five minutes or whether Jesus Christ will return this calendar year.

For most of the last year, the price of a \$1 future on that last question cost less than 4 cents, which means that the market gave less than a 4 percent chance of the Lord's return, and in 2025 nearly \$3.3 million was bet on the possibility — a small enough market that most of the wagers were probably jokes and larks. Then, suddenly, in February, the odds jumped.

This wasn't because there had been any big theological news, but because a secondary market had opened up, in which people were gambling on which direction the odds in the eschatology market would move. It was easy enough to spend a little money betting up the odds in the first futures market and collecting a much bigger payoff in the second. And now there is almost \$50 million riding on the chances of a Second Coming.

On March 10, the journalist Emanuel Fabian, live-blogging the Iran war for The Times of Israel, reported that a ballistic missile had struck near the city of Beit Shemesh, just outside Jerusalem. He soon began to receive a series of emails and messages — polite at first, then threatening, then life-threatening — imploring him to rewrite his story to say that the missile had been intercepted overhead by an Israeli rocket, with debris falling to the ground below.

The issue, he wrote in a terrifying account for the newspaper, was a Polymarket fu-



LISA SHEEHAN

ture: "Iran strikes Israel on...?" More than \$14 million had been bet on that happening March 10, and an intercepted missile didn't count. "You have no idea how much you've put yourself at risk," read one message. "If you do not correct this by 01:00 Israel time today, March 15, you are bringing upon yourself damage you have never imagined you would suffer," it said. "You have exactly

half an hour to correct your attempt at influence," read another. "You made a fatal mistake and you'd better respond to us," and then: "I expect a response from you within 9 minutes." Then: "One minute remains..." He reached out to the police and Polymarket, which condemned the attempt at intimidation and posted on X that it "banned the accounts for all involved & will pass their

Can Mamdani Get the Big Stuff Done at This Intense Pace?

Mara Gay

A writer in Opinion who covers politics.

MAYOR ZOHRAH MAMDANI was on his way to Gracie Mansion this winter when he asked his driver to pull over to help fellow New Yorkers dig their cars out of the snow. He picks. He shovels. So did his press secretary. Members of his security detail did, too.

It was just the kind of scene that had endeared Mr. Mamdani, 34, to voters. It also hinted at a governing style that resembles the scrappy, high-octane feel of a political campaign — and relies on the hustle of a group of young staff members to keep up.

Mr. Mamdani, New York City's youngest mayor in about a century, has filled City Hall with people who are also in their 30s, or even younger. The mayor's chief of staff, Elle Bisgaard-Church, is 34. His communications director, Anna Bahr, is 33. Joe Calvello, his press secretary, is 33. His closest outside adviser, Morris Katz, 26, is so young that for several months last year, he told reporters he was a couple of years older than he was.

The arrival of these young Democrats at the helm of one of the most prominent offices in the country has meant all kinds of changes for New York politics, from the congressional primaries in which Mr. Mamdani has involved himself to who holds the political capital in New York.

Then there's the way they run the government, with a management style that youth allows: working all the time. Mr. Mamdani is younger than most prominent Democrats, needs little sleep, enjoys working weekends and likes to be highly visible in the city he leads, every day. Some of his closest aides haven't had a day off since Jan. 1, when the mayor was sworn into office. Work calls can begin as late as 10 p.m. Some veterans say the approach is notably intense, like Karen Hinton, who was Mayor Bill de Blasio's press secretary and said she struggled to imagine her former boss shoveling snow. "He wouldn't have gotten out of his car," she said. "He would have called someone."

Mr. Mamdani's administration offers among the first looks at the generational change coming — slowly, finally — to leadership in politics and other key American institutions beyond it. His 2025 campaign, both in policy and in messaging, is already influencing Democratic politics. If he is successful, politicians of both parties may seek to replicate his governing style.

Some of the staff members' ideas are novel, like the faux newspaper front page that aides prepared as a gift for President Trump, meant to evoke the New York tabloids that helped launch Mr. Trump's politi-

cal career. Several people told me the charm offensive was the idea of Ms. Bahr, but when asked, she said it was "a team effort." Either way, the gambit led to the release of a Columbia University student, Elmina Agayeva, who had been detained by federal immigration officials earlier that day.

But as with any management style, the culture Mr. Mamdani is building at City Hall comes with some possible blind spots and potential trade-offs.

One question is whether there are enough people at City Hall with the confidence that years of experience can bring to know when to tell the mayor no. (Several people told me this role is primarily filled by Dean Fulei-

The New York mayor's long hours show what generational change actually looks like.



