



## Tackling takedowns

### Online censorship is a threat to the fundamental right to free expression

The Union government's enthusiastic misuse of its spurious powers to censor lawful speech online is an alarming and exponentially growing threat to India's democracy. With amendments to the IT Rules, 2021 – which are themselves on shaky constitutional ground – the government has successfully pressured Meta and X to take down content within three-hour timelines that leave little time to push back, lest they lose “safe harbour” protections and be dragged into court or, worse, have their employees face personal criminal liability. Under the cover of fighting AI-generated content, all speech is being subjected to a despotic regime where the state can silence speech at will, destroying the promise of the Internet, which has emerged as an important alternative voice to express everyday concerns. Visceral, hard-hitting expressions of independent voices are an integral part of a society led by free ideals and representative democracy. Weaponising Sections 69A and 79(3)(b) of the IT Act, 2000 to take down such content, and accounts wholesale, distorts the public conversation in a way that benefits the ruling party, with scant regard for the freedoms of audiences and the livelihoods of creators. Often, entire accounts of the Opposition are deleted. Since this infrastructure of censorship has been built brick by brick without any moral compunctions on the path down which they lead, takedowns of independent media outlets and critical commentators have grown. Some have been reversed, at the cost of revealing their identity. The government continues to enjoy these powers under a veil of secrecy, publishing no meaningful data on how its hold on online discourse has tightened.

By opening up the so-called Sahyog portal to police officials around the country, requests under Section 79(3)(b) have been supercharged as a censorial rubber stamp that the IT Act simply does not give them. The clear Supreme Court precedent outlining what “actual knowledge” of illegality online constitutes for takedown orders has been reduced to a mockery. The Karnataka High Court has even brushed aside binding Court precedent under *Shreya Singhal vs Union of India*, even as the government has not dared to formalise the powers that it is exercising by passing a law in Parliament. Social media platforms have failed miserably in acting as a check in this ongoing rampage for power over online speech and have instead chosen the peace of mind that comes with automatically processing takedown notices. X continues to resist the Sahyog portal, but faces pressure from proceedings in the Karnataka and Delhi High Courts. The political elite must ponder the consequences of its campaign against online speech. Opposition-ruled States have quickly leapt to leverage the Sahyog portal's powers. A future government run by today's Opposition will likely play by the same sordid rules.

## Doctors decide

### Decisions to go for abortion must be guided by sound medical advice

With freedom comes great responsibility; decisions made as a consequence of any freedom must be informed by reasonable awareness of the fall out. In seemingly vesting reproductive autonomy with the woman, the Supreme Court might have edged out the essential role of a clinical review of the situation. The Court asked the Union government to amend the abortion law to remove the time limit on medical termination of unwanted pregnancies in the case of minor rape victims. The Bench of the Chief Justice of India, Surya Kant, and Justice Joymalya Bagchi made the observation while refusing to entertain a petition against an earlier Court decision allowing a 15-year-old survivor of rape to terminate the pregnancy during the 30th week. In the original judgment on the case, which was on curative appeal, the judges remarked that the right of the minor child to continue a pregnancy that is illegitimate must be considered, to safeguard a woman's right to reproductive autonomy. The Bench of Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan had noted that the minor had shown a clear and consistent unwillingness to continue the pregnancy. The Court cannot compel any woman, much less a minor, to complete her pregnancy if she otherwise did not intend to do so, they said. They also indicated that if the legal routes were closed, women might take the dangerous path to quacks, risking life. However, counsel for the All India Institute of Medical Sciences stoutly opposed the termination, and the curative petition; leveraging the same safety consideration. Terminating the pregnancy at an advanced stage – 30 weeks – would be inimical to the health of the teenage mother. Currently, Indian law allows for the termination of pregnancy up to 24 weeks of gestation.

The entire argument hinges on gestational age, which, as an indicator of how far along the pregnancy is, is crucial to deciding whether an abortion would be safe. Most countries that have legalised abortion restrict the period of safe abortion to 24 weeks of gestation, primarily because of the negative implications for the life and health of the mother, after that. But, central to legal abortion is a medical assessment of risks. Will a child or her parents alone, with lay knowledge, be able to make a studied assessment of such risk? While the minor expresses her desire to be rid of a forced pregnancy, it is the role of her parents and the system to provide her with safe options, within the permissible period. Making an uninformed decision at this stage could be counterproductive, if it compromises on her health or life, while allowing the right to bodily autonomy.

# AI and a gathering storm of unchecked power

On April 19, the American tech-giant Palantir tweeted a 22-point summary of its CEO Alexander C. Karp's book, *The Technological Republic* (co-authored with Nicholas Zamiska). In it, the company decries corporate inclusivity, the equality of cultures, and, more worryingly, the limits of soft power. “The ability of free and democratic societies to prevail requires something more than moral appeal,” it says. “It requires hard power, and hard power in this century will be built on software.” Palantir then proceeds to point out that the question is no longer whether Artificial Intelligence (AI) will be used to build weapons, but who it will build them for and for what purpose.

It is difficult to read Palantir's programme and not feel a foreboding sense of anxiety about where AI is taking us. It has after all crept into every stream of life, often with devastating consequences. With every passing day, it is evident that these companies will shape how people interact with each other, how the economies of the world develop, and even how nations wage wars.

Indeed, Palantir's tweet is no corporate dogma. Among the more striking influences of AI in recent times is the news of its use in the United States' attacks in Iran. Reports have shown us that the company's AI-powered defence platform, the Maven Smart System, had a substantial role to play in selecting the targets, including the primary school in Minab, Iran, where American forces killed between 175 and 180 people, most of them girls between the ages of seven and 12.

### What is eerily disquieting

The speculative dystopias from a few years ago are now with us in the present. No doubt, we have reached this moment due to an accretion of choices that we have made over many years. But so eerily disquieting is the lack of regulation over its use and growth that AI's potential appears to concern even the savants of today's technological world, Sam Altman of OpenAI among them, more than it does the state.

In a 13-page document released on its website, titled “Industrial Policy for the Intelligence Age: Ideas to Keep People First”, OpenAI claims that the technology it is building is coming at a pace far faster than society is prepared to handle. The paper argues that in normal times, markets can work on their own and competition can lead to better living standards and expanded opportunity.

“But the magnitude of the changes we expect and the potential risks we foresee demand even more,” it says. “We are entering a new phase of economic and social organization that will fundamentally reshape work, knowledge, and production. It requires not just incremental policy responses but ambitious policy ideas for tomorrow.”



**Subhrit Parthasarathy**

Advocate practising in the Madras High Court

To that end, governments, according to Open AI, should implement common sense regulation, which, far from entrenching incumbents, would “help protect children, mitigate national security risks, and encourage innovation”.

But the absence of regulation could not be more glaring. Open AI's rival, Anthropic, which operates Claude, has a resident philosopher and ethicist, Amanda Askell, supposedly doing the job for it. Ms. Askell has written up what is now described as “Claude's Constitution” – known to the corporation's employees as the “soul doc”. It purports to provide the large language model (LLM) a set of moral precepts.

In this case, it seeks to ensure that Claude is “broadly safe”, “broadly ethical”, “compliant with Anthropic's guidelines”, and “genuinely helpful”.

For example, the safety standards it prescribes demands that Claude should never, among other things, provide uplift to those seeking to create biological, chemical, nuclear, or radiological weapons with the potential for mass casualties; provide uplift to attacks on critical infrastructure; engage in an attempt to kill the vast majority of humanity as a whole; and generate child sexual abuse material.

But, ultimately, these efforts must be viewed with the greatest scepticism. They are the LLMs' way of telling us to thank them for keeping the world a safe place. Even if we treat them at face value, consider what happens when Claude chooses to override its constitution? Or if one of Anthropic's competitors, say, Palantir, feels no urge to control how its LLMs grow?

### From warfare to surveillance

Consider Anthropic's latest model, Claude Mythos, which has already raised a raft of ethical concerns over its hacking skills, outperforming humans. Thus far, the company has not released the new version to the public, because of the serious threats it poses to cybersecurity. In Palantir's case, not only has its manifesto and its use in recent warfare been alarming, but so too has its role in America's surveillance efforts. The corporation has reportedly built software that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) uses to profile and track individuals. While some may argue that the software's surveillance efforts have been used to enhance public good in the past – notably in contact tracing efforts in some countries during the COVID-19 pandemic – it has increasingly become a tool for brazen surveillance in breach of civil liberties.

Palantir's software is also in use across States in the U.S. where predictive policing has become the norm. Multiple investigations have shown the problems inherent in the technology's use – its profiling is racially charged and biased and based on information that is collated with unabashed disregard for privacy.

Beyond issues of surveillance, privacy and

warfare, there are other concerns too. These include the impact that AI has had and will continue to have on jobs, on our climate, and on our creativity, will, and endeavour, ultimately, impinging on what it means to be a human being. There are also worries over how LLMs are trained on man-made writing, by using novels, poems and essays as data points. Whether this constitutes fair use of copyright remains a point of contention.

But the idea that these corporations are to be trusted to do the right thing shifts the burden of public accountability otherwise fundamental to constitutional democracies onto private entities. By any account, this portends dangerous consequences.

Across the world there appears to be a sense not too distinct from how we have reacted to the various arrangements of affairs in the neo-liberal world order, that “there is no alternative”, a maxim once made famous by Margaret Thatcher. This allowed Thatcher, as the writer Cory Doctorow has argued, to “paint her ideological choices as historical inevitabilities”.

### The rest of the world must react

But there are alternatives. That the U.S. and the West are unwilling to regulate AI must not mean that the rest of the world should stay silent. Thus far, India has adopted a relatively soft regulatory regime. Its Governance Guidelines, released in November 2025, recognises many of the problems characteristic to the technology, but stops short of recommending legislative intervention.

The cue is in what Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said at the AI Impact Summit held in February 2026 in New Delhi. Big tech needs regulation, with the “imperative of safeguarding human rights in the digital sphere, promoting information integrity, and protecting our countries' creative industries”.

As he correctly recognised, the companies' business model depends on exploitation of personal data and the erosion of privacy. To that end, allowing technological expansion to go unchecked would only deepen inequalities and concentrate power in a few nations and corporations.

At a time like this, when international law is flailing, to be cheery about global cooperation may seem desperate. But frameworks exist, the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act, Brazil's proposals, and even India's own guidelines, among them. What we must do is compel our leaders to show the political will to make these binding and multilateral.

The problem is that most of us have not so much as started asking ourselves what a just future with AI would look like. Instead, we seem to have accepted that there is no alternative. In the process, we have all fallen into the Thatcherite trap.

Corporate control of AI raises urgent questions about power, accountability and a weakening of democratic safeguards

# Keeping India's carbon money at home

On January 1, 2026, the European Union (EU)'s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) came into effect, and is fully in force. Europe calls it fairness: European producers pay a carbon price, so imports should too. On paper, it sounds equitable; in practice, the door to fair competition is only half-open for India.

European steel, aluminium and cement producers enjoy large decarbonisation subsidies and subsidised public finance. They also continue receiving free allowances under the EU Emissions Trading System, which will be phased out gradually from 2026 to 2034, lowering their effective carbon costs even as CBAM phases in. Indian exporters, by contrast, face the full weight of CBAM charges without equivalent state support.

This tilt sits uneasily with the spirit of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Article III, which bars deploying internal charges to shield domestic producers from fair competition.

### What the deeper issue is about

The new India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA), whose negotiations concluded on January 27, 2026, provides no exemption from CBAM for India. The EU held firm: no country gets country-specific flexibility. The FTA's Annex on Carbon Border Measures (Annex 14-A) does, however, establish a formal technical dialogue on CBAM implementation – including how any effective carbon price paid in India can be taken into account at the EU border, and a most-favoured-nation commitment that any flexibility extended to other countries will automatically extend to India. That narrow opening matters enormously.

The deeper issue is climate justice and sovereignty. CBAM shifts part of Europe's



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decarbonisation burden onto developing-country exporters while keeping the resulting revenue in European hands. A country that cannot shape the carbon price on its exports, or direct the associated revenues, risks becoming a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker in the green transition.

India is not starting from zero. The Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS), notified in 2023, establishes a domestic carbon price through tradable certificates, and will, over time, cover key industrial sectors including steel. Under CBAM Regulation Article 9, European importers may deduct embedded emissions that have already borne a carbon price in the country of origin. That is the legal hook for recognising India's carbon price as an offset to CBAM. The principle, and the legal mechanism, are sound.

Crediting CCTS under Article 9 is both legally defensible and environmentally coherent. CCTS is a compliance-grade market: installations must hold carbon credits against measured emissions, carrying a rupee-denominated value per tonne. Crediting that effective price against CBAM obligations – subject to robust monitoring, transparent exchange-rate conversion, and guarantees that no export rebates neutralise the burden – would prevent double-pricing while preserving CBAM's stated aim of levelling the playing field.

### As a counter adjustment

India's next move should be a counter adjustment: an India Border Adjustment Mechanism (IBAM). Rather than accepting CBAM as an inescapable external levy, India could impose its own carbon-based charge on CBAM-covered exports, collected at the point of export. But IBAM must not be rushed or announced unilaterally. It should be developed only through Annex 14-A, so that its design is clearly recognised in advance as a “carbon price

When Europe sets carbon rules, India must not remain the price taker

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The day of election results

May 4, 2026 should witness grace in victory, dignity in defeat. As the electorate in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry render their verdict on May 4, all stakeholders must honour democracy's covenant. The winners must resist triumphalism – a mandate is a trust, not a trophy. The vanquished must concede with grace,

for dignified defeat strengthens democracy more than hollow victory. Party cadres on both sides must shun provocation and violence; the street is not an extension of the ballot box. Voters, having exercised their sovereign right, must now demand accountability regardless of affiliation. Election officials must ensure an orderly, transparent count. And the

media – democracy's sentinels – must report facts, not fervour; results, not narratives.

**Gopalswamy J.,**  
Chennai

Many who saw the election system as robust and the Election Commission of India (ECI) as beyond reproach have been taken by surprise. The Special Intensive Revision of

electoral rolls was introduced in haste ahead of the Assembly polls; “logical discrepancy” was cited in West Bengal to exclude lakhs of voters. Judicial intervention, too, did not offer relief in time. With results due and new governments set to take office, these concerns may fade away for now, only to return before the next election. A clear and

well-defined process must be put in place leaving no room for doubt about the ECI's credibility.

**V. Nagarajan,**  
Chennai

**MI and IPL 2026**  
Mumbai Indians are an incredible case study in franchise cricket. The most successful team in the IPL, alongside Chennai Super Kings, is now fighting not

only for qualification to the play-offs in the 2026 season but also for its identity. MI looks especially bedraggled. Loyal MI fans want to see Rohit Sharma back at the helm. The 2026 season seems to have signalled a decline in MI's dominance.

**R. Sivakumar,**  
Chennai

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

# A countdown to International Day of Yoga

At a time when the world is navigating conflict, uncertainty, and rising psychological strain, the idea of peace demands renewed attention. Traditionally approached through diplomacy and policy, peace is often framed as an external goal, negotiated across borders and institutions. Yet, despite these efforts, societies remain increasingly unsettled, suggesting that peace cannot be secured externally alone. It must also be cultivated within. Yoga facilitates this journey.



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the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. While deeply rooted in India's civilisational ethos, Yoga today belongs to the world. Its universality lies in its simplicity – it requires no elaborate infrastructure, no exclusive access, and transcends cultural boundaries.

It is in this spirit that the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga, Ministry of Ayush, Government of India organised the 'Yoga Mahotsav 2026' on May 2, at the Kanha Shanti Vanam.

### Bridging the gap

Yoga offers a way to bridge the gap between inner imbalance and external discord by strengthening the individual's capacity for awareness, balance, and restraint. Rooted in India's traditional knowledge systems, Yoga is not merely a physical routine but a discipline that harmonises the body, mind, and breath.

Through this integration, it enables individuals to respond to situations with clarity rather than impulse.

This distinction is critical. Much of the conflict witnessed today, whether in personal interactions or public discourse, does not arise solely from deep divisions but from the inability to regulate response. Yoga, through practices such as breath control and meditation, develops precisely this capacity. It creates space between stimulus and reaction – where reflection replaces reaction, and understanding tempers instinct. It is through this shift in individual behaviour that Yoga begins to shape peace at a broader, societal level. In a world reacting faster than it reflects, Yoga restores the discipline of pause.

In this context, Yoga has also emerged as one of India's most significant instruments of soft power. Unlike conventional forms of influence that rely on assertion, yoga operates through participation and shared experience. It creates moments of collective stillness in an otherwise fragmented world, fostering trust,

mutual respect, and a sense of global unity – values that are essential for lasting peace.

The relevance of Yoga becomes even more pronounced in the present global landscape. Rapid urbanisation, digital overstimulation, and shifting social dynamics have contributed to rising stress levels, shrinking attention spans, and increasingly reactive forms of communication. In such conditions, the absence of inner equilibrium often translates into external friction. Yoga addresses this challenge at its root. By encouraging mindfulness and emotional regulation, it equips individuals with the ability to manage stress and respond thoughtfully. When adopted widely, this shift in behaviour has the potential to influence collective outcomes, strengthening social cohesion and fostering more resilient communities.

The Ministry of Ayush has been committed to advancing this vision by integrating Yoga into public health, education, and community initiatives. The objective is not periodic participation, but sustained behavioural transformation that supports both individual well-being and societal harmony. Events like the 'Yoga Mahotsav 2026' are not merely commemorative – they are catalytic, bringing people together in a shared experience of awareness, balance, and collective intent. Peace, ultimately, is not a singular milestone but a continuous process, shaped by how individuals think, act, and engage with one another. Yoga, in its depth and universality, offers a practical means to nurture this process.

As the world moves toward the International Day of Yoga 2026, the message is both simple and profound: lasting peace will not be negotiated only across tables, but also cultivated within individuals. Yoga, in this sense, is not merely a practice – it is a quiet, enduring architecture of peace.

# Naidu's industrial push for Andhra

The Chief Minister's ambitious drive for investments has given rise to concerns

### STATE OF PLAY

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In 1995, when Nara Chandrababu Naidu became the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh (then undivided), he began pitching Hyderabad as the new IT destination of the country. He was able to make due on that claim, when in 1998, IT giant Microsoft established a global R&D centre in the city. This proved to be a game changer for both Mr. Naidu and the State as soon Hyderabad came to be regarded as a major IT destination for global firms, with other majors such as Oracle, Google, Amazon, and Cognizant making a beeline for Hyderabad.

Ever since then, Mr. Naidu has basked in the success of transforming Hyderabad, with the achievement featuring prominently in all his subsequent political campaigns.

After a setback in 2004, Mr. Naidu returned to power in 2014 as part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), following the bifurcation of the State, and once again focussed on IT; only this time, he pitched Visakhapatnam as the IT destination of the residual Andhra Pradesh. Apart from IT, Mr. Naidu also proposed developing a greenfield capital at Amaravati.

However, his 2014-19 tenure was riddled with controversies, and his formidable Opposition – the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) led by a much younger Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy – picked holes in several of the initiatives he had undertaken. Towards the end of his term, he bitterly parted ways with the NDA. Mr. Reddy capitalised on this vulnerability and won the 2019 elections with a thumping majority.

But Mr. Naidu is not one to be written off easily. He highlighted the shortcomings of his opponents; mended ties with the NDA leadership; brought Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party into the alliance; and reduced the YSRCP from 151 seats to just 11 seats in 2024. He is now back at the helm of affairs and appears to be leading an industrial push in the State.

### A new vision

Mr. Naidu has now succeeded in roping in Google to set up its first 1 GW (gigawatt) hyperscale AI data centre outside the U.S., in the Tarluvada village near Visakhapatnam, with an investment plan of about \$15 billion.

While there are several concerns surrounding the project – including issues related to water, power, land holdings and the environment – Mr. Naidu has stated that these will be addressed with both the State government and Google working to resolve them. There is a strong view within the tech community that although Google may not directly employ a large number of people, it could act as an anchor, attracting companies in IT, AI, finance and banking. This could mirror the catalytic role Microsoft played in Hyderabad.

Unlike the 1990s, when Mr. Naidu primarily focussed on an IT-driven growth model, this time he is also emphasising on core sectors. He has en-

couraged stakeholders to leverage regional strengths and optimise resource utilisation across districts. Leveraging Visakhapatnam's coastline, port infrastructure and iron ore supply, ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India has grounded a 17.8 MTPA steel plant at Rajayyapeta in Anaparthi. Mr. Naidu has also pitched for investments from MNCs such as LG and Carrier in Sri City in the Tirupati region, along with several other big-ticket proposals, including an ₹82,000 crore green energy project from ReNew. He has also identified zones for a drone city, defence hub and space city in the Rayalaseema region. At present, Mr. Naidu's image as a 'CEO-style' administrator seems to be attracting investments.

However, the question of continuity looms large. In 2019, when Mr. Naidu lost power, several projects were stalled and tenders were reversed. This cycle of policy reversals has had an adverse impact on the State. Therefore, ensuring continuity of these projects, irrespective of which party is in power, will augur well for Andhra Pradesh.

Another key challenge for Mr. Naidu is to effectively capitalise on these big-ticket investments. Following Google, Reliance Industries is also in talks with the State to set up a 1.5 GW data centre. But the question is whether the government will be able to attract MNCs to set up shop by leveraging the advantage of high-speed data transfer through the sub-sea cables that will land in Visakhapatnam.

Also, fostering subsidiary industries to boost local employment while ensuring that environmental safeguards are not compromised will be equally important.

# Electoral participation has been on a steady rise in India

Voter turnouts have been increasing over decades across States, and is not a sudden phenomenon

### DATA POINT

**Sanjay Kumar**  
**Arindam Kabir**

India's electoral participation has been rising across States, with the pattern being much broader than the recent trends in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Assam. Data shows that, over the past decade or so, voter turnout has increased in most States, with only a few exceptions, suggesting a sustained deepening of electoral engagement rather than a sudden increase.

The clearest takeaway from the data is that higher participation is not confined to one region or one political context. In Gujarat, voter turnout rose from 59.77% in 2007 to 64.84% in 2022, while in Uttar Pradesh, it moved from 45.96% to 61.08% in the same period. Goa saw a jump from 70.51% to 81.89%, and Manipur's voter turnout increased from 86.73% to 90.28% (Table 1). These are very different States in terms of geography, party competition, social composition, and turnout history, yet they show the same broad direction – more people are voting.

Karnataka's turnout rose from 64.84% to 73.84%, Madhya Pradesh's increased from 69.63% to 77.74%, Rajasthan from 66.49% to 75.33%, and Chhattisgarh's from 70.66% to 76.75% (Table 2).

### Exceptions to the rise

The overall pattern is upward, but it is not universal. Punjab fell from 76.04% in 2007 to 72.15% in 2022, while Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura show decline or near-stability over time. Haryana is another important exception, moving from 72.37% in 2009 to 67.89% in 2024 (Table 3). These cases matter because they show that turnout growth is not automatic and can be shaped by local political conditions, competition, and administrative factors.

At the same time, several States

that had already registered high voter turnout continued to do the same. Arunachal Pradesh's voter turnout rose from 79.45% in 2009 to 86.89% in 2024 (Table 3). Puducherry moved from 86.19% in 2011 to 89.85% in 2026 (Table 5). Kerala, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu have also shown increases. Kerala's voter turnout increased from 75.26% to 78.27%, Tamil Nadu's increased from 78.29% to 85.15% and West Bengal's from 84.72% to 92.47% (Table 5). West Bengal deserves special attention because it shows that rising turnout can occur even in a politically intense, highly competitive State. The State has long had one of the highest participation levels in India, yet turnout still moved upward from 84.72% in 2011 to 92.47% in 2026.

This is important because Bengal is often treated as an exceptional case in debates about electoral mobilisation. However, the numbers suggest something broader – participation has not only expanded in low-turnout States, it has also deepened in places where voting was already strong. Bengal therefore reinforces the central argument that the recent rise in voter turnout is part of a wider and long-term trend, not a sudden or isolated development. Even in States that already had relatively high turnout, the increase is visible, which suggests that participation gains are not limited to low-turnout States alone.

The data across different election cycles suggests that voter turnout has been building over time. Andhra Pradesh increased its voter turnout from 72.72% in 2009 to 81.79% in 2024, Odisha increased it from 65.35% to 74.79%, and Jharkhand has gone from 57.03% to 67.66% (Table 3). Similarly, Bihar has also increased its voter turnout from 52.73% in 2010 to 67.67% in 2025 (Table 4). Taken together, these numbers indicate a steady broadening of electoral participation across India's electoral landscape, and not a sudden increase. This is important because it

places the recent surge in voter turnout across a longer time frame. The rise in participation is best understood as a decade-long trend with uneven outcomes across States, rather than as a sudden event limited to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

### Not much impact

The SIR may have further increased voter turnout by changing the denominator, which can push the voter turnout percentage upward even when the underlying number of voters changes only modestly. That means its effect should be seen as additive rather than foundational. The more fundamental story is that voter turnout was already moving upward in many States well before any such exercises. This distinction is important for interpreting the numbers correctly. If voter turnout rises because the eligible voter base is recalibrated, that may amplify the final percentage. But the broader picture shows that the direction of movement was already upward across many States, so the SIR most likely worked on top of an existing trend rather than initiating it.

The broad increase in voter turnout points to stronger political engagement and possibly more effective mobilisation by parties and institutions. It may also reflect changing voter attitudes, better awareness, or a greater sense that elections matter. Whatever the mix of causes, the evidence suggests that India's electoral participation has become more expansive across States.

At the same time, the exceptions remind us that participation is not uniform. Some States have shown a downward trend too, and these variations deserve attention instead of being flattened into a single national story. Still, the overall direction is clear – across India, voter turnout has generally gone up, and recent factors like the SIR may have added to a rise that was already underway.

## Parsing participation

The data for the tables were sourced from the Election Commission of India



**Electoral mandate:** An election officer puts the indelible ink mark on the index finger of a woman at a polling booth in the Dr.Radhakrishnan Nagar constituency on April 23, 2026. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

**Table 1:** Voter turnout (in %) in the Assembly elections of 2007 and 2022

States	2007	2022
Gujarat	59.77	64.84
Punjab	76.04	72.15
Uttar Pradesh	45.96	61.08
Goa	70.51	81.89
Manipur	86.73	90.28

**Table 2:** Voter turnout (in %) in the Assembly elections of 2008 and 2023

States	2008	2023
Karnataka	64.84	73.84
Madhya Pradesh	69.63	77.74
Rajasthan	66.49	75.33
Chhattisgarh	70.66	76.75
Meghalaya	89.39	86.72
Mizoram	82.33	82.26
Nagaland	87.16	88.1
Tripura	92.49	89.83

**Table 3:** Voter turnout (in %) in the Assembly elections of 2009 and 2024

States	2009	2024
Andhra Pradesh	72.72	81.79
Haryana	72.37	67.89
Maharashtra	59.68	65.11
Odisha	65.35	74.79
Jharkhand	57.03	67.66
Arunachal Pradesh	79.45	86.89
Sikkim	83.37	83.43

**Table 4:** Voter turnout (in %) in Assembly elections of 2010 and 2025

State	2010	2025
Bihar	52.73	67.67

**Table 5:** Voter turnout (in %) in the Assembly elections of 2011 and 2026

State	2011	2026
Assam	76.04	85.96
Kerala	75.26	78.27
Tamil Nadu	78.29	85.15
West Bengal	84.72	92.47
Puducherry	86.19	89.85

Higher participation is not confined to one region or one political context. Recent factors like SIR may have added to a rise that was already underway



**Note:** Sanjay Kumar is a professor, psephologist and election analyst. Arindam Kabir is a researcher with Lokniti-CSDS. Views expressed by the authors are their own independent views, it does not reflect the views of the institution

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

The **Hindu**

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 4, 1976

## Big haul from pawnbrokers' banker

Madras, May 3: One hundred and sixty kilograms of gold ornaments ranging from a ring to a huge gold necklace stored in 48 boxes and valued at Rs. 65 lakhs – claimed to be one of the biggest hauls in the country – were seized by the Central Excise officers from the residence of a "pawnbrokers banker" last Monday. These boxes had been stored in a strong room in the premises at Govindappa Naicken Street, George Town. The officers also seized cash of Rs. 63,000. The banker had neither declared possession of this huge quantity of gold ornaments nor even his personal jewellery.

Disclosing this at a press conference to-day, Mr. L.J. Rao, Collector of Central Excise said each box contained 100 to 1,500 items of gold jewellery. These boxes belonged to various pawnbrokers who had re-pledged them with their "banker" and received advance of monies. Two Inspectors Mr. P. R. Krishnan and Mr. K. Rangaraj spent over 10 days gathering intelligence and finally located the premises. Fifteen officers led by Mr. E. J. Coelho, Assistant Collector and Mr. N.V. Kumaraswamy, Superintendent, entered the premises on April 26 and started an inventory of all the ornaments.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 4, 1926

## Ootacamund horse show

Ootacamund, May 3: The Ootacamund horse show was brought to a successful conclusion this afternoon. The show was voted one of the finest held in India and attached large number of prominent visitors who are now at the station. Among these were, besides His Excellency the Governor and the Hon'ble Cicely Goschen, Sir C.P. Raniyaswami Iyer, the Maharaja and Junior Maharani of Travancore, the Maharani of Cooch Behar, the Maharaja of Bobbili, the Nawab of Tander, General Ponsonby the Raja of Kollengode, Sirdar Kaniaraj Ors and Devarj URS of Mysore.

The Open Jumping Competition for horses and ponies aroused keen competition, the prize eventually going to the Maharani of Cooch Behar's "Roulette." The prize for the best pony or horse in the show went to the Maharani of Coen Bihar "Broad Port" and that of the best pony to Mrs. Hildebrand's "Theodora."

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**Appointments cancelled by Nepal government**

**1,500** Nepal's new government has effectively cancelled more than 1,500 major public appointments through a sweeping ordinance issued by President Ram Chandra Paudel, local media reported. These appointments were made before March 26 — the date marking leadership change in the country. PTI

**Foreign nationals arrested in Sri Lanka for cyber fraud**

**130** More than 130 foreign nationals were arrested in Sri Lanka for alleged cybercrime operations over the last two days, police said. The police actions are part of a wider crackdown on cross-border online fraud networks operating from the island nation. In a raid in Thalagama, a suburb of Colombo, the police arrested 37 Chinese nationals on Saturday. PTI

**Coal imported in Meghalaya without valid papers**

**3** lakh metric tonnes. Two cement companies in Meghalaya have been accused of violating prescribed norms, a High Court-appointed committee said in its report. The single-member panel of retired judge B. P. Katakey said that they transported the dry fuel from outside between February 2025 and February this year "without obtaining mandatory approvals under the SOP, 2024". PTI

**Number of IPS officers transferred in a major reshuffle in M.P.**

**62** In a major reshuffle, the Madhya Pradesh government on Sunday transferred 62 IPS officers, including 19 Superintendents of Police, assigning new roles from Additional Director General to Deputy Commissioner of police levels. The Home department transferred Manish Khatri, Singrauli SP, posting him as Assistant Inspector General at the police headquarters in Bhopal. PTI

**Kerala's voter turnout after inclusion of service voters' ballots**

**79.70** per cent. Kerala's voter turnout in the April 9 Assembly elections has tentatively risen to 79.70% after the inclusion of service voters' postal ballots, CEO Rathan U. Kelkar said on Sunday. He also outlined elaborate arrangements for the counting of votes scheduled for Monday. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Rationalising Iran's nuclear capability

How does the NPT regulate nuclear programmes? Why is uncertainty about nuclear intent a problem? Why does Iran say its nuclear programme is peaceful? Why has the international community sanctioned the country? Can Iran's stance on nuclear weapons change?

**EXPLAINER**

Vasudevan Mukunth

**The story so far:**

Under pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump to abandon its nuclear programme, Iran has "vowed" to protect its nuclear stockpile. At the same time, former supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei disapproved of the use of nuclear weapons on religious grounds. How does Iran reconcile the two positions?

**What does the NPT allow and restrict?**

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – NPT for short – discourages countries from developing nuclear weapons, but does not prevent them from developing the ability to make these weapons. This is ostensibly because some of the same technologies and processes are necessary in a civilian nuclear programme, such as generating nuclear power and making nuclear isotopes for medical use. But the NPT does not turn a blind eye altogether: it expects the civilian programme to include some safeguards that resist the ability to develop from becoming the possession of a nuclear weapon. Examples of such safeguards include closely monitoring the use of technologies like uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing.

This said, even these safeguards are focused on diversion, which is only one of the two pieces of the gap between ability and possession, the other being capability. That is, a country can have the capability to develop a nuclear weapon, but the NPT's safeguards have been designed to deter the diversion of that capability to military uses. Countries interested in helping tame the spread of nuclear weapons have enforced this fuzzy barrier using export controls and diplomacy, including sanctions. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) contributes as an independent watchdog that performs intrusive inspections.

**Why is not knowing a country's nuclear intent a problem?**

This is one way the world has kept itself from downsliding into nuclear catastrophe. It is a fragile setup because the regulatory regime decision focusing on weaponisation rather than capability has created important downsides. Perhaps foremost among them is the threshold state: a country that learns about and builds everything required to make a nuclear weapon but stops just short of building one. This country may also strategise its breakout – the rapid sequence of events from enriching weapons-grade fissile material to deploying a nuclear warhead. This way, the country does not draw sanctions, but the moment its policy changes, it can 'breakout' quickly. North Korea was once an example of a threshold state – and now so is Iran.

Not knowing whether a country will actually build nuclear weapons, especially since it has the ability to do so, is also bad for the non-proliferation regime for a few reasons. When a country breaks out, the regime will be forced to respond very close to weaponisation, which may warrant drastic measures, which does not bode well to limit escalation. Second, a non-nuclear-capable country has to guess whether another country – perhaps a neighbour – intends to build nuclear



A child holds an Iranian flag through the window of a vehicle in northern Tehran, Iran, on May 1. AP

weapons. Figuring it out requires judgment, diplomacy, and acting in good faith, all of which are powerful but hard to enforce using external pressure. It also muddies international waters. For example, South Korea does not view Japan with suspicion but it may not extend the same courtesy to, say, Argentina.

Another consequence is the nuclear cascade: if Country A is a threshold state and is not on good terms with its neighbours, the neighbouring countries may find it necessary to arm themselves with nuclear weapons in case Country A decides to break out. This is why the world has clusters of nuclear-capable states: South Asia, West Asia, North America, and Eastern Europe.

**How close is Iran to a nuclear weapon?**

Iran joined the NPT in 1970 but has recently expressed doubts about its participation. It is also a threshold state with a breakout time widely understood to be in the order of a few weeks. It is also thought to possess around 500 kg of uranium enriched to 60%. According to *The New York Times*, in fact, Iran possesses 11 tonnes of uranium overall enriched anywhere from 2% to 60%. Nuclear power reactors require uranium enriched to significantly under 20%. Weapons-grade uranium requires 90%. The way enrichment works, the road from 60% to 90% is much shorter than getting to 60%. In other words, Iran is for all practical purposes a nuclear-capable state – yet it is not known to have developed a nuclear weapon.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei spoke against using nuclear weapons, calling them 'haram'. Many have claimed that he issued a *fatwa* – a ruling based on Islamic law – against the nuclear bomb. Tehran has held that its stockpile and nuclear infrastructure are "peaceful" and

intended for civilian use. This is technically possible because uranium enriched to 20% or more can be transformed in a process called downblending to a lower enrichment and used for civilian purposes. The NPT also treats the use of nuclear technologies for scientific progress as every country's "inalienable right".