YUKI WAMURA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

han, Mr. Mamdani's 75-year-old first deputy mayor.) The influx of younger people to City Hall has also brought shifts in policy that would have been unthinkable under earlier mayors, from views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to issues closer to home. For instance, Mr. Mamdani's aides are acutely aware of the cost of rent (a good thing, since two-thirds of residents are renters) but sometimes appear less attuned to the concerns of homeowners.

There are few Black people among the senior staffers at City Hall, which is a serious problem. There were no Black deputy mayors until March 19, when Mr. Mamdani put Renita Francois in charge of a new office focused on mental health and safety. About one in five New Yorkers is non-Hispanic Black, and Black Americans make up the heart of the Democratic base, as well as an important part of the culture of New York. They are also being priced out of the city in disproportionate numbers and face myriad challenges, including higher unemployment and lower reading-proficiency rates in the city's public schools.

Representation isn't the only measure of commitment, and Mr. Mamdani has been vocal about these issues. His decision to roll out his child care initiative in high-poverty areas like, for instance, the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, which is heavily Black, is encouraging. And his poll numbers among Black voters are strong. But for Black Americans, who have faced a long history of exclusion, a seat at the table still matters.

As generational change in government gets underway nationally, there are likely to be some practical concerns, too.

The 30- and 20-somethings around Mr. Mamdani — most of whom have yet to do their demanding jobs in a period of major crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic — will have to learn how to pace themselves. Not even 100 days into the administration, the relentlessness has left some running on fumes.

Most of them don't seem to mind. Mr. Mamdani tends to inspire loyalty; many of the people surrounding the mayor are also avowed progressives who see his mayorality as a chance to carry out an agenda to which they are fiercely committed, and a rare bright spot in a national landscape dominated by far-right policies and ideas.

"Would you rather a mayor who does 11 p.m. press conferences or one who's at the gym at 11 a.m.?" Mr. Mamdani's senior communications adviser, Monica Klein, 36, asked me in a text message. When I asked how much sleep she was getting, Ms. Klein was referring to her previous boss, Mr. de Blasio, who lived at Gracie Mansion on Man-

hattan's Upper East Side but drew ire for working out at a Y.M.C.A. in Park Slope, often midmorning.

As they were during the breakout campaign last year, the millennial mayor and his millennial and Gen Z aides are in constant contact with New Yorkers across social media platforms. But they are spending even more time barnstorming the city with in-person events, a nod to a growing sense of urgency among younger generations to get offline and rebuild connection and community.

Mr. Mamdani likes to work in person, often dropping in on the bullpen to check in with aides. He is also constantly coming up with new ideas that lead to more work, like going bowling (on a Saturday) with members of a nurses' union to celebrate their new labor contract. He frequently communicates with his staff members through chat on Microsoft Teams.

Working at City Hall has always involved long hours and a certain kind of intensity. Accordingly, the top jobs tend to attract a certain type of individual. Stu Loeser, New York City's longest-serving press secretary, says his schedule during those days included a nap between 7:30 and 9:30 p.m. after putting his infant daughter to bed, rising to work again until midnight, then sleeping before briefing his boss, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, in the 6 a.m. hour. "I was dying. You should be killing yourself," Marc La Vorna, who also served as Mr. Bloomberg's press secretary, told me. "Number of days in office is your biggest piece of capital. You run out of time, on everything," Mr. La Vorna said.

The maverick group of young politicians running the city may also come to find that personally engaging in every minute detail of municipal government, and with equal ferocity, can make it harder to deliver on the big promises. Those promises are what got Mr. Mamdani elected, and they electrified the younger and more progressive parts of the Democratic base far beyond New York City.

Mr. Mamdani is trying to enact a sweeping leftist agenda in a moment when trust in government is exceedingly low. He is the city's first Muslim mayor. And he came to office promising to champion working people in a moment when those Americans are struggling.

That may be why this mayor seems to approach everything he does with a sense of urgency. If it seems like Mr. Mamdani is everywhere, it's because he is. So are his exhausted staffers. It's a group of young and hungry progressives out to prove to voters that the left can govern.

OPINION

info to the relevant authorities.”

As Fabian pointed out in a kind of addendum, an Israeli reservist and a civilian were indicted last month, accused of using classified information to place bets about the country’s 12-day war against Iran last June.