Iran's claims to that end were also politically credible as it abided by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a.k.a. the Iran deal, until Mr. Trump unilaterally exited it in 2018. In effect, Mr. Trump sought to back Iran into a corner, which backfired after Tehran took licence from Israel's aggression across West Asia to resume higher enrichment.

Despite the Joe Biden administration's attempts to restore parts of the deal, Iran progressively scaled back its commitments under the JCPOA. In Islamic jurisprudence, Iran has a valorous duty to defend its homeland against "Zionist" aggression – which includes defending its enrichment sites and, by appealing to its right to scientific progress, its nuclear stockpile as well.

**Why are the regulatory options limited?**

These reasons alone have not convinced the international community, however, much of which agrees Iran is a threshold state. The UN Security Council, the U.S., and the European Union have sanctioned Iran pre-2015 over Tehran's failure to declare uranium particles the IAEA found at three undeclared sites and the related past uranium processing activities, as required by its safeguards agreement with the IAEA.

Today, Iran's stockpile and the extent and sophistication of its nuclear infrastructure are believed to mean its breakout time could be short – yet the non-proliferation regime has limited

courses of action because Tehran is technically toeing the line.

The U.S. and Israel have nonetheless repeatedly gone to war against Iran because they are nervous and want to eliminate even its status as a threshold state. This includes the ongoing conflict as well as the Twelve-Day War last year, and attempts over the years to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists and mount covert attacks, such as the Stuxnet virus in the late 2000s.

**How did the Iran-Iraq war shape Iran's stance?**

In fact, the *fatwa* is also not necessarily binding, thanks to a policy called *Maslahat-e-Nizam*, meaning 'expediency of the system'. Specifically, in Shia Islam, a *fatwa* is not necessarily eternal but can be a ruling based on existing circumstances. If those circumstances change, so can the decision. Since the threats to Iran from Israel and the U.S. have been deemed existential of late – a point the U.S. has been happy to parrot as part of its brinkmanship – the Supreme Leader, currently Mojtaba Khamenei, could supersede his predecessor's *diktat*.

In the post-revolution era, Iran's leadership has been opposed to nuclear weapons on religious or ethical grounds because of the country's experiences during and after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). In the early and mid-1980s, Iraq deployed chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers as well as civilians, killing tens of thousands. The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini famously resisted retaliating in kind, appealing to his religion forbidding indiscriminate killing and securing a moral victory for his regime.

But Tehran revived its interest in the nuclear programme after officials argued that the international community, including the UN, had however failed to respond adequately to Iraq's use of chemical weapons.

**THE GIST**

Iran is a "threshold state"; it has the capability to develop nuclear weapons and a short breakout time, but has not moved to possession.

The NPT allows civilian nuclear programmes but seeks to prevent diversion to military use, creating a gap between ability and weaponisation.

Iran maintains its programme is "peaceful" and within its rights, even as sanctions, uncertainty, and limited options define the global response.

CACHE



GETTY IMAGES

# Why does EU want Google to open up Android to AI rivals?

The European Commission has unveiled draft measures requiring Google to open the Android ecosystem to rival AI services, focusing on interoperability and third-party access; it found Google favours its own AI, while Google warns the move could affect privacy, security, and costs

Sahana Venugopal

**The story so far:**

In April 27, the European Commission unveiled draft measures as part of its requirement for Google to open its Android ecosystem to AI rivals. These measures cover features such as third-party “wake words,” custom long-press rules, wider access to app data, context-based intelligence, and AI-powered task completion, with the regulator aiming for Android interconnections to allow even Google’s competitors to provide AI services to users via the Android ecosystem. The EU regulator’s proposed rules could have far-reaching implications for both Google and Android users worldwide.

**What are the European Commission’s proposals for Google?**

While Google was deemed to be lagging behind OpenAI and Microsoft in terms of its Generative AI releases, the search giant caught up last year and infused its widely used products – ranging from its search engine and smartphones to personal email and workplace suite – with AI, exposing billions to its latest tech. Under the current system, the European Commission observed that Google was favouring its own AI offerings (namely Gemini) on Android devices, while third parties (such as competing AI service providers) did not enjoy comparable levels of access to Android’s capabilities when serving customers.

The Commission is particularly focused on “interoperability,” or how smooth it is for non-Google services to work with the

Android ecosystem. The regulator’s proposed measures explored what such free-of-charge access could look like and what new features users could receive as a result.

First and foremost, the regulator wants Google-parent Alphabet to allow third parties to be invoked by Google’s long-press home (LPH)/long-press navigation handle (LPNH) feature. It would also allow these rivals to access Google Search via Circle to Search.

Another measure was that Alphabet would allow third-party app developers/users to create a custom always-on ‘wake word’ for their app and support such integrations, instead of offering “Hey Google” as the default option for hands-free assistance.

Alphabet was also asked to support interoperability with the feature linked to centralised access to apps’ data stored on-device, to allow “efficient cross-app data access, search and retrieval”.

A key Google Android feature is the ability to surface helpful information, such as flight details, calendars, etc., with much of this due to Gemini. The European Commission’s draft measures direct Alphabet to allow other services to carry out these tasks for users, as well as access features including context-aware intelligence, background execution, on-device model implementation, system integration, screen automation, and more.

In simpler words, rival AI services should be able to interact with apps on users’ Android devices and “effectively” carry out tasks such as sending emails, ordering food, and sharing photos – via the app the user chooses, instead of the

one Google favours. However, these measures are not finalised. The European Commission may replace or alter some measures if Alphabet provides good cause for an exemption. The regulator has also invited “all citizens, companies and organisations” to share their feedback and contribute to the consultation until May 13. A final decision is set to be adopted by July 27. Google will have to further support and document these technical implementations in detail, as well as submit reports.

**What was Google’s response to the EU regulator?**

Google’s Senior Competition Counsel, Clare Kelly, was against the move and shared concerns about security and affordability for users.

“This unwarranted intervention would strip away that autonomy, mandate access to sensitive hardware and device permissions; unnecessarily driving up costs while undermining critical privacy and security protections for European users,” Kelly was quoted as stating in an email, per Reuters.

Google has also criticised the DMA more widely. In a September blog post, Google’s Oliver Bethell, Senior Director, Competition, wrote that the DMA’s aim was more fairness but that it was “causing significant and unintended harm” to European users and many small businesses. The post claimed that the DMA was focused on the commercial interests of intermediary sites connecting businesses and customers, instead of allowing customers and businesses to connect directly via Google.

Furthermore, Bethell claimed that the

DMA forced Google to remove “legitimate safeguards” protecting Android users from scams and malicious links.

**Why does this issue matter?**

As Big Tech giants race to develop new AI tools and market them to users through their search engines (in the case of Google/Microsoft) or messaging apps (in the case of Instagram/WhatsApp), regulators are concerned that these companies may cut off access to rivals who have competing AI products. This, in turn, would hurt fair competition.

For example, both OpenAI’s ChatGPT and Microsoft’s Copilot announced last year that they would be leaving WhatsApp after Meta changed platform usage policies that affected how AI chatbots could access the WhatsApp backend. In December, the European Commission opened a formal antitrust investigation into Meta over the policy change.

In scenarios like these, customers could be forced to rely on the default AI product offered by the platform or device they are using, instead of freely choosing the one they want. On the other hand, tech companies have opposed opening up their hardware and software ecosystems to rivals, claiming that such permissions reduce security or pass on increased costs to users.

The enforcement actions taken by the European Commission in Google’s case could also influence the business outlook of other Big Tech companies designated as gatekeepers under the DMA. Furthermore, these proceedings have the power to influence how Indian courts and competition regulators handle such antitrust questions at home.



**KNOW YOUR ENGLISH**

## He got out to a grubber on the first ball

There was quite a hubbub when the players walked in

S. Upendran

“You must be in a foul mood. Heard you guys lost the match by a hundred runs.”  
 “Please don’t remind me about yesterday. I’d like to forget about it.”  
 “But how could you lose so badly? Heard you, the so-called star batsman, got out on the first ball. What did...”  
 “The ball that I got out to didn’t even bounce. It was kept very low.”  
 “I heard that you got out to a grubber.”  
 “A what? Grubber?”  
 “It’s spelt g...r...u...b...e...r! Rhymes with ‘rubber’. It’s what the English and the Australians call a ball that keeps very low. Something that the poor batsman has no chance against.”  
 “In other words, an unplayable delivery.”  
 “I guess you could say that. The grubber I got, hit me on the toe – not even on the pad. I was given out LBW.”  
 “It was a procession. None of the batsmen had a clue about playing grubbers.”

“That’s a good example. Are you going to complain about the pitch?”

“It was a friendly match. Tell me, how do you pronounce ‘h...u...b...u...b’?”

“The first syllable rhymes with ‘sub’, ‘tub’ and ‘pub’. The ‘ub’ in the second sounds like the ‘ub’ in ‘cub’, ‘dub’ and ‘rub’. The word is pronounced ‘HUB-ub’ with the stress on the first syllable. Any idea what the word means?”

“I’m guessing it means ‘commotion’.”  
 “Very good! That’s one of the meanings of the word. ‘Hubbub’ is usually used to talk about commotion or noise. The noise that results when several people talk at the same time.”

“It could also be the noise present in a situation, I suppose.”

“Here’s an example. People who come from small towns find it difficult to put up with the hubbub of a city.”

“The hubbub at the station made it impossible to hear what my grandmother was saying.”

“The CEO’s unexpected resignation created quite a hubbub.”

“Meaning it created quite a commotion?”

“That’s right! As expected, there was quite a hubbub when Sachin and Kohli walked in.”

“I can imagine. Whenever Sachin used to walk out to bat, the hubbub in the stadium was deafening.”

“I know! It was unbelievable.”

“I heard that you got a raise last week.”

“I didn’t tell you because it was nothing to shout about.”

“Nothing to shout about?”

“It means that the raise wasn’t significant. Nothing to make one feel excited or happy.”

“I see. I read my favourite author’s latest novel. It’s nothing to shout about.”

“Our new recruit is good, but definitely nothing to shout about.”

“That’s the way I felt about the new restaurant that’s opened on RP Road.”

“I was planning to take you there this weekend.”

“I saved you a trip, I guess. The food is nothing to shout about.”

“That’s a pity!”  
 upendrankye@gmail.com

**THE DAILY QUIZ**

A quiz for the true Star Wars fans on the occasion of Star Wars Day, observed today

Please send in your answers to [dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in](mailto:dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in)

V.V. Ramanan

**QUESTION 1**

According to George Lucas, the creator of Star Wars, the stories were taken from an ancient journal chronicling the history of the galaxy and written by immortal beings. What were the beings called?

**QUESTION 2**

Fans use BBY and ABY as primary timeline markers in the Star Wars lore for Before and After BY. What is BY?

**QUESTION 3**

What are the surnames of the following characters in the Star Wars universe: Mace (Jedi master), Princess Leia, Lando (administrator of Bespin and Han Solo’s friend) and Ahsoka (former Padawan of Anakin Skywalker)?

**QUESTION 4**

To which planets do Chewbacca, Admiral Ackbar, Wicket and Jar Jar Binks belong?

**QUESTION 5**

Which craft measures 34.37 meters by 25.61 meters, is powered by Girodyne SRB42 sublight engines and can attain a speed of 75 Megalights per hour in the vacuum of space?

**QUESTION 6**

What is the actual name of the ‘Cantina band’ that played the famous ‘Mad About Me’, a jazz-like tune, at the Mos Eisley bar on Tatooine?

**QUESTION 7**

Name the trio of actors who provided the physical presence, voice, and face of Darth Vader in the original trilogy.



**Visual Question:** Identify these loveable characters and name the actor who played the taller droid to have featured in all nine films of the Skywalker Saga? AP

**Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:** 1. International Workers’ Day is observed on May 1 in more than 80 countries, but not officially in X. Name X (a country). **Ans: USA**

2. International Workers’ Day commemorates the \_\_\_\_\_ affair. On May 4, 1886, a peaceful rally for the eight-hour workday in Chicago turned violent after someone threw dynamite at the police. The name of the incident refers to the square where the incident occurred; the incident is also considered the climax of the Great American Upheaval. Fill in the blank. **Ans: Haymarket**

3. The Y adopted the date of May 1 in 1889 as International Workers’ Day to honour the events of Q2. Name Y. **Ans: Second International**

4. India celebrates its first May Day in 1923 in P (a city) thanks to the efforts of labour leader Q. Name P and Q. **Ans: Chennai, M. Singaravelu**

5. In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev delivered a famous speech in which he denounced Joseph Stalin’s excesses, behind closed doors. What was the title of Khrushchev’s speech? **Ans: ‘On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences’**

Visual: Name this activist and Gandhian who helped found the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). **Ans: Ela Bhatt**

**Early Birds:** Arun Kumar Singh | Dil Bahadur Airee | Arpit Kullu | Naveen Kumar B. L. | Varghese Joseph

# How dual-use satellites are blurring the lines of modern space war

The Outer Space Treaty of 1967 and international humanitarian law require warring parties to differentiate between civilian objects and military targets; however, modern satellites are dual-use by default as civilian GPS networks, broadband constellations routinely support intelligence gathering and drone targeting

Shrawani Shagun

**W**hen we imagine space warfare, we picture shattered satellites and orbital debris. The reality is quieter but also more dangerous. The markers of modern orbital conflict are signal loss, deliberate misdirection, and sudden system failures.

In the initial hours of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a cyber-attack crippled Viasat's KA-SAT network, severing vital communications across Europe. GPS spoofing incidents have similarly misled civilian aircraft and maritime vessels, luring ships into hazardous shoals or corrupting flight computers to trigger false terrain alerts effectively weaponising a platform's own safety logic against its operators.

The next conflict in space will begin with silence, with jammed signals, altered coordinates, and compromised systems. Space is today critical infrastructure and vulnerabilities related to space are often tantamount vulnerabilities in human society.

This vulnerability is built into the architecture of space systems. Interference leaves no physical trace yet it can be devastating. It operates using three tools: jamming (or blocking signals), spoofing (sending false data), and ground station hacking (taking control of satellite systems).

As a result, no physical destruction is needed to paralyse an adversary – which is an important shift in the way conflict plays out in orbit. As financial, energy, and communication networks depend on satellites, such intrusions can also trigger cascading failures on the earth.

## Legal blindspot

This change exposes a deeper legal problem. As the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz observed, war is defined by its effects. If cyber operations can disable satellites that support power grids, financial systems or emergency communications, their consequences are indistinguishable from a physical strike. However, the United Nations Charter does not clearly address cyber operations within its Article 2(4) prohibition on the "use of force".

A functional, effects-based test is therefore essential to interpret "use of force" in the orbital domain. As of 2026, several states have moved to the position that a cyber operation does not require physical 'smoke and fire' to violate Article 2(4). Instead, if a digital intrusion functionally disables a satellite, effectively bricking it, the strategic and economic consequences are identical to a kinetic strike. In this context, loss of functionality is the new shattered glass.

However, it also comes with a challenge, called the attribution gap. Under the International Law Commission framework on state responsibility, legal



Conflict in orbit no longer requires satellites to be physically destroyed in order to paralyse an adversary. IMAGE CREATED WITH CHATGPT

liability is contingent on identifying the perpetrator with high evidentiary certainty. In the digital domain, operations routed through proxy networks and spoofed identities create a layer of strategic anonymity that complicates traditional deterrence.

This is less a technical flaw and more a structural tension: as long as evidentiary standards are based on visible, physical proof, the invisible nature of cyber-disruption will continue to offer a significant strategic advantage to aggressors. In other words, existing international law recognises force by its consequences – yet it remains in a reactive posture as both the act and the actor remain obscured.

## Collapse of civilian-military divide

The legal protections designed to safeguard non-combatants are deteriorating in the face of modern technology. The Outer Space Treaty and international humanitarian law rely heavily on the principle of distinction, requiring warring parties to differentiate between civilian objects and military targets.

However, modern satellites are dual-use by default. Civilian GPS networks, commercial broadband constellations, and financial timestamping systems now routinely support intelligence gathering and drone targeting. Because militaries piggyback on commercial infrastructure, these assets often lose their protected civilian status under international humanitarian law.

That said, in practice, the 'civilian satellite' is becoming a legal fiction. When commercial constellations provide 'space

**States must move from advisory norms to enforceable 'secure-by-design' standards, clarify when cyber operations in space constitute a use of force, and strengthen cooperative attribution mechanisms. Without this, ambiguity will continue to favour the attacker**

as a service' for military kill-chains – also known as the Starlink Precedent – they dissolve the distinction entirely. In this environment, an entire network can become a legitimate grey-zone target, even if it simultaneously serves schools or hospitals.

Former British army officer and author Emile Simpson has distinguished between traditional Clausewitzian war and contemporary conflict: the former seeks a definitive military decision while the latter functions as a direct instrument of political communication aimed at fragmented audiences.

In space, cyber operations enable ambiguous, deniable attacks that are designed to shape perceptions of state power rather than to secure territorial gains. Because they avoid the debris and visibility of kinetic strikes, they incentivise constant, low-level disruption. This creates a persistent state of friction that never crosses the threshold of war but continuously undermines the political legitimacy of the targeted state.