THE long-term vision is to financialize everything and create a tradable asset out of any difference in opinion,” Tarek Mansour, the chief executive of another major prediction market, Kalshi, declared in November. But who wants this future, besides perhaps inveterate gamblers and those people who profit off them?

When people use the phrase “casino economy,” it isn’t as a term of praise but rather a lamentation — that in a healthier world, held together by thicker bonds, less inequality and more evenly distributed opportunity, fewer of us would feel that high-risk gambles were the best chance of getting ahead.

But moneyballing everything has produced an abundance of data on almost all subjects for idle hands to play with, and when there are profits to be made, financialization is typically a more effective tool than a high-stakes, highly leveraged return. He’s surrounded by family members and appointed officials comfortable with self-dealing side hustles. And it’s not just the president — even leaders of the opposition party have been reluctant to ban increasingly common stock trading by members of Congress.

The rest of us now watch odds onscreen as Oscar and Grammy winners are announced, considering placing last-second bets when we might once have been crossing our fingers about the \$5 office pool — or perhaps naively cheering a personal favorite.

On cable news, odds lifted from prediction markets are presented as the informational equivalent of polling results, often by newscasters employed by media organizations now working in corporate partnership with those same betting sites. And a net effect of all this coverage, Kyle Scamroth has argued, may be to undermine public deliberation by manufacturing a kind of premature consent — reporting about the prospect of, say, a mil-

itary strike through prediction market odds that are treated as objective and immutable, rather than engaging in debate about whether the strike should happen.

Sports, too, have been remade by on-demand gambling in ways once considered taboo. Just a few years ago, before sports betting was legalized in 2018, broadcasters were prohibited from mentioning betting lines; now, some podcasters talk about little else. Leagues back then wanted to avoid the taint of betting at almost any cost; now they’re in partnerships with gambling apps.

Before easy-access casinos were installed on everyone’s phones, Americans could still engage with sports as an escapist pastime, mixing aspects of low-stakes tribal conflict and periodic collective exultation. Now, even on Super Bowl Sunday, we engage with those same events less as a strange secular religion and more as if we are sitting in front of a slot machine, experiencing an entirely different game than are even the loved ones sitting right beside us in identical jerseys, but staring down at their phones to monitor their various parlays.

Estimates suggest that in 2022, Americans gambled the equivalent of nearly 4 percent of the gross domestic product and lost more than 10 percent of that money on those bets. Half of all men between the ages of 18 and 49 have an active online sports-betting account, and though surveys are rarely so reliable about these things, one-quarter of sports bettors report being unable to pay bills because of money lost gambling. A 2024 report from researchers at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst suggested that 90 percent of the state’s gambling revenue came from “at-risk and problem gamblers.”

This is a power law familiar from other pastimes that Americans used to categorize as “vices,” and the costs of legalization and destigmatization have proved distressingly familiar, too. In just a few years, the rise of betting apps has produced big spikes in personal bankruptcy and big drops in personal credit ratings, and, on days when there are big upsets, a measurable and horrifying uptick in domestic violence.

The legalization of online gambling increased the population-level risk of personal bankruptcy by roughly 25 percent, according to one scholarly paper; according to another, households that frequently bet reduced their investments after legalization; according to a third, legalization led to reduced savings. It appears to have made binge drinking among young men worse, as well.

When the frenzy of sports betting was really taking off in 2022, the share of Americans who thought legalization was good for society were outnumbered by those who thought it was bad by about four to one. Three years later, the ratio had grown to six to one.

Do we really want to wager on nuclear Armageddon?

Are we sure we want to expand the aperture of this activity so much that it swallows all of us, the world we inhabit, and all events that might happen upon it? Are we sure that we need to be wagering on war and nuclear Armageddon?

FOR decades now, high-minded advocates of prediction markets have argued that, beyond the diversion of gambling on events of real-world consequence, they offer real social value — namely, more accurate forecasts than prognosticators or polls can manage. In certain settings, the advocates are right: A pretty robust finding in social science is that well-designed markets with well-informed participants can perform quite well.

But as the actual futures-market future comes into view, it doesn’t look exactly utopian. And it’s not just the market manipulation, insider trading and potential for strong-arming, as in the case of Emanuel Fabian. It’s that it doesn’t look as if prediction markets have granted us access to a crack team of superforecasters and subject-area experts. At least not all of the time. Instead, it seems that the market logic of day trading meme coins and stocks has simply been extended into every last corner of our lives.