For India, the 2026 CERT-In/SIA-India Guidelines institutionalised a "secure-by-design" doctrine for space systems. They embed cybersecurity into

every stage of the satellite lifecycle, from design and launch to in-orbit operations and decommissioning. They also identify threats such as signal jamming, spoofing, and unauthorised command access, and recommend layered safeguards across space, ground, and communication segments. However, an enforcement gap remains: India is expanding its presence in orbit faster than it is building the ability to detect and trace cyberattacks in real time.

## Objective of disruption

The response cannot remain reactive. States must move from advisory norms to enforceable "secure-by-design" standards, clarify when cyber operations in space constitute a use of force, and strengthen cooperative attribution mechanisms. Without this, ambiguity will continue to favour the attacker. In a digital battlefield, if an attacker cannot be identified within minutes, they cannot be deterred at all.

For the Global South, this digital battlefield poses the unique threat of orbital dependency. When the digital backbones of developing economies are hosted on third-party commercial constellations, a silent strike can blind a military and, more importantly, effectively paralyse a state's ability to govern, disenfranchising a nation in a single digital stroke.

In this new era, the objective is no longer to destroy a satellite but to disrupt the society that depends on it.

(Shrawani Shagun is a researcher focusing on environmental sustainability and space governance. shrawani.shagun@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

The markers of modern orbital conflict are signal loss, deliberate misdirection, and sudden system failures

As financial, energy, and communication networks depend on satellites, such intrusions can also trigger cascading failures on the earth

This change exposes a deeper legal problem. The United Nations Charter does not clearly address cyber operations within its Article 2(4) prohibition on the 'use of force'

## BIG SHOT



Samples of coral collected from the Abrolhos National Marine Park in Brazil on April 23, 2026. The Abrolhos reefs are the most biodiverse coral ecosystem in the South Atlantic. Their biodiversity has dropped by around 15% over 18 years due to marine heatwaves, a new study has found. REUTERS

## WHAT IS IT?

# Sustainable mining: oxymoron?

Vasudevan Mukunth

**H**umans are trying to build a low-carbon future. Ironically, this future won't be possible without mining today. This is because wind turbines, solar panels, and electric batteries all require lithium, cobalt, copper, and rare-earth elements.

Mining doesn't leave the earth intact. Instead, it extracts finite, non-renewable resources. The processes of mining also often pollute the environment, permanently change landscapes, and destroy biodiversity. So in a commonsensical way, mining is not sustainable. No amount of money or technologies can bring back, say, a pristine rainforest.

However, some people, including the UN and the International Energy Agency, have floated an idea called 'weak sustainability' with regards to mining. They argue that mines can be 'sustainable' if the extracted resources create greater value, like human capital – like education and infrastructure – that outlasts the mine. They have also said that green technologies of the future make mining inescapable today.

There is a related concept called 'sustainable mining'. The minerals we



Mining is not sustainable in a commonsensical reading of the word. ABDULL BASIT/UNSPLASH

remove from the ground don't grow back. But once we start using them, we need to recycle them almost indefinitely. The problem is that the current recycling rate for critical minerals is at best 5%.

Industries have also adopted a framework called 'responsible mining', where the focus is on using green hydrogen as fuel for trucks, solar and wind power for mining equipment, and seeking the permission of local communities to operate and sharing profits with them, among others.

**For feedback and suggestions** for 'Science', please write to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Daily page'



## OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

## Shadow of fear, state of mistrust

Three years after ethnic clashes broke out, Manipur continues to be rocked by violence

It's been three years since an ethnic conflict began to roil Manipur. Over 270 people have been killed in clashes, mostly involving Meitei and Kuki groups, and thousands displaced from their homes. The then BJP government of Biren Singh resigned after its gross incompetence and unpopularity were exposed, followed by a stint of rule by central administrators. A new government of elected representatives is now in place, but peace remains elusive. In April, at least 11 people died in separate clashes: The bodies of a five-year-old boy and his five-month-old sister killed in a suspected mortar attack on April 7 were buried only last week, after state-wide protests and shutdowns. What began as clashes involving the Meiteis and the Kukis over the reservation policy have now drawn in the Nagas as well, which means the entire Manipur state — not just the Imphal Valley and Kuki zone in the hill districts — is now a conflict zone.

What explains this prolonged state of unrest? Many parts of this country have experienced violence due to insurgencies and communal clashes since Independence. But it's rare to have disturbances within a state go unaddressed for this long and in this manner. Take the case of a Centre-appointed three member Commission of Inquiry, set up in June 2023, a month after the violence started, to investigate the omissions and commissions that led to the conflict and to fix accountability. After four extensions — the last deadline was May 20 — the panel is nowhere close to submitting its report. The panel chair resigned midway, and a new official has been appointed while thousands of submissions from public officials and citizens, including victims, are gathering dust in files. Justice is wound up in the proverbial red tape, and the State offers procedural excuses to justify the commission's failure. Meanwhile, Manipur continues to bleed.

Manipur's ethnic conflict carries the weight of history. An enlightened politics that rose above the ethnic fault line and petty power manoeuvres was necessary to bridge the communal divide and bring social peace. Such leadership was absent when flames of hate engulfed not just the street but also civil society and public institutions. The indifference of the Centre's commission points to a larger structural crisis — of the State abandoning its responsibility to get to the root of a problem and resolve it. Policing the street, eliminating vigilante groups, and securing the borders are essential, but the challenge is ultimately political. Unfortunately, Manipur continues to await that leadership.

## US must leave offshore call centres alone

A proposed rule by the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has triggered another serious concern for the Indian IT industry. This is tantamount to a quantitative and non-tariff barrier on services exports by offshore call centres to the US — of which India has a large share — as it seeks to put a cap on operations that can be outsourced, in terms of both quality and quantity. The justifications provided are loss of jobs for Americans and customer safety concerns.

On face value, neither of them is without basis. American companies have outsourced jobs to save costs and, of late, there has been an increase in cyber frauds to which America isn't immune either. However, to put it as if the gains of such outsourcing have accrued to only service exporters is being economical with the truth. Outsourcing has generated massive profits for American corporations too. Similarly, cyber frauds need concerted collective action by all countries as it is increasingly becoming obvious from their mutation into organised crime syndicates in Southeast Asia.

India's IT industry lobby is preparing to counter the proposed law for obvious reasons. One can hope that good sense will prevail in the US government and knee jerk responses will not hurt an industry which is already feeling the AI squeeze. To be sure, there is good reason to counter the proposed law on one more front. If the US wants greater access for its merchandise trade across the world, India included, it cannot hope to do so by closing its own markets to the rest of the world. Indian trade negotiators, who are in the process of finalising the trade deal with the US, should remind the US of this basic bargaining principle.

## In West Asia, making of a post-OPEC order

UAE's exit from the cartel reflects the new security architecture being built around Abu Dhabi. The choice for New Delhi is to be a participant in shaping the new order or be a price-taker once it is built

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) left the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) on May 1, ending a 59-year membership without consulting Riyadh, Moscow or anyone else. The cartel's most senior officials learned of the decision on the wires. The oil price barely moved. That, more than the announcement itself, is the story. In the age of US shale and a closed Strait of Hormuz, OPEC's power to influence prices is no longer what it once was. Abu Dhabi has chosen to leave a grouping whose collective discipline has, for some time now, delivered diminishing returns to its most capable members.

The proximate reasons are well documented. Abu Dhabi has spent more than \$150 billion to lift the capacity of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) to 4.85 million barrels a day (MMb/d), with a publicly stated target of five million by 2027. Its OPEC+ baseline has kept it at roughly 3.2 MMb/d. The gap is both arithmetic and grievance: 2019 OPEC+

talks collapsed precisely because Riyadh refused to raise the UAE's baseline, and the dispute has festered since. UAE's energy minister Suhail al-Mazrouei has framed the exit as policy rather than politics, but the timing — mid-war, with Hormuz shut and the war premium dwarfing everything else — is itself the politics.

The deeper trigger is security, not oil. Since late February, Iran has fired around 550 ballistic and cruise missiles, and over 2,200 drones at the UAE — more than at any other target, including Israel. Anwar Gargash, the UAE President's diplomatic adviser, has called Tehran's campaign a "premeditated plan", conceded that the Gulf's containment policy "failed miserably", and said the GCC's collective response was at "the weakest level historically". As Abu Dhabi absorbed the bombardment, the GCC's silence became unbearable. The OPEC exit is, at one level, the visible aftershock of an invisible decision: Solidarity that fails in moments of acute threat is not solidarity worth paying for.

The security architecture being built around the UAE in response is the most consequential development in the region since the Abraham Accords. An Israeli Iron Dome battery, with operating personnel, has been on Emirati soil since the Iran war began — the first time the system has been deployed in a third country in active combat. A US treasury-backed emergency dollar swap line

was floated in senate testimony six days before the OPEC announcement; secretary of state Marco Rubio's visit followed two days later. The choreography is unmistakable: Washington and Tel Aviv have offered Abu Dhabi a depth of integration that the GCC framework could not, and Abu Dhabi has accepted. Gargash has stated openly that Iran's aggression "will solidify the American role in the Gulf" and that Israeli regional influence would grow as a consequence.

The Saudi calculation is moving differently. Riyadh's Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) with Pakistan, a NATO-style pact signed in September 2025, serves as a hedge against US unreliability following the Israeli strikes on Hamas leadership in Doha. Whether the pact extends to Pakistan's nuclear arsenal remains studiously ambiguous. Turkey ultimately stayed out, but Ankara's drift towards the Sunni-political axis is unmistakable. The Saudi posture in the war was conventionally defensive, with significant production losses and no public criticism of Tehran.

Two trajectories are, therefore, visible. One axis — Riyadh, Islamabad, with a Turkish lean — is built on conventional deterrence, ambiguous nuclear backstopping, and Sunni-political identity. Another — Abu Dhabi, Tel Aviv, and Washington, with New Delhi as commercial hinterland — is built on technological integration, Abraham Accords-style



Ausaf Sayeed



A cartel has cracked. An order is being rewritten. The capitals doing the rewriting are few, the importers paying for the outcome are many.

normalisation, and explicit alignment against Iran. The binary is overdrawn. Saudi Arabia has not abandoned Washington; the Kingdom hosts critical US bases and remains the Trump administration's most courted Arab interlocutor on a "second Abraham Accords". The UAE, for all its hawkishness, has reopened a phone line with Tehran and has maintained its commercial relationship with Beijing. Between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, rivalry — not rupture — is the more accurate frame.

Iran is the variable that will determine which trajectory dominates. A weakened Tehran negotiating from genuine collapse would vindicate the Emirati confrontation thesis; a Tehran that reconsolidates and reopens proxy operations in Iraq and Yemen would justify the Saudi hedge. Russia, distracted in Ukraine, has neither the capacity nor the appetite to shape the post-war Gulf. China does. Beijing imports almost 700,000 barrels a day from the UAE and is the natural beneficiary of Abu Dhabi's unconstrained barrels, with modest yuan settlement experiments likely to follow. The strategic test of the coming decade is whether the US can sustain

a regional order whose principal customer is China.

For India, the calculus is sharper than for any other importer. The UAE is its third-largest trading partner. ADNOC participates in India's strategic petroleum reserves; the CEPA framework, the dirham-rupee settlement, and the I2U2 architecture provide unusually deep scaffolding. Abu Dhabi, looking to monetise reserves before peak demand, has every reason to deepen long-term contracts with New Delhi — and New Delhi has every reason to accept the offer.

A cartel has cracked. An order is being rewritten. The capitals doing the rewriting are few, the importers paying for the outcome are many, and the gap between the two is the strategic problem of the next decade. For India, the question is not whether the new order will form — it is forming — but whether New Delhi will be a participant in shaping it or a price-taker once it is built. The window for the former closes faster than it appears.

Ausaf Sayeed is the former secretary in the ministry of external affairs, and former ambassador of India to Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The views expressed are personal

## India's renewables sector needs a fundamental reset

India's updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) for 2031-2035 — a key goal of which is 60% of installed power capacity in the country being non-fossil-fuel-based — announced amid rising geopolitical implications for energy security. The war against Iran has underscored a critical vulnerability: Global energy flows remain fragile and dependence carries risk. For India, energy security can no longer be defined by access alone. It must now feature resilience from within. But does adding more non-fossil capacity deliver that?

The current scenario suggests otherwise. Non-fossil sources already account for nearly half of installed capacity, with over 250 GW deployed, yet contribute only about a quarter of actual power generation. The question, therefore, is no longer how much renewable capacity India can build, but whether that capacity can deliver reliable, affordable, round-the-clock power in a world of growing external uncertainty.

The answer lies in three structural elements of the power system: How the grid is built, how electricity is valued, and how distribution is governed.

First, the grid must be redesigned for transition. India's power system was built around coal — centralised, predictable and geographically fixed. Renewable energy (RE) is changing that logic. India's electricity demand is rising fastest in coal-dependent states such as Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh, driven by industrial growth and urbanisation. Chhattisgarh alone is seeing peak demand grow by around 7% annually.

This is happening even as renewable surplus is being curtailed in high RE states. Between May and December 2025, 2.3 terawatt-hours of solar power was curtailed. In Rajasthan, curtailment has reached 50%, with 3.3 GW lying idle — this power could have met demand elsewhere.

The constraint is within states. While inter-state transmission has expanded, intra-state networks remain too weak to absorb or move renewable energy efficiently. The result is a system where surplus and shortage coexist — clean power is curtailed even as other regions rely on costlier thermal generation.

The next phase of RE development must shift focus. Beyond transmission corridors, India needs stronger intra-state systems — substations, last-mile connectivity, and networks that can handle variability.

Reliability, however, cannot come from infrastructure alone. It must be built into the system operations. With solar generation peaking during the day and demand rising later, the grid needs flexibility. Solar and wind power generation must be backed with enough storage to bolster renewable energy dispatchability.

Second, electricity markets must evolve from being commodity supply focussed to becoming a system of services. India's power markets were designed for a coal-based system where reliability was implicit. Electricity was valued simply as energy, units generated and consumed.

Renewables disrupt this model. They make energy cheaper, but they also mean variable supply. Solar tariffs have fallen to ₹2-3 per unit — among the lowest globally. But cheap energy does not translate automatically into reliable supply. Ensuring power is available when needed requires

additional services — storage, flexible generation, and demand response. Yet, the market does not adequately value these.

As renewable penetration increases, the system needs more flexibility, but investment in flexibility remains uncertain because there is no clear price signal. The way forward is to recognise that electricity is not one product, but three: The first is energy (the electricity produced); the second is capacity (the assurance that supply will be available during peak demand); the third is flexibility (the ability to respond quickly to fluctuations in supply and demand).

Global experience points in this direction. Mature power systems have already moved towards differentiated markets where availability and responsiveness are valued alongside energy. In the UK, the capacity market ensures that generators are paid for being available during peak periods. In the US, markets such as Pennsylvania-New Jersey-Maryland (PJM) explicitly price ancillary services that stabilise the grid.

Separating and pricing these services would fundamentally change how the system operates. It would allow system operators to ensure reliability explicitly and create viable revenue streams for storage and hybrid projects, accelerating their deployment.

Third, the transition must confront its weakest link — distribution. India's distribution companies (discoms) remain the weakest link in the power chain. Financial stress is chronic, with accumulated losses hovering around ₹1 lakh crore. Discoms are required to serve very different consumers within a single framework. They supply power to industrial consumers at near cost-reflective tariffs while delivering heavily-subsidised electricity to agriculture and households. The resulting cross-subsidies blur the true cost of service and mask inefficiencies. Repeated reform efforts have provided temporary relief but left the underlying design intact. As a result, the system continues to recycle the same problem.

A more durable solution lies in separating what is commercially viable from what is socially necessary. Feeder-level segregation, particularly between agricultural and non-agricultural supply, is a critical first step. States that have begun this process, such as Maharashtra, are demonstrating that it can improve both transparency and operational efficiency.

Solarising agricultural feeders builds on this approach. By shifting farm demand to dedicated solar systems, states can provide reliable daytime power while making subsidies explicit and measurable. It also enables the transition towards direct benefit transfers, replacing opaque cross-subsidies with targeted support.

India's energy transition is entering a more demanding phase. The early years were defined by scale, while the next chapter will be defined by reliability.

The true measure of progress will not be the megawatts India installs, but the electricity it can rely on across regions, seasons, and in an increasingly uncertain world. Building that system will require a willingness to reimagine the fundamentals of how power is produced, priced and delivered.

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{ ANTONIO GUTERRES } SECRETARY GENERAL, UN

It is often said that truth is the first casualty in war. But the first casualties are journalists, who risk everything to report that truth, not only in war, but wherever those in power fear scrutiny

On World Press Freedom Day

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



## On counting day, a look at the quality of electoral politics

Record voting is testimony to the tide of the times and a reflection of growing social consciousness. Today, when the poll results of the five states are announced, we should look back at the rumblings before the contest.

It is hard not to have felt that the campaign trail was inundated by hate. Words denoting identity such as *mian/miya* (Muslim), Hindi, Hindu, Muslim or Sanatan — in some cases, people were called "infiltrators" — were constantly thrust into our consciousness. Do these leaders who have been ruling for the last five to 15 years and their detractors have nothing positive to contribute to the political discourse?

During the first general elections in 1952, India's literacy rate was 18.33%. At that time, merely 45% of the electorate voted. Among them, many had no idea that they had made a transition from British colonial rule to democracy. They were unaware that their vote wasn't just electing a government but deciding the fate of their nation. Till this day, it is their initiative that is defining the strength of the country's democracy.