Prediction markets have been drawing in new customers with low-grade social media clickbait, and, as it turns out, the thing people seem to want to do with prediction markets most of all is just throwing money away on college football. A paper written last month identified one eye-opening reason: Those gamblers operating with useful knowledge were routinely outperformed by know-nothings with more experience in betting markets, because the former moved too slowly to take advantage of their knowledge, and the more experienced gamblers moved fast enough that their ignorance didn’t matter.

So what is all this for? In theory, true believers say, the more markets grow, the more accurate they become, with betting volume smoothing out bias and ignorance over time. But not all money spent on speculation is smart money, and when you look in more detail at the actual markets, it gets

harder to pretend that the inevitable outcome of all this gambling is something we want to call wisdom.

Last month, betting markets correctly favored James Talariot in the seemingly wide-open race for the Democratic nomination for a U.S. Senate seat in Texas. But for long stretches of 2022, they also said the Republican most likely to be nominated for the White House wasn’t the former president leading the polls but instead the Florida governor trailing behind him. And while prediction markets seemed to move more toward Donald Trump than polls did in the fall of 2024, a recent review concluded that while Polymarket and Kalshi were a bit better than pure chance at predicting the outcome, they were inconsistent and unimpressive, especially given the size of the market. \$3.6 billion had been spent betting on the outcome just on Polymarket — early as far as the \$1.8 billion spent by the two candidates themselves in 2023 and 2024. Even so, those researchers found, the odds were volatile enough that they often moved in different directions across different markets on the same day, delivering what was less like a consensus forecast than a running arbitrage opportunity for always online traders.

Polis aren’t perfect, either, of course, and we make a mess of understanding them properly as a public. But on the biggest social misses for polling over the last decade, the record of prediction markets isn’t obviously better. In the shock 2016 presidential election, for instance, some of the major betting markets did worse than polling averages. The same was true for the seismic 2016 Brexit vote in Britain.

Betting markets hadn’t exactly predicted that Joe Biden would drop out of the 2024 campaign, and when he stumbled in his June debate with Mr. Trump, suddenly opening up the possibility of a change at the top of the ticket, those flocking to PredictIt to take stock of the contenders would have seen Gavin Newsom as the likeliest replacement. On other sites, Michelle Obama looked like the favored alternative. Those odds may have told us something about the Democratic Party in 2024, at least as it was understood by a relatively small number of like-minded political gamblers. But they certainly didn’t tell us the future.

What, then, are we getting out of it? Maybe it is useful to be able to say concretely that Timothee Chalamet was the favorite to win the Oscar for best actor for a long stretch before eventually losing the lead (and eventually the award) to Michael E. Jordan. Perhaps it’s helpful to know that the betting odds of nuclear war this year spiked to 22 percent before Polymarket shut the market down. But a country this hooked on gambling probably doesn’t need to turn more of life into a game of chance, played alone, on the knife’s edge.

Iran Is Using America’s Playbook Against Us

Edward Fishman

The author of “Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare.”

WE ARE jujitsuing the Iranians,” Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said last Sunday. The United States had just lifted sanctions on about 140 million barrels of Iranian oil, which will likely deliver billions of dollars to a regime the United States is currently at war with. In Mr. Bessent’s telling, America is using Iran’s own oil against it. Iran wants to drive oil prices high enough for President Trump to have to back down. By offering sanctions relief, Mr. Bessent argues, America can flood the market and lower prices.

If either side in this war has pulled off an act of jujitsu, it is Iran. For the first time since 1995, Tehran can sell oil directly to the United States and use the American financial system to collect payment. By closing the Strait of Hormuz for a few weeks, it has secured sanctions relief that in some respects surpasses what it achieved via the 2015 nuclear deal. The United States has long weaponized the financial system to advance its geopolitical aims. Iran has now learned to do the same with the world’s most vital energy chokepoint. And it has done so by borrowing a playbook developed by the United States.

Shortly after winning re-election in 2004, President George W. Bush lamented his lack of leverage. “We’ve sanctioned ourselves out of influence with Iran,” he said. After a decade-long embargo, the United States had virtually no trade or investment ties left with the country. With little left to sanction, Washington saw only one way to increase pressure: Persuade allies to join. Many did not view Iran as a pressing threat. U.S. credibility was strained by the Iraq war. Few of our partners wanted to risk another messy entanglement.

At a hotel breakfast in Bahrain, Stuart Levey, Mr. Bush’s under secretary of the Treasury, was flipping through a newspaper when he came across a story about a Swiss bank that had cut ties with Iran of its own accord. “It sort of clicked for me,” he later recalled. The United States didn’t need to persuade foreign governments to shun Iran. It could instead compel foreign banks to do so — from London to Frankfurt to Dubai to Hong Kong.