Right now, India's literacy rate has crossed 81%. Education brings awareness and leads to responsibility. The 92.47% voting in West Bengal and above 80% voting in the three other states and one Union Territory is testimony to the fact that voters have performed their duty exceptionally well. In our 5,000-year-old history, the last close-to-eight decades have been particularly important. Eight of 15 presidents have come from tribal, dalit or minority communities. We have had two women as Lok Sabha speakers and one woman prime minister (PM).

Rajiv Gandhi, as PM, introduced the 64th and 65th constitutional amendment Bills to empower women by reserving a third of the seats in village panchayats and urban local bodies for them. Though the amendments failed to clear Parliament's test, these reforms were later introduced under the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. Today, 50% of village panchayat representatives are women. In state assemblies, their strength is 8-10%. There are 116 women MPs in both the houses of Parliament.

Last month, the Nari Shakti Vandan (Amendment) Bill was introduced in Parliament. Had it been cleared it would have paved the way for 272 seats for women in Parli-

ment. It failed due to a political logjam, but experience suggests it can't be stalled for long.

Meanwhile, the war against Iran has brought another fact to light. Long queues at LPG agencies to secure a gas cylinder are a sad sight but indicate a rise in gas usage among households, primarily because of the Ujjwala scheme. The crowds suggests they have become habitual of uninterrupted supply of gas. Sometimes, crises make us realise how far we have come.

Our democratic progress would have been more satisfying had our election procedure not become so expensive and many of our leaders weren't so corrupt.

This discrepancy has led to a situation where our legislative assemblies and Parliament are slowly being overwhelmed by millionaires. According to the Association for Democratic Reform (ADR), out of 543 Lok Sabha members, 504 (or 93%) were millionaires. The numbers have increased alarmingly since 2009 when just 58% were millionaires. From 2014 onwards, their number has steadily crept up.

There's nothing wrong with a country's Members of Parliament being rich. But tongues will wag when the average earning of an Indian is languishing at Rs 2-2.5 lakh.

The chasm between the voter and the representative is pronounced during elections. In West Bengal, there are just 50,400 millionaires but one out of every five contestants is a self-declared millionaire. Similarly, the parties fighting to gain power have fielded 1,047 people with 412 facing serious criminal charges. They include 35 who face murder charges. Neighbouring Assam isn't lagging behind. Out of 722 contestants, 39% are millionaires and 14% face criminal charges. Parties crying hoarse about women empowerment have fielded just 8% women contestants.

This is the reason why, as the elections approach, our leaders liberally dole out government largesse — they hide their weaknesses and speak in interperate language. They sow discord and reap hate. Record voting conjures fears, what if the hydra-headed monster of social alienation is rearing its head? Has polarisation taken over our society? I want to see my apprehension proven wrong.

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

## Costly remedy

*Sun-Organon deal, mitigating future market risk*

**T**he landmark \$11.75 billion buyout of US-based Organon by Sun Pharma impacts investors, policymakers and consumers. At the outset, there is a looming context that cannot be overlooked. The Trump administration, after having concluded its Section 232 investigations on pharma imports recently (examining 'national security' concerns), decided last month that tariffs of up to 100 per cent will be imposed with effect from July, on some patented drugs and 'associated' ingredients.



Imports of generics will be exempted if the exporting companies enter into drug pricing agreements with the US, or if the country concerned gets into "MFN deals with the administration". This order really matters for Sun Pharma, which earns nearly a third of its revenues from the US market as an exporter of generics. With the latest US order, it would probably make sense for global companies reliant on the US market to cut deals to 'make in America'. The Sun-Organon deal might have been struck to mitigate future market and cost risks. A valuation of 6.2x of Organon's EBITDA looks good for Organon as well. Sun possibly gains by securing its US market and getting an entry into China (13 per cent of Organon's revenues). It can leverage Organon's product range, particularly in areas of women's health (33 per cent of its revenues), established brands (half its revenues) and biosimilars (11 per cent and rising sharply).

However, Sun is buying into Organon's debt, which is 4x its EBITDA, while its own debt-EBITDA ratio is below one. The challenge for Sun is to secure better long-term returns from Organon's products than the latter has managed in recent times. Since Organon has no major patents, it is not clear how Sun can leverage them. In its 2024 annual report, Organon has cited its "risks". Its sales are over-reliant on a few products, such as Nexplanon (its flagship product, a contraceptive implant), Arcoxir (a pain reliever for arthritis in particular) and Singulair (for respiratory ailments). Organon's sales from Nexplanon have dipped as its patent has lapsed in most countries except for the US, where the patent expires in 2027. According to the annual report, it will have to rely on "future acquisitions, partnerships or collaborations" even to keep branded generics sales going. Clearly, Organon lacks the means to carry on, even as its women's products and presence in biosimilars holds promise.

For investors and consumers, the combined entity (comprising two equals with revenue of \$6.2 billion each) poses certain risks. A new set of products could enter the Indian market, amidst low levels of awareness. It is worth noting that Organon's CEO quit last year over sharp sales promotion practices with respect to Nexplanon and an anti-depressant, Remeron. The company faces trouble over alleged patent infringement, while its contraceptive NuvaRing is controversial for side effects. India should keep a strict regulatory eye on 'innovative' products, without coming under pressure.

## OTHER VOICES.

### The Guardian

#### When global shocks hit your shopping bill

When the Bank of England warned this week that food inflation could reach 7% by the end of the year, it revealed how little stands between a geopolitical jolt and a domestic crisis in Britain. A shock wave in the Gulf feeds through energy, fertiliser and supermarket prices into falling incomes, weak growth and job losses. What it exposes is not just inflation but a system unable to absorb disruption. The Bank is right that interest rates cannot move global energy prices. Raising them will not fix the shock. Instead, rate hikes redistribute the impact by compressing wages and deterring investment to stop higher costs becoming embedded. What appears as inflation is, in reality, the price of dependence on the strait of Hormuz. Clearly, the UK's stability rests on security that the country that has yet to build into its infrastructure. LONDON, MAY 1

### 讀賣新聞

THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

#### Deepen Discussions in Light of Global Turmoil

The postwar international order based on multilateral cooperation and free trade is on the verge of collapse. People now live in an era where merely advocating for peace is no longer enough to protect their nation's security. It is the duty of politics to bring the supreme law in line with the times to tackle new challenges. It has been 79 years since the Constitution came into effect. Japan has enjoyed peace and successfully achieved economic development after the end of World War II. It goes without saying that the pacifist Constitution has served as the foundation for this. Universal principles — popular sovereignty, respect for fundamental human rights, and pacifism — must continue to be upheld. TOKYO, MAY 3

## LINE& LENGTH.



TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

**W**hy have successive Indian governments since the mid-1950s been obsessed with the capital account and ignored the current account almost altogether? This question is prompted by the statement by the Chief Economic Adviser on the record gross capital inflows in the last 12 months.

That's good news, doubtless, because more foreign money is good for the economy. But wait: when was the last time you heard any CEA talk about the current account, except in passing?

First, however, the definitions. The current account comprises a country's balance of trade, net of factor income and cash transfers. That means earnings from what it sells to foreigners. And the capital account shows how their capital is coming in and going out. It shows the country's overall financial position and the confidence foreigners have in the economy.

That out of the way, the answer to the question about CEAs and the current account was a dismaying nearly never. And this when the capital account is really the balancing factor in the balance of payments. It makes up the shortfall in the current account when a country exports less than it imports.

Before 1947 the capital account wasn't really an issue because the Indian economy was fully integrated with the British and therefore the global economy. Capital flows were strong and seamless. The Brits saw to it to ensure that they got the investments they wanted or needed. So India had full capital convertibility.

However, the current account did cause a lot of concern to our English lords and masters. They kept fiddling with the exchange rate to keep it in good shape, at least from their point of view. Starting from the early 1890s they made life difficult for us. You should read the controversies on and around the subject.

But after 1955 it's been the other way round. It is the capital account that governments have been worried about, not the current account even though what happens in the capital account is a consequence of what happens to the current account. Why has this happened? Basically what you don't earn, you borrow.

#### WHY THE CAPITAL ACCOUNT?

There can be many reasons. The most important reason has to do with the Second Five Year Plan and the foreign exchange requirement demanded for it by PG Mahalanobis. Such was the capital



# India's capital account obsession

India has not tried to bolster its current account.

At the same time, it has chosen to squeeze capital flows, hurting growth

intensity of that Plan that it was assumed that the money would have to come into the capital account via loans and grants rather than via the current account as a result of earnings from exports. This when India's share of world trade was still above 2 per cent.

But the emphasis on capital intensive growth came at the expense of labour intensive investments into the export sector. We did the most stupid thing imaginable: we gave up our comparative advantage. You can almost hear Eli Heckscher and Bertil Ohlin groaning.

**The capital goods model of industrialisation in the 1950s and the primacy given to the Finance Ministry over the Commerce Ministry are the reasons why the current account was ignored over the years**

Another reason was administrative, namely, the division of work between the finance ministry and the foreign trade ministry, as it was then called. The former was in charge of the capital account while the latter, being in charge of exports and imports, was in charge, so to speak, of the current account.

Given the pecking order in government, the Finance Ministry and therefore the capital account took precedence in the setting of priorities. That hasn't changed since the mid-1950s. The Commerce Ministry has to take its chances on debt and exchange rate policies.

There are other reasons as well such as the political pressure on governments not to be seen as a debtor. The colonial image of a farmer drowning in debt was transferred to the country as a whole.

Pakistan has shown that this is false imagery. It's been to the IMF two dozen times. But Indian politicians, in their anxiety to avoid this, forgot that if you earn enough, you don't have to borrow. The current account was therefore ignored by them. In India, capital flows

were constrained by fear of debt.

#### THE CONSEQUENCES

There have been two major consequences of this approach to the management of the external sector: one, a steadfast refusal to tap adequately into foreign savings even though our own savings are inadequate. Combine that with a refusal to turn around the current account, and we ended up with a capital shortage. The stigma attached to debt has impeded growth.

The second consequence is the sacrificing of capital efficiency because of import substitution. Not only do investments made behind tariff walls face reduced pressure to be efficient, there is a spillover effect on the labour market where wages are higher than they would otherwise be.

It's possible to enumerate many more such foolish things but the point ought to be clear. By focusing on the capital account and neglecting the current account, we have made a gigantic mistake. It can be rectified if the thinking changes.

# MSP methodology should reflect changing reality

Refinements in interest cost and accounting for volatile inputs will help in encouraging cultivation of oilseeds and pulses

Mohit Sharma

**I**ndia's Minimum Support Price (MSP) framework rests on a cost estimation system. At its core lies the Comprehensive Scheme for Studying Cost of Cultivation, implemented by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics.

The scheme relies on a triennial block sampling design in which selected villages are observed over a three-year cycle before rotation. Although methodologically sound, this framework has remained largely unchanged over decades, despite significant structural transformations in Indian agriculture.

The concern is that MSP recommendations are often based on cost conditions that are two to three years old. The 2021-22 input shock offers a clear example: global fertilizer prices surged, diesel prices increased before partial relief measures, and labour costs rose moderately. This indicates that the MSP system is structurally stable in normal periods but becomes systematically misaligned during input price shocks. There are evidences of research reports proving the gaps in actual plot level cost and MSP; had costs been more accurately captured, MSP for several crops would have needed to be 20-30 per cent higher to maintain the intended margin over costs.

A more subtle but increasingly important gap arises from changes in

mechanisation patterns. The existing framework distinguishes between owned machinery (accounted for through depreciation and interest) and hired machinery services (captured under paid-out costs), which in principle avoids double counting. The Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanization (SMAM) has allocated a total of ₹8,565 crore across States for the 2014-15 to 2024-25 period, aimed at distributing over 1.9 million machines and establishing thousands of Custom Hiring Centres. This policy attention of the government on farm mechanisation, rapid expansion of custom hiring centres has shifted machinery access patterns, particularly among small and marginal farmers. The triennial sampling design, however, may still reflect older ownership-heavy distributions.

#### VARIED FACTORS

These methodological gaps influence the accuracy of cost estimation but do not, by themselves, explain broader structural outcomes such as cropping patterns. Evidence from across States suggests that crop diversification is driven far more by procurement assurance, irrigation conditions, input subsidies, and market linkages than by marginal differences in estimated costs.

States such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra have achieved relatively higher shares of pulses and oilseeds due to stronger market ecosystems, whereas Punjab continues



SUPPORT PRICES. Need for tweaks

to be dominated by the rice-wheat system.

This contrast underscores a critical insight: MSP in practice operates less as a pure cost-based price signal and more as a procurement-backed assurance mechanism. Even where MSPs are announced for alternative crops such as pulses and oilseeds, weak procurement limits their effectiveness in shaping farmer decisions. Data shows that market prices for several crops have frequently fallen below MSP in multiple regions.

The implications for MSP outcomes are therefore twofold. First, during stable periods, the gap between MSP and actual cost remains limited, and the system functions broadly as intended. Second, during periods of input price volatility, lagged cost estimation can compress the MSP-to-Cost margins, reducing real profitability even when nominal MSP increases are announced.

The MSP debate in India is often framed as a pricing problem, whereas it is fundamentally a problem of measurement and transmission.

Addressing these issues requires calibrated reform. Refinements on interest rate assumption and introducing limited indexing for volatile inputs like fuel and fertilizers could be piloted for crops where diversification is desired, such as pulses and oilseeds. Later, these refinements could be extended across all MSP crops, accompanied by gradual improvements in sampling frequency and regional representation. The fiscal implications of such changes would remain modest relative to their potential to enhance policy credibility and precision.

India's MSP system has played a critical role in ensuring food security. Yet a framework designed for earlier production conditions now faces the risk of gradual misalignment as agricultural systems evolve. A carefully sequenced modernisation focused on improving cost estimation without disrupting institutional continuity can strengthen both its credibility and effectiveness. When cost estimates more closely reflect observed realities, MSP can function not only as a safety net but also as a reliable guide for long-term agricultural transformation.

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## BELOW THE LINE



TVK leader Vijay during an election campaign BALACHANDAR L

#### Seeking Divine intervention

Joseph C. Vijay, founder of Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), embarked on a multi-faith spiritual tour ahead of the Assembly election results set to be announced on Monday, seeking divine

blessings at key religious centres across the country. He began his pilgrimage at the Tiruchendur Murugan Temple, where he offered prayers to Lord Murugan. Holding the 'Vel' — the deity's sacred spear — Vijay performed 'darshan' at the coastal shrine before proceeding to the Shirdi Sai Baba Temple near Pune.

Continuing his tour, he was supposed to visit Shrine Basilica Vailankanni Church in Velankanni, a prominent Christian pilgrimage site, and conclude his Yatra at the Nagore Dargah, an important Islamic shrine but this got cancelled at the last minute even as a large number of his

fans assembled at the Church waiting to see him. With several exit polls predicting a strong performance by the TVK, Vijay's outreach to multiple faiths underscores a carefully calibrated message of inclusivity, as he positions himself to emerge either as a 'king' or a potential 'kingmaker' in Tamil Nadu's evolving political landscape.

#### Golden opportunity?

In a recent event a retired SEBI official was all praise for himself for conceptualising an idea to facilitate the common man buy gold coins and bars on MCX in the most transparent market driven price. What one wonders is why should investors buy

gold at futures prices when they are paying the entire money today with an intention to take delivery. Other participants use the exchange platform only for hedging their risk. Moreover, futures prices are always at a premium to spot prices as it involves cost of carry and storage. This trend is not going to change in the near future given the geopolitical turmoil.

#### Rudy's mid-air roll call

A routine IndiGo flight from Jammu to Delhi on May 1 had an unusual in-flight announcement: the pilot, Rajiv Pratap Rudy, casually welcomed Union ministers Ashwini Vaishnav and Jitendra Singh, along with MPs

Sanjay Jaiswal and Manoj Tiwari, turning a standard cockpit message into a mid-air political cameo. A former civil aviation minister under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Rudy has been repeatedly elected from Bihar's Saran Lok Sabha constituency. Though his political prominence has waned over the years, he has stuck with flying, operating Airbus A320 aircraft in an honorary capacity. That makes him a rarity: among India's politicians, only Rudy and the late Rajiv Gandhi have flown commercial passenger jets. Another famous airman, Rajesh Pilot, was an Indian Air Force officer, not a commercial airline pilot. **Our Bureaus**

## Seven decades of Keralam

29 bureaucrats offer a rich portrait of Kerala

### BOOK REVIEW.

S Adikesavan

Kerala consistently punches above its weight in any discussion on social and economic development in India. Its achievements in human development indicators, as well as its distinctive administrative challenges, have long attracted national attention. Further, until about a decade ago, key positions in the Government of India — particularly in the Prime Minister's Office — were occupied by officers of Malayali origin.

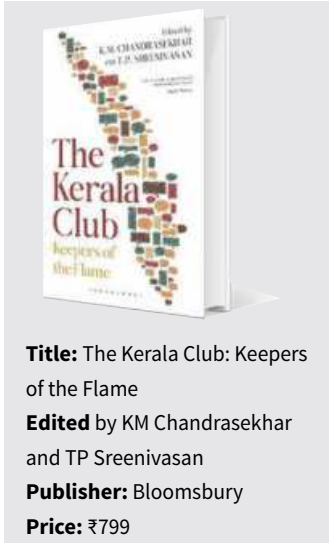
The phrase "Mallu Club" or "Keralite Mafia" came into currency to describe this influential cohort during the tenure of Manmohan Singh. Officers such as TKA Nair (Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister), MK Narayanan (National Security Advisor), and Shivshankar Menon (Foreign Secretary) formed part of a powerful administrative axis in New Delhi.

*The Kerala Club: Keepers of the Flame*, edited by KM Chandrasekhar and TP Sreenivasan, (Bloomsbury, 2026) both guide and Guru to scores of young civil servants, brings together essays by 29 bureaucrats who either belonged to the Kerala cadre or had significant professional engagements with the State. The volume is both a chronicle and an analytical exploration, illuminating Kerala's developmental journey over roughly seven decades.

Several essays stand out for their narrative richness, personal touch and insight. In "A Heady Mix of Maths, Science and the Baton," Rajan Medhekar recounts his remarkable career trajectory — from a strong academic foundation in solid-state physics to leadership roles in the State police, the Border Security Force and as chief of the National Security Guard's "Black Cat" commandos. His reflections include a vivid account of the Chalai riots of 1982, one of the rare instances of communal unrest in Thiruvananthapuram, and the swift deployment of the Army to restore normalcy.

#### LABOUR RELATIONS

A recurring theme in this volume is the complexity of labour relations in Kerala. In "Kerala's Trade Unions," EK Bharat Bhushan, former Chief Secretary, offers a candid account of his tenure as Managing Director of



**Title:** The Kerala Club: Keepers of the Flame  
**Edited by** KM Chandrasekhar and TP Sreenivasan  
**Publisher:** Bloomsbury  
**Price:** ₹799

Kerala Minerals and Metals Ltd. He describes how efforts to revive the company — through stricter discipline and improved marketing — were met with resistance from entrenched union leadership. The backlash included threats and even a legislative motion seeking his removal.

Transferred thereafter to Travancore Titanium Products, he encountered an even more fragmented union environment, with 48 (sic) unions operating simultaneously and discipline virtually absent. His essay is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand Kerala's industrial climate.

Equally compelling is "When the Desert Bloomed" by T Balakrishnan, which critiques the State's fiscal priorities. He argues that tax revenues have often been directed more toward welfare expenditure than toward critical physical infrastructure. Successive governments, he notes, have competed to enhance salaries and benefits for organised labour across both public and private sectors, contributing to wage inflation and rendering labour increasingly unaffordable.

The book will appeal not only to general readers interested in the state's development trajectory but also to serving bureaucrats and civil service aspirants.

That said, the volume might have benefited from a concluding synthesis drawing together key insights and offering a critical overview in summary. The diversity of styles and topics occasionally makes the reading uneven. Yet, this is a minor drawback in an otherwise valuable compendium.

The reviewer is a commentator on banking and finance

## A fearless activist and a rebel

This compelling biography describes Annie Besant's many transformations and her role in India's freedom movement

### BOOK REVIEW.

Parimala S Rao

Any guesses who the first woman president of the Indian National Congress was? She presided over its Calcutta session in 1917 and was, in fact, British national, political firebrand and supporter of Irish self-rule, Annie Besant. And this is just one of the many avatars that Clare Paterson describes so vividly in *The Nine Lives of Annie Besant*, the recent biography of a key force behind India's Home Rule movement and a dominant figure in the Theosophical Society, which celebrated its 150th anniversary last year.

The engrossing life story brings alive one of the most colourful figures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries — an inspirational activist and educator who left her imprint on many schools and colleges, localities and roads across India that are named after her. In recording Annie Besant's remarkable journey across continents and ideologies, Paterson presents a study in political and spiritual transformation. She shows how Besant's early activism in Britain laid the intellectual and moral foundations for her later, pivotal role in India's struggle against British rule.

Born in 1847, Annie, as she was popularly known in London's East End, was a revolutionary thinker, swept up on an extraordinary roller-coaster of a life. Losing her father when she was five, she and her older brother were brought up by their mother in a Victorian middle-class family. An intelligent, intuitive and deeply religious young girl, Annie was riveted by tales of the sufferings of early Christian martyrs, writes Paterson. Ironically, this unshakeable faith was shattered after

her disastrous marriage, at age 20, to clergyman Frank Besant. Parting ways from her husband of six years and forced to give up their son to his care, Annie turned breadwinner for her mother and daughter with short-term jobs.

As a prolific writer, she was drawn to unconventional thinkers of the time, and became a pamphleteer in the early 1870s.

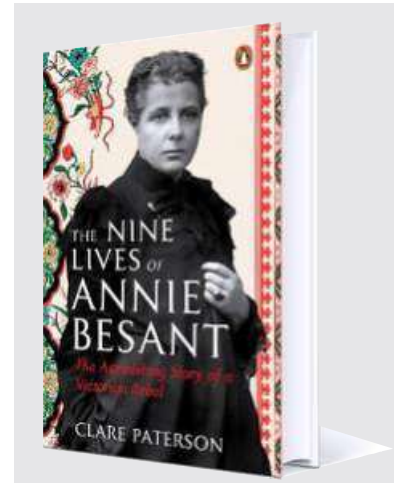
She wrote prodigiously, on vital current issues such as women's suffrage, unemployment, workers' rights, corruption, slavery, political reform, the lunacy laws, and much more.

#### MULTIFACETED PERSONALITY

Being a powerful orator, Annie was also a sought-after public speaker, captivating large crowds with her impassioned campaigns for birth control, workers' rights, and women's emancipation. Paterson highlights her involvement in freethought circles, her collaboration with politician, radical thinker and proponent of atheism, Charles Bradlaugh, and her willingness to court controversy while defending principle. The legal action and trial relating to her pamphlet on birth control underscore Annie's courage in challenging state and church authority, and her faith in fearless public engagement.

Annie's early radicalism, Paterson argues, did not disappear with her later turn toward spirituality; it evolved. Describing her meeting with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1889, Paterson writes, "Madame Blavatsky's appearance was ramshackle but her personality was electrifying. She smoked incessantly and swore prodigiously. She rejected all accepted norms, from the church to science... It must have been invigorating for Annie to find so powerful a woman at the head of this organisation."

Annie's embrace of the Theosophical Society offered a broader framework that accommodated both spiritual



**Title:** The Nine Lives of Annie Besant  
**Author:** Clare Paterson  
**Publisher:** Penguin Random House India  
**Price:** ₹499

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Paterson is an award-winning television executive with extensive experience of commissioning and making documentaries, some of which have been honoured with BAFTAs and International Emmys

inquiry and social reform. This new philosophy's emphasis on universal brotherhood and Eastern wisdom allowed multiple trajectories to converge, and resonated with her long-standing critique of Western imperial arrogance. She believed that self-government, or Home Rule, required not only political change but also moral, intellectual and cultural

renewal. The account of Annie's role in India's Independence movement forms the political core of the book.

#### FREEDOM FIGHTER

Paterson captures both the scale of her influence and the tensions inherent in her position as a British-born advocate of Indian self-government, which led to her imprisonment for political activism. When Annie assumed presidency of the Indian National Congress in 1917, Paterson says, she acquired "a huge base among nationalists as well as Theosophists, the sort of support that is every politician's dream."

British officials in India and England didn't know what to make of her but understood that "this formidable woman now at the centre of the imperial picture was refusing to toe the government line," while occupying "an extraordinary position of power as president of both a new world religion and of the mainspring of Indian nationalism."

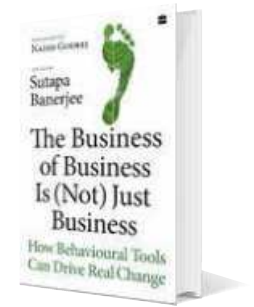
Paterson recognises the contradictions in Annie's radical politics — her preference for constitutional methods, her unease with civil disobedience, and her eventual marginalisation as nationalist strategies shifted. The book leaves the reader viewing Annie as a bridge between Britain and India, rationalism and mysticism, dissent and institution-building.

*The Nine Lives of Annie Besant* stands out for the clarity and edgy elegance of Paterson's prose.

She balances colourful narrative with analytical depth, enlivening the text with delightful and wondrous anecdotes. The result is a biography that is both intellectually rigorous and hugely readable.

The reviewer is an independent editor based in Besant Nagar, Chennai

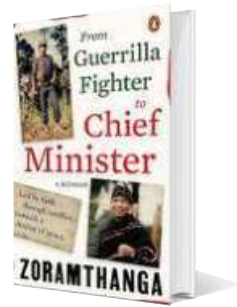
### NEW READS.



**Title:** Business Of Business Is (Not) Just Business  
**Editor:** Sutapa Banerjee

**Publisher:** HarperCollins India

**This book examines** what it takes to move from box-ticking to meaningful action, and sync success with public purpose



**Title:** From Guerrilla Fighter to Chief Minister  
**Author:** Zoramthanga

**Publisher:** Penguin Eight

**This is not** just a political memoir. It is a story of struggle. A story of conviction. A story of one man who held his people's future in his hands



**Title:** First Bite: Breakfast Stories from Urban India  
**Author:** Priyadarshini Chatterjee

**Publisher:** Speaking Tiger Books

**This book blends** food history with cultural reportage. It is a book about ordinary meals and extraordinary stories

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 4, 2006

#### Petro price hike likely by third week

The expected increase in petrol, diesel and cooking gas (liquefied petroleum gas) prices may take place by the third week of this month. The Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Mr M.S. Srinivasan, told select media persons here on Wednesday that a final decision on price revision would be taken after consultations be tween the Petroleum and Finance Ministries.

#### ADB plans to double hike to India

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has decided to more than double its financial assistance to India to over \$2.6 billion by 2008 from the current level of around \$1.3 billion, according to the ADB President, Mr Haruhiko Kuroda.

#### Gujarat Ambuja to merge Ambuja Cement with itself

Gujarat Ambuja Cements Ltd will amalgamate Ambuja Cement Eastern Ltd with itself, offering four equity shares of GACL of Rs 2 each for every five equity shares of ACEL of face value of Rs 10 each. This share ratio recommended by the GACL board on Wednesday (and also by the ACEL board), was based on a valuation report prepared by Deloitte Haskins & Sells, said a statement from the Ambuja Group.

### Short take

## Working towards a sensible AI plan in telecom

SP Kochhar

Recent geopolitical conflicts have demonstrated that telecom systems are no longer neutral utilities but active arenas of strategic competition. In this context, the concept of "sensible AI" becomes critical.

During the recent Iran war, cyber operations targeted communication systems, disrupted infrastructure and manipulated information channels before and alongside physical actions. This marked a shift from the isolated cyberattacks to coordinated, multi-domain strategies.

Telecom networks were used not only to disrupt enemy coordination but also

to influence perception. By exploiting mobile applications and communication platforms, actors could send misleading messages, spread disinformation and create confusion among both civilians and military personnel. This highlights a critical reality: telecom networks are not just carriers of information — they shape it. In such volatile scenarios, artificial intelligence is increasingly used to monitor, manage and defend telecom systems. However, not all AI is equally effective. What is required is sensible AI. AI that operates with context awareness, restraint and reliability.

A sensible AI system does not simply react to anomalies; it interprets them. For instance, a sudden spike in network traffic during a conflict could indicate a

cyberattack, or it could be a surge in legitimate communication. An overly aggressive AI might shut down parts of the network, causing unnecessary disruption. A sensible AI, on the other hand, evaluates multiple signals before acting, ensuring stability while addressing real threats.

Sensible AI in telecom must therefore evolve beyond conventional cybersecurity. It must integrate awareness of operational technology (OT) systems and understand how digital commands translate into physical outcomes.

Another key takeaway is the importance of resilience. In conflict scenarios, network disruption is often inevitable. The goal is not to prevent all

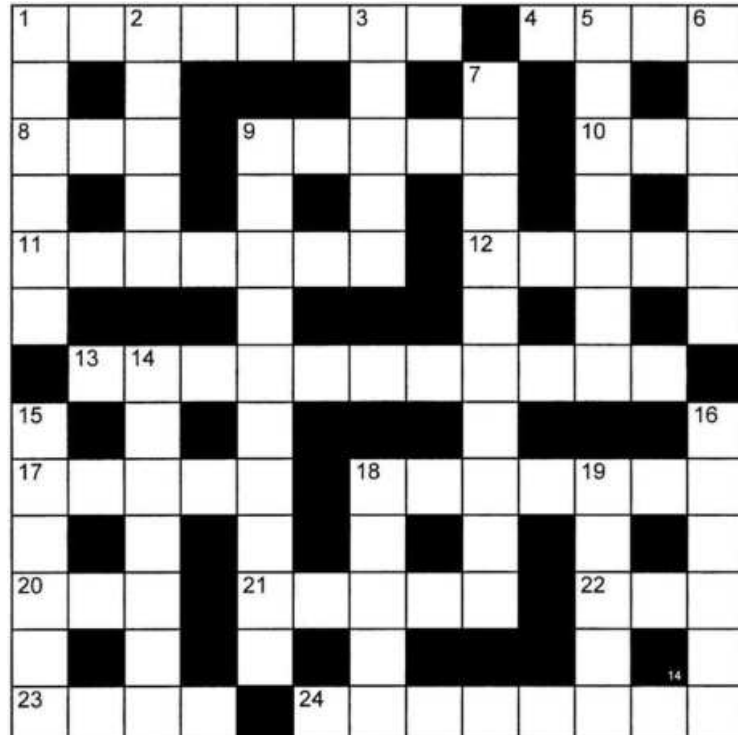
failures but to ensure continuity of critical services. Sensible AI enables the development of self-healing networks — systems that can detect faults, isolate compromised components and reroute traffic dynamically.

Modern telecom systems must move from reactive to predictive models. Instead of responding to attacks after they occur, sensible AI should anticipate potential threats based on behavioural patterns and historical data.

Sensible AI represents a shift toward systems that are not only intelligent but also measured, context-aware and resilient.

The writer is Director General, Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI)

### BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2671



#### EASY

##### ACROSS

- An invective harangue (8)
- Biting, sour (4)
- Stud, plate in sole of shoe (3)
- Dressing poured over food (5)
- Russian village community (3)
- Orange-coloured fruit (7)
- Pungent bulb (5)
- Beheaded (11)
- Tree emblematic to Canada (5)
- Escort vessel (7)
- Practice, operation (obs) (3)
- Two, couple, pair (5)
- Sail of windmill (3)
- Work set or undertaken (4)
- Form of ninepins (8)

##### DOWN

- Appal, discourage (6)
- Carpenter's bore (5)
- Not sharp (5)
- Draw up, compose (7)
- Throughout the time of (6)
- Winding-up part of a speech (10)
- Religious mysteries (10)
- Fast train (7)
- Quantity (6)
- Court game (6)
- Open, candid (5)
- Smith's iron block (5)

#### NOT SO EASY

##### ACROSS

- Help to turn the people with a bitter harangue (8)
- Returning some medication that tastes sour (4)
- Some of these guys have a stud in the shoe (3)
- Dressing for dinner? What cheek! (5)
- I'm backing the first Russian space station (3)
- Fruit from a tropic being distributed (7)
- There's no backing one on this sort of dome (5)
- Having lost head when taped, one acted strangely (11)
- Tree, the palm, put out at end of grove (5)
- Vessel with its set of sails in its appointed lot (7)
- Old-fashioned use of river in Yorkshire (3)
- Mark Clemens made for the two of them (5)
- Commercial vehicle used to test ore (3)
- Piece of work terrorist leader will request (4)
- A parody, lest it be confused with ninepins (8)

##### DOWN

- The underworld is allowed to discourage one (6)
- Argue about how boring it can be (5)
- Take the edge off it by being outspoken (5)
- Police about to take in first murderer to put it together (7)
- While it's going on run, dig round it (6)
- For each a speech, with this to wind it up (10)
- Religious rites meant crass conversion (10)
- A daily will put it into words (7)
- How much for a horse to ride? (6)
- Nine involved in street up at Wimbledon maybe (6)
- This old German seemed sincere (5)
- Smith strikes one villain perhaps abandoned by the Italian (5)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2670

**ACROSS** 1. Digestion 5. Sup 7. Cash 8. Deprived 10. Mushroom 11. Oral 13. Labour 15. Fallow 18. Doom 19. Ruminant 22. Commands 23. Once 24. Tar 25. Digresses

**DOWN** 1. Decimal 2. Gusts 3. Ice-box 4. Norm 5 Several 6. Pedal 9. Fraud 12. Ratio 14. Bloomer 16. Witness 17. Gun-dog 18. Ducat 20. Annas 21. Ward

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to [explained@indianexpress.com](mailto:explained@indianexpress.com)

## TECH

# How India's new emergency messaging system works

**Bhaskar Sarma**  
New Delhi, May 3

ON SATURDAY morning, many smartphones across India suddenly played a sharp beeping sound, accompanied by vibrations. A pop-up message flashed on screens in English, Hindi and other languages with the headline "extremely severe alert".

While many may have been taken aback, this was a pan-India test of a mass broadcast system — called cell broadcast — to alert people during natural or manmade disasters. At present, the government issues disaster alerts through SMS, which can be missed by many. The cell broadcast technology is more difficult to miss. While tests have been on for some time now in India, this was the first time this took place on such a scale.

### The technology

Cell broadcast is a method of simultaneously sending short messages to multiple mobile phones within a defined geographic area. It can reach a very large number of devices at once, or, in case of hazards that affect only a small area, be sent to just a limited number of handsets, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a UN agency. The system overrides any network congestion, allowing messages to be delivered instantaneously.

It was developed in the early 1990s by the European Telecommunications Standards Institute, with inputs from telecom operators and equipment makers across Europe. First demonstrated in 1997 in Paris, the technology is considered an international best practice and is

### BEST PRACTICE

Among the first to adopt it was Japan in 2007. In Asia, South Korea and Singapore have also deployed nationwide alert systems over the past decade

The US rolled out its Wireless Emergency Alerts system in 2012. Across Europe, countries adopted similar systems under the EU-Alert framework, especially after a 2018 directive

now used by more than 30 countries. The alerts are also adaptable to specific requirements, such as a user's language.

For India, the Centre for Development of Telematics under the Department of Telecommunications has developed this technology. A timeline for a complete roll-out is unclear. Currently, India's SMS-based alert system is operational across all states and Union Territories.