Over the following years, Mr. Levey and his successors did just that. By threatening to cut off foreign banks from the dollar unless they severed ties with Iran, they effec-

tively isolated the country from the international financial system. The United States rarely had to follow through on its threats. In a strategy one U.S. official described as “killing the chicken to scare the monkeys,” Washington deployed these so-called secondary sanctions sparingly. On the few occasions when they were applied, everyone else got the message. Sanctioning a single Chinese bank was enough to shift the risk tolerance of the rest.

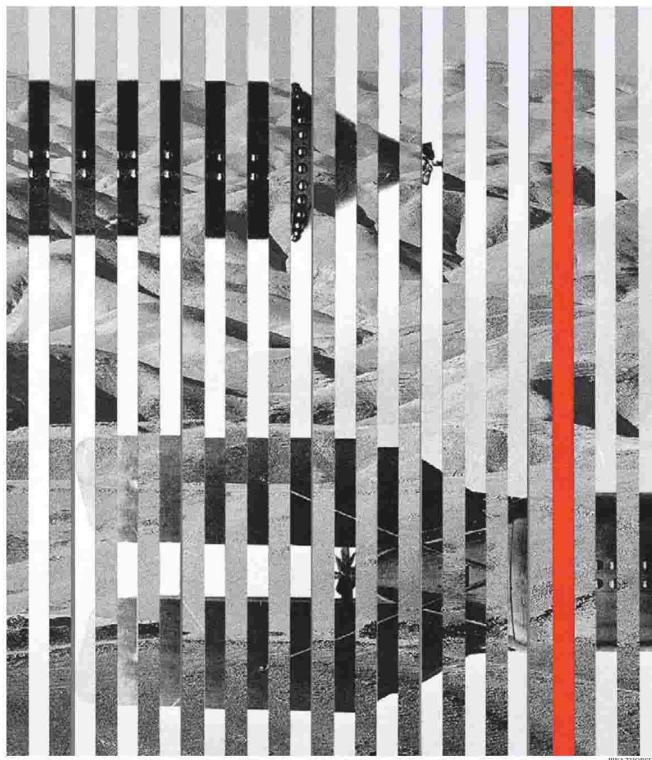
In recent weeks, Iran has turned this strategy against the United States. Analysts long assumed that closing the Strait of Hormuz would require Iran to lay thousands of sea mines and render the strait physically impassable. That made such a move unlikely, since Iran depends on the same waterway to export its own oil.

Instead, Iran has shown it can disrupt the strait at far lower cost. By striking a small number of ships with relatively cheap drones and missiles, Tehran has been able to reshape the risk calculus of the entire global shipping industry. Iran does not need to target every ship, just as the United States did not need to sanction every bank. A few examples were enough to force the rest to fall in line.

Despite Mr. Trump’s best efforts — which have included offering government-backed insurance and encouraging mariners to “show some guts” — traffic has fallen by around 90 percent since the start of the war. The few ships still transiting the waterway are mostly Iranian. In effect, Tehran has established itself as gatekeeper of the strait, demanding multimillion-dollar tolls to guarantee safe passage.

While the Trump administration’s war aims have vacillated between regime change, denuclearization and military degradation, it now has one overriding objective: reopening the strait. Another lesson from the U.S. sanctions campaign could shape what happens next. After the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, global banks were allowed to do business with Iran once more. Mr. Levey, by then the chief legal officer of the London-based HSBC, concluded that the risk for the bank was too high. The Iranian regime had not fundamentally changed, and the United States could ratchet up sanctions again.

It is much easier to heighten risk perception than to reduce it. Iran’s drones are cheap and plentiful. Conflict could reignite. Even after this phase of the war ends, fear that Iran can disrupt the strait at will may linger — deterring investment, reducing traffic and embedding a lasting price increase in global energy markets.



Iran has learned the lessons of American foreign policy. It has used the tools at its disposal to exacerbate risk, forcing private actors to become unwitting tools of its statecraft. That strategy appears vindicated: It has delivered sanctions relief that years of diplomacy could not. Tehran may now con-

Tehran takes cues from U.S. policy.

clude that further pressure is the best way to extract more concessions.

What happens if other countries reach the same conclusion? If the world deals with the United States by fighting back, rather than negotiating, stability will be harder to achieve — and more costly once won.