### How it works

As part of day-to-day network functionality, cell towers communicate with phones within their reach, providing information such as the network it is connected to, according to the GSM Association, a global body that represents network operators. The technology that enables this is known broadly as cell broadcast. Government authorities can harness this one-way communication system to issue emergency alerts.

The system essentially works by sending a single message from a mobile network tower to all phones connected to that tower at the same time, instead of sending individual SMSes. "Visitors to the target area, including from abroad, will also receive alerts, and even in their own language if the system is multi-language enabled," the GSM association says.

### Why this system matters

Cell broadcast technology uses no personal data. Mobile phones can receive messages without the need for users to share phone numbers or location data. It needs no app or subscription. The only requirement is that the phone is switched on and configured to accept such messages.

It is much more conspicuous than SMS owing to its distinct alert tones and vibration. This can draw people's attention even in noisy environments. It will override all ongoing tasks on a mobile phone, including calls, and would be delivered even when the device is on silent or do-not-disturb mode.

As climate-related disasters such as flash floods, extreme temperatures, and cyclones become more frequent and severe — including in India — technologies such as cell broadcast become extremely important.

## EDUCATION

# The quick answers trap: Is AI in top colleges helping students or adding to stress



**EXPERT EXPLAINS**  
BY RAJEEV KUMAR

FORMER PROFESSOR OF COMPUTER SCIENCE AT IIT KHARAGPUR, IIT KANPUR, BITS PILANI, AND JNU

THE LAUNCH of ChatGPT in November 2022 accelerated the adoption of Generative AI (GenAI) across domains. It is now widely used in education, research, and industry to improve productivity and work quality, and is increasingly treated as an assistive technology. Despite concerns about the impact on jobs, GenAI has quickly become embedded in everyday academic and professional workflows.

In academia, adoption has been particularly rapid in India's premier technical institutions, such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) Pilani, and National Institutes of Technology (NITs).

GenAI tools provide on-demand access to explanations, problem-solving support, and coding assistance, effectively functioning as 24x7 tutors at students' fingertips. While this improves access to guidance and reduces dependence on institutional resources, it raises a key question: Is GenAI reducing academic stress or intensifying it? The question is especially relevant given the high number of student suicides reported in these colleges, owing to a variety of factors.

### GenAI-driven ecosystem

The recent proliferation of Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning (AI/ML) has penetrated academia more rapidly than the earlier cycles of AI development. While AI has evolved since the late 1950s, its direct

integration into daily life accelerated with the rise of conversational systems such as Google Assistant in the mid-2010s.

A decisive shift followed the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022, marking the widespread adoption of large language models (LLMs). These systems generate text, code, images, and other content from large datasets, and are called GenAI.

Within academia, students rely on tools such as Google Gemini, DeepSeek and GitHub Copilot for tasks including report drafting and assignment preparation. These tools function as assistive technologies, but at the same time, they are shifting learning from deep engagement with problems to effective querying, placing greater emphasis on prompt formulation than on independent reasoning.

LLMs are probabilistic systems and can produce errors, inconsistencies, or misleading outputs. Over-reliance without verification may affect conceptual understanding and academic rigour. This evol-

ving ecosystem brings both efficiency gains and new challenges in education.

### Gap in the ecosystem

Traditionally, teaching and learning in premier educational institutes focused on analysis, design, and application of knowledge rather than rote memorisation. Given concepts and mathematical formulations, students were expected to apply them to solve problems. Many examinations were open-book, allowing the use of reference material while assessing analytical and problem-solving ability. Preparation involved selecting relevant material, organising notes, and developing approaches — processes that ensured deep engagement.

With the advent of LLMs, this is changing. The effort invested in reading, organising material, and working independently through problems has declined. Students are increasingly relying on querying AI systems for solutions. As a result, emphasis shifts from internalising concepts to retrieving answers on demand. While this

could be more efficient, it reduces sustained thinking and limits the development of independent analytical skills.

### Effects on academic stress

The widespread adoption of GenAI is introducing a set of specific though interlinked stress intensifiers in academic environments:

- **Dependence and reduced confidence:** Frequent reliance on AI-generated solutions shifts competence from self to system, weakening confidence in unaided problem-solving. Over time, this reduces persistence in tackling complex problems independently.
- **AI-driven benchmarking:** Student performance is increasingly measured — directly or indirectly — against AI-generated outputs that are faster, more structured, and often appear near-ideal. It raises evaluation standards, leaves little room for iterative thinking or minor errors, and fosters constant comparison with peers and machine outputs.

- **Competitive pressure driven by Fear of Missing Out (FOMO):** With all-time access to GenAI, students feel compelled to use these tools to avoid falling behind. It creates a continuous pressure to match AI-augmented productivity, often prioritising speed and output over deep understanding.
- **Learning-evaluation mismatch:** While GenAI is widely used for coursework and preparation, it is typically restricted in examinations and interviews. This creates a dual environment, forcing abrupt shifts to unaided performance, leading to anxiety, self-doubt, and a sense of unpreparedness during high-stakes assessments.
- **Ethics undefined:** The absence of clear norms on acceptable AI use creates uncertainty and internal conflict. Students must constantly decide how much reliance is appropriate, increasing stress while raising concerns about academic integrity.

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## WEST ASIA CONFLICT

# Why benchmark oil prices don't show the full picture



SUKALP SHARMA & ANIL SASI

THE WEST Asia war has driven oil prices into a highly volatile phase, with vessel movement effectively halted through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the most critical maritime chokepoints for global energy flows. So far, the price surge appears muted compared with the surge in oil benchmarks triggered by the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. But that's not the complete picture.

Since the war began, the highest Brent crude — one of the oil benchmarks — has traded at about \$126 per barrel. It ended last week at about \$108 per barrel. But in reality, refiners in various parts of the world have likely been paying a lot more. Reports suggest that barrels have changed hands at even \$150 per barrel, significantly higher than the exchange-traded benchmarks.

Oil price levels generally quoted in reports, seen on television news tickers, and available on commodity exchanges can be significantly different from the actual price that refiners pay for the barrels, particularly during supply crises. And that is because, like other commodity markets, the oil market comprises not one but two markets: a paper market and a physical market.

### The two markets

The difference between the paper market and the physical market is largely defined by the timing of delivery and the actual intent to buy and use the oil. The paper market consists of financial front-month futures contracts, which are essentially promises to buy oil at a future date. These contracts are usually for about one-two months hence. And these are the prices quoted most often as benchmark prices.

But are these the prices at which refiners are striking deals today to get oil to feed their refineries over the next few weeks? Absolutely not. The price they pay is based on the supply situation in the physical market, where oil is actually bought and sold for refinery operations, not just for trading.

In effect, the two markets price different things: paper market prices the future expectation, while the physical market prices the immediate demand-supply realities. When all's well with oil supplies globally,



A man stands in the water as ships line the horizon in the Strait of Hormuz off Bandar Abbas in Iran. AP

the prices in the two markets are usually well-aligned. But in times of supply crises — like the unprecedented closure of the Strait of Hormuz — the divergence can be yawning.

The Strait's effective closure has taken millions of barrels of oil a day off the market, marking the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). The Strait of Hormuz accounted for about a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flows. Refiners cannot rely on the paper market, and in times of supply disruptions, move to procure oil even at exorbitant prices as supply security takes precedence over price considerations.

### Backwardation

Amid the current supply disruption, the paper market appears to belie the truth somewhat, given that the physical market is really stretched. The dissonance here is somewhat similar to the stock market optimism globally, with the S&P 500 inching back to its pre-war levels despite there being no sign of conflict resolution.

Much of this optimism in the American stock markets could be on account of the AI buildup, even as the oil sector does not have a parallel to justify the hope that prices would come down. The paper market evi-

dently believes that the supply situation is expected to ease significantly in a couple of months, even as the physical market grapples with scarcity. Focusing only on paper market prices can result in complacency about the dynamics of oil flows.

The lower price of paper barrels for future delivery than physical barrels for immediate supply is referred to as "backwardation", which is a market structure in which the commodity's immediate availability is worth a lot more than its availability a few months down the road. Put simply, it means that the market — currently facing supply tightness — doesn't expect the supply disruption and high prices to last too long.

"...the Dated-to-Frontline (DFL) Brent benchmark has reached levels of \$25 per barrel. The DFL represents the premium that Brent physical barrels (Dated Brent) for immediate loading (typically 10-30 days ahead, current May) command over the Brent Futures front month (now pricing June). The explosion from a couple of dollars to an average \$21 per barrel in the first week of April highlights the time value of 'ASAP' (as soon as possible) barrels over future-delivery barrels," Rystad Energy said in an April 20 note.

Notably, when the war began, it was the paper market that got spooked first, with

### Estimates vs reality

The lower price of paper barrels for future delivery than physical barrels for immediate supply is termed backwardation

### Put simply, it means that the market doesn't expect the supply disruption and high prices to last too long

## DEFENCE

# Why India's new helicopter-launched naval missile 'hits different'

**Sushant Kulkarni**  
Pune, May 3

LAST WEEK, the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the Indian Navy successfully test-launched a salvo of short-range anti-ship missiles from a helicopter off the Odisha coast. These indigenously developed missiles, called the Naval Anti-Ship Missile Short Range (NASM-SR), are to be deployed from ship-borne helicopters.

This was the platform's first successful salvo test — multiple launches in quick succession — wherein two such missiles were launched from the same chopper. While the Navy already has helicopter-launched missiles, the NASM-SR offers a potential upgrade.

### Role of the missiles

A helicopter-launched system, such as NASM-SR, allows a navy to engage hostile vessels from a safe distance.

The Indian Navy already possesses the British-origin Sea Eagle anti-ship missile, which it has equipped its Sea King 42B heli-

copters with. Stationed on ships, these helicopters can take off, strike a target from a relatively close range, and then return to the ship.

The Sea Eagles are 1980s-era missiles, lacking many modern capabilities. One of its key issues was its weight: a single missile weighs around 580 kg.

In the early 2010s, the DRDO began working on a lighter, modern, and home-grown missile that could be carried in higher numbers in helicopters. The NASM-SR's first successful flight test was conducted in May 2022.

### Anatomy of the missile

The NASM-SR uses a solid propulsion booster rocket that gives the missile its first thrust and a long-burn sustainer engine that keeps it flying for longer.

One of its key subsystems include the seeker — a sensor that detects and tracks the target. It also has a radio altimeter device that measures height from the ground or sea. Another critical component is a high-bandwidth two-way data link system that allows real-time communication be-

### Development partners

● Premier DRDO labs in Hyderabad, Pune, and Chandigarh were part of the development process

● The missiles are being produced by private sector partners with the help of MSMEs, startups, and others



The NASM-MR missile was tested last week. MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

tween the missile and operator sitting in the helicopter, DRDO said.

One missile weighs around 380 kg; 200 kg lighter than the Sea Eagle. Its 55-km range, however, is lower than the Sea Eagle's 110 km. When the NASM-SR missile is within a certain distance of its target, a radio proximity fuse detonates its explosive device.

### The hits

Many modern navies have helicopter-launched missiles with two features: "man-in-loop" and "waterline hit".

"Man-in-loop" means that a human operator can change the missile's path even when it's mid-flight. In a crowded maritime environment, this reduces the risk of hitting non-combatants and makes the missile more adaptable. The Navy and DRDO successfully tested this feature in February 2025. In contrast, Sea Eagles are "fire-and-forget" missiles.

A "waterline hit" means the missile strikes a ship at or just above the line where the hull meets the water. One of the ship's most vulnerable parts, damage here can cause water to rapidly flood the vessel and dislodge or sink it. The Sea Eagle has no specific waterline hit capabilities.

### The salvo test

Demonstrating a salvo launch shows the ability to overwhelm shipborne defence systems. The missile can maintain a sea-skimming trajectory and accurately lock onto the most vulnerable part of the target.

**WORDLY WISE**  
The decision whether or not to bear a child is central to a woman's life, to her well-being and dignity.  
— Ruth Bader Ginsburg

**WEB EXCLUSIVE**  
DMK, AIADMK or TVK? Tamil Nadu's three futures — and one warning.  
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## After Hormuz disruption, Asia should build an energy security alliance



**OVER THE BARREL**  
VIKRAM S MEHTA

**F**ATHI BIROL, executive director of the International Energy Agency (IEA), said last month that “we are facing the biggest energy security threat in history”, worse than the aggregate impact of the crises sparked by the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict that began in 2022. He should know, as the organisation he heads was established as a result of the Yom Kippur War. The latter triggered the quadrupling of crude oil prices (\$2.90/bbl in October 1973 to \$11.90 in January 1974) and a global recession. In its aftermath in January 1974, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger invited the leaders of the Western world to a conference in Washington, DC. Kissinger's objective was to create a mechanism by which Western countries could counter the cartel of the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and manage and mitigate future supply disruptions. The IEA was the outcome of this conference.

Fifty-two years on, in the wake of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, India should lead a call for the petroleum-importing countries of Asia to create a similar institution, but with a broader threefold purpose. One, to safeguard the rights of individual member countries to free and unencumbered navigation

passage through the maritime straits in Asia; two, to counter the pricing power of Middle East exporters through the lever of their aggregate purchasing strength; and three, to harness the complementary technical, financial and human assets of members to accelerate the pace of the green energy transition. Such an institution could be called the Asian Energy Collaborative Compact (AECC).

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has had a dual impact on Asian oil-import-dependent countries. It has led to an energy shortage and highlighted the risks of exposure to maritime chokepoints. The closure has trapped 13 million barrels of petroleum (and its derivatives) in the straits. The bulk of this quantity (approximately 85 per cent) is destined for the Asian markets. As a result, a number of Asian countries are currently facing an energy-supply crisis. The Philippines has declared a national energy emergency; Japan has cut back on ferry and bus services, and India has rationed the supply of LPG to commercial establishments. China has also put the brakes on domestic consumption, although the impact has been buffered by substitute supplies from Russia and a drawdown of stocks from its strategic reserves.

Beyond this physical constraint, the closure has alerted countries to their vulnerability to other nautical chokepoints. Aside from the Strait of Hormuz, their energy supplies have to cross the Strait of Malacca and, further east, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. These maritime passages are in the high seas and under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, also referred to as the “con-

stitution of the oceans”, all ships are assured the right of “innocent passage”. The Iranian action has breached this right and created a precedent that compels reflection on the counterfactual. What if the Strait of Malacca (through which 60 per cent of all seaborne trade to and from East Asia passes) were choked? What if the flow of merchandise traffic through the Taiwan Strait and/or the South China Sea were impeded by regulatory restrictions and/or tolls? What pipeline configurations, over land and under water, might enable countries to create supply lines that avoid exposure to such blocks?

These concerns are common to most Asian countries irrespective of their political system, ideology or stage of economic development. They can and should therefore be discussed conjointly. The AECC could provide a forum for such discussions.

The “Asian Premium” (the price differential between the price paid for crude oil by Asian countries to Middle Eastern exporters and the North Sea benchmark price) ranged between \$3 and \$6 per barrel before the start of the conflict. It widened to \$60 per barrel after the start of the bombing. It has come down since, but the initial increase warrants the question: Was the steepness of the hike in prices, freight rates and insurance premiums due entirely to tightening supply and inelastic demand? Or was it also because of asymmetric bargaining, that is, the fact that Asian importers failed to leverage their aggregate purchasing power?

Kissinger convened the leadership of the Western world in January 1974 to counter OPEC. My suggestion is that AECC should be set up to secure a similar objective. It should develop mechanisms that,

whilst not impeding a country's ability to trade independently, enable the members to negotiate collectively to secure better supply terms and reduced freight and insurance costs. In addition, AECC should provide real-time market intelligence on supply disruptions, infrastructure incidents and geopolitics. This information is currently provided by the IEA, but Asia should have its own bespoke agency. IEA has a Western skew as it works under the OECD's umbrella.

The exit of the UAE from OPEC is further evidence of the fractured relationships amongst the Gulf oil exporters and the terminal volatility of the international petroleum market. It deepens the urgency for Asia to shift away from fossils towards renewables. Most, if not all, Asian countries have a green energy strategy in place, and some have made impressive progress. But no country has successfully scaled up renewables to dominance in its energy consumption basket. The question arises: How can this shift be accelerated? One proposition that *prima facie* seems fanciful would be for Asian countries to leverage their green assets (technology, finance, mineral and metal resources, human talent) to identify and tackle areas of overlapping interests regarding the green transition. The proposition is fanciful because, unlike the IEA, Asian countries do not share a common political ideology or system. But the region does have a common purpose in decarbonisation and energy security. So, in its third role as an energy think tank, AECC should research how best the complementary assets of its members can be combined to generate a positive-sum green outcome.

The writer is chairman and distinguished fellow, CSEP Research Foundation

The closure has alerted countries to their vulnerability to other nautical chokepoints. Aside from the Strait of Hormuz, their energy supplies have to cross the Strait of Malacca, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea

## Don't fall for Mythos hype, India needs its own models



PRANESH PRAKASH

**M**YTHOS, ANTHROPIC'S proprietary large language model (LLM), has been deemed too dangerous for release because it is said to excel at discovering security vulnerabilities in software. Under Project Glasswing, Anthropic has provided exclusive access to the US government and select American software vendors to uncover vulnerabilities. Some have urged India to “urgently seek participation in Project Glasswing”. Pleading with the US for access concedes digital sovereignty without helping our cyber-defences.

It is true that frontier LLMs upend traditional cybersecurity — but not in the way the Mythos hype suggests. While Mythos has been able to find security problems in important software like Linux, OpenBSD, and Firefox, this took thousands of attempts and a lot of money. Cybersecurity firm Aisle found that it could replicate many of Mythos's findings using a frontier open-source LLM. A single Linux developer running an open-source LLM on a laptop has found several dozen bugs so far. A paper by Hanzhi Liu et al also discovered 10 unknown (“zero-day”) vulnerabilities in Google Chrome using an open-source LLM. The paper concluded that using open-source LLMs locally was not only powerful but the only economically viable option for large-scale deployment.

Finding zero-day vulnerabilities is different from weaponising them at scale. Many vulnerabilities found by Mythos weren't exploitable. Most successful cyberattacks are from known-but-unpatched vulnerabilities along with a lack of defence-in-depth, rather than the zero-day vulnerabilities at the core of the Mythos hype. In the race of modern cybersecurity, access to powerful open-source LLMs that can be run cost-efficiently at scale is far more critical than having the best LLM.

Clement Delangue, Huggingface's CEO, points out that “the Mythos moment” is asymmetrical in its impact: It helps the defenders more when it comes to Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), but attackers more when it comes to proprietary software. FOSS relies on openness for security, captured in the dictum “given enough eyeballs,

all bugs are shallow”. Delangue argues that since LLMs can now read even stripped binaries, legacy proprietary software running in critical information infrastructure (CII) is legible to automated analysis and attacks. But FOSS is better protected since independent developers can use diverse AI tool-chains (as long as they aren't regulated away) to find and fix bugs — “given enough eyeballs” evolves into “given enough eyeballs, AI agents and computing power”. As with previous generations of bug-finding automation, we now need to adopt LLMs as well; not doing so will give the attackers a leg up. The hype around LLMs' security implications is largely true; that around Mythos largely isn't.

US officials and Big Tech firms have compared advanced LLMs to digital nukes, hoping to erect regulatory barriers to competition from Chinese and Indian companies, who are mostly working releasing open weights/open-source LLMs. Accepting that would harm our cybersecurity posture by decreasing access to open-source LLMs and slowing innovation and the spread of the benefits of AI.

If India's CII depends on proprietary American LLMs, our cyber-immune system can be revoked by a whim of US foreign policy. But isn't China a potential threat as well? Yes, but this isn't a conflict between US and Chinese tech; it is a battle between dependency and the digital sovereignty that FOSS and open-source AI systems enable — once available under an open licence, code and models can be modified and run locally. Relying on proprietary LLMs (that too, made for a single chip architecture) for national security is a supply-chain risk. The idea that only access to Mythos can secure our infrastructure is the inverse of the truth.

In 2019, OpenAI initially held that GPT-2 was too dangerous to release, though that was clearly false. Now Anthropic is saying the same thing. We should learn to ignore such self-serving hype and urgently push for FOSS and open-source AI model adoption for the sake of our digital sovereignty and security.

The writer is a tech law and policy analyst. Views are personal

## May Day is relevant for Gen Z. It has to be made aware



AMIR HYDER KHAN

**F**OR MANY in Gen Z, International Workers' Day or May Day is little more than a symbolic holiday, detached from its origins in the Haymarket Affair and from the struggles that shaped modern work. This fading memory reflects a deeper transformation. At a moment when AI is redefining labour, a generation entering one of the most uncertain labour regimes in decades is also the least connected to the movements that once secured workers' rights.

The classical imagery of labour — factory floors, textile mills, dockyards — has steadily receded from everyday life. In its place has emerged a digitised, fragmented regime of work. Platforms shaped by companies like OpenAI and Google are restructuring labour. Yet AI has not eliminated labour; it has redistributed it into less visible, more precarious forms — data annotation, content moderation, and gig-based services.

Gen Z's detachment from labour politics is structurally produced. Educational curricula marginalise labour history, while media narratives often frame strikes as disruptions rather than democratic rights. The rise of gig work has further eroded shared workplaces where collective identities once formed. The language of freelancing and entrepreneurship has replaced older notions of class solidarity. Workers are encouraged to see themselves as isolated actors, weakening the possibility of collective bargaining. Algorithmic systems determine wages, visibility, and access to work, while opaque metrics replace negotiation.

The decline of organised labour in India predates AI but has been intensified by it. Economic liberalisation expanded informal work and prioritised flexibility over security. With institutional avenues weakening, protests increasingly appear as isolated eruptions rather than sustained movements. What is often described as disorder is, in many cases, a symptom of organisational vacuum. The crisis of labour politics is also a crisis of the Left. Its historical strength lay in its ability to articulate collective identities and organise around them. Today, that capacity is strained. The Left needs to expand its understanding of labour — digital work, gig work, and data work are central to contemporary capitalism. Ignoring them risks rendering labour politics obsolete.

It must also move beyond traditional organisational forms. Unions tied to specific industries cannot adequately represent a workforce that is dispersed. New models — networked unions, digital collectives — are necessary. The Left must engage with technology as a political terrain. Questions of who controls AI, who owns data, and how algorithms are governed are fundamentally questions of power. The Left must reclaim cultural space. If Gen Z encounters politics primarily through digital platforms, then labour politics must exist there.

The lesson of the Haymarket struggle was not just the demand for an eight-hour workday; it was the principle that workers, when organised, can reshape the conditions of their lives. That principle still holds.

Khan is a researcher in urban planning focusing on labour, housing, and the political economy of contemporary Indian cities

At a moment when AI is redefining labour, a generation entering one of the most uncertain labour regimes is also the least connected to the movements that once secured workers' rights

## 40 YEARS AGO

May 4, 1986



### Punjab minister resigns

THE CRISIS in the eight-month-old Barnala ministry deepened further when the Minister of State for Tourism, Suchha Singh Chhotepur, and a number of party functionaries quit their posts in protest over the police entry into the Golden Temple. The Chief Minister, Surjit Singh Barnala, however, announced he had an “overwhelming” majority in the party's legislative wing and alleged that his opponents were trying to sabotage his plans to deal with extremists.

### Muslim Women Bill

THE OPPOSITION parties have decided to press for a division when the controversial

Muslim Women (Protection on Divorce) Bill is voted on in the Lok Sabha on Monday. Even though the Bill's fate is a foregone conclusion with the ruling party — which has a two-thirds majority in the House — having issued a whip to all its members to support it, the opposition parties expect to win a moral victory.

### Air Lanka plane blast

TWENTY-TWO people were killed and 24 injured when an Air Lanka Tristar aircraft exploded at Colombo international airport in Katunayake, 35 km from the city. The Sri Lankan government said it suspected that an “Eelam terrorist group” was responsible for the blast. A National Security Ministry re-

lease said the explosion occurred as passengers were boarding flight number UL 101 to Malé. There was a loud explosion five minutes before its scheduled takeoff.

### Anand routs grandmaster

VLADIMIR TUKMAKOV, the mightiest dragon ever to have invaded the Indian chess circuit, was prostrated at the Bhiilwara tournament. His conqueror was a 16-year-old knight in shining armour, Viswanathan Anand. Of such stuff are legends made. Tukmakov's fiery breath had consumed every single opponent in the tournament, except his own compatriots. Even as the Russian manoeuvred his pawns to control the all-important “centre”, Anand fired his first salvo.



## FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



● **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**  
Israel's Opposition would do well to  
remember: There is no democracy  
without Arabs  
—Haaretz, Israel

# The fear factor: Why West Bengal's voter turnout shattered records



NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY

**U**NDER NORMAL circumstances, an increase in voter turnout is considered an indication of democracy's vibrancy. Over the past four decades, as electoral data became increasingly available in the public domain, turnout was seen as a ready indicator of the likely verdict. The drawback was that the same figure could be, and was, used to justify contrasting forecasts or assessments.

Higher turnout has been seen alternately as a mandate against the incumbent government and an endorsement of the ruling party. There has also been at least one instance when a rise in turnout was interpreted as voters choosing political continuity in the face of a threat to "national" security, coupled with a "sympathy" vote for the ruling party. This was in 1984, after Indira Gandhi's assassination, when 63.56 per cent of voters lined up, as against 56.32 per cent in 1980 and thereafter declining to 61.95 per cent in 1989.

However, higher turnout never came under the public glare the way it now has in the just-concluded polls in four states and one Union Territory. The Election Commission's decision to conduct the SIR posthaste, with the politically driven objective of "purifying" the electoral rolls for all five assemblies, was the singular reason for this. But of these, the SIR in West Bengal was the most politically contentious, not just for its comparatively extended timeline, but also for a past associated with the BJP.

By mid-2025, as the state entered the politically charged pre-poll period, it had already been three-and-a-half decades since the BJP launched its political campaign against "foreigners" or "infiltrators" from Bangladesh, allegedly entering India illegally and altering the demography of places they settled in. This campaign was neatly timed

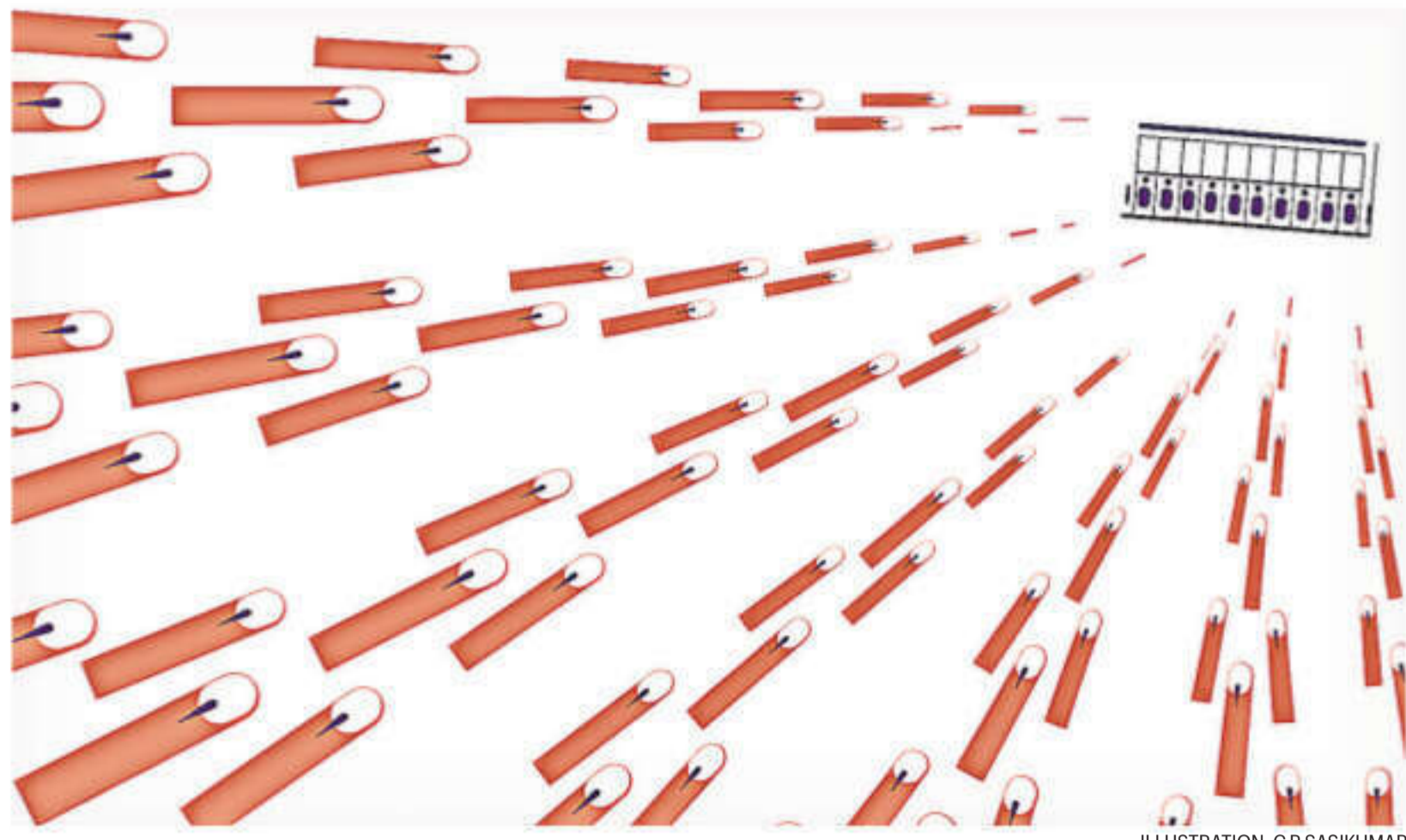


ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

with the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation in the late 1980s, and enabled the widening of the nascent Hindutva plank.

By that time, the Assam agitation had run its full course, during which then-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief MD Deoras made a politically indicative assertion: Hindus from Bangladesh must be treated as refugees, while Muslims should be treated as infiltrators. In 1993, during Delhi's first assembly election after being granted partial statehood, the BJP made the repatriation of Bangladeshi "foreigners" a central plank of its successful campaign.

The BJP continued to espouse this issue, although it petered out somewhat after 2004. It was revived during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections with slogans and assertions that are now part of India's political lexicon. Over the past 12 years, this campaign has been ceaseless and become more virulent. As events in the NCR and several northern and western states in recent years show, the situation has become hazardous for even genuine Bengali Muslim citizens if

**The TMC's campaign against the SIR worsened the fears of previously uninterested voters. The BJP stoked the fears of those who had faced harassment from the TMC cadre**

they live outside the state. Despite accounting for almost 27 per cent of West Bengal's population, they were cast, along with "actual" illegal immigrants, as Bangladeshis. This campaign is neatly coupled with the campaign to "invisibilise" all Muslims, for example, by preventing them — forcefully, and through administrative orders — from offering Friday *namaz* on public grounds.

The opacity, hurriedness and insensitivity with which the SIR was conducted in West Bengal was one of the biggest reasons for the unprecedented turnout in the two phases. The figures spoke for themselves, but ironically, they were of use to both the TMC and the BJP. The entire SIR process and the extraordinary number of deletions — the Supreme Court contributing with its injudicious order not permitting 2.7 million people to vote — were of use primarily to the TMC. The BJP, on the other hand, sought votes on the basis of its "success" in "cleaning up" the rolls by eliminating dead or phantom/ghost voters, those who had multiple votes across different locations in their

names, and of course, those who simply had no right to vote due to being illegal immigrants or "ghuspaithiyas".

The TMC's campaign against the SIR worsened the fears of previously uninterested voters, who concluded that being on the electoral rolls was essential for them to be considered legitimate residents. Migrant workers and professionals based outside the state rushed back at enormous cost, thinking that casting their votes this time was essential to remain on the voters' list — and that this in turn was necessary to remain citizens on paper. From their perspective, neither Aadhaar cards nor passports are enough to claim what is rightfully theirs — only their names on the voters' list will suffice. It is too early for a detailed post-mortem of the SIR in West Bengal. The process was undeniably questionable, especially as it was politically driven, raising worries over the EC's impartiality and whether people can continue to have faith in the electoral process.

The BJP stoked the fears of those who had faced harassment from the TMC's cadre over the past 15 years. The presence of large numbers of central police personnel and polling staff from outside the state allowed these people to vote without having to worry about their safety.

The other major issue that propelled turnout was that of identity, as framed differently by the two parties. The BJP appealed to the exclusivist Hindu identity by claiming it was under threat from Muslims and those appealing them, while the TMC framed the inclusivist Bengali identity as facing a threat from the BJP, led by "outsiders". These two conceptualisations of the Indian nation and nationhood remain just as they were in the late 19th century, but more pronouncedly from 1925, when the RSS was established. Though surviving as different streams within the national discourse, this is the first time the "secular-versus-cultural nationalism" divergence has manifested itself so starkly in an election and boosted electoral turnout in an unprecedented manner.

Mukhopadhyay is the author of Narendram Modi: The Man, The Times and The RSS: Icons of the Indian Right

# Jewar airport will give flight to UP's economic ambitions



NACHIKETA TIWARI AND TV MOHANDAS PAI

**O**N MARCH 28, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated Noida International Airport (NIA) in Jewar, Uttar Pradesh. Built at a cost of around Rs 11,200 crore, the airport will transform the size and character of UP's economy. When fully developed, it will be able to handle 11.6 crore passengers, 7.3 lakh flights and 28 lakh metric tonnes of cargo each year, making it one of India's largest airports and air-logistics hubs.

The airport will be an important piece in UP's infrastructural and economic strategy puzzle, positively impacting the state's economy in four ways: Increasing GSDP, creating a large number of quality jobs, generating new economic opportunities, and deepening the technology and electronics manufacturing sectors in western UP. Let us look at each of these in some detail.

India's aviation market is estimated at Rs 1.6 lakh crore, with six Tier-1 cities accounting for 68 per cent of this market. Amongst the states, Delhi leads the pack with a 20 per cent market share. In contrast, UP's share is barely 4 per cent. NIA will rapidly alter that reality as its annual air-passenger traffic will exceed 3 crore by 2034, more than double the current figure for the entire state of UP. Thus, the airport will enhance UP's GSDP significantly.

Currently, India's aviation sector generates around 3.7 lakh direct and 77 lakh indirect jobs. Given the state's small aviation footprint, not many UP residents benefit from these jobs. NIA's launch changes that story as well, with its developers estimating that over 1 lakh direct jobs — many of them high-quality — and many lakhs of indirect jobs will be created over the airport's development period.

India's air cargo sector is currently dominated by six metro hubs: Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, and Kolkata. With UP aspiring to become a \$1-trillion economy in the next few years, and with a population of 24 crore, it needs a large air cargo hub of its own. The facility at NIA will fill that gap, with an immediate annual capacity pegged at 2.55 lakh MT, about half



that of BIAL, which will increase to 15 lakh MT over a period of time. Air cargo hubs are economic engines that facilitate over 35 per cent of global trade by value (about \$8 trillion annually). They drive GDP growth, create high-value jobs and play a pivotal role in drawing FDI and generating forex for the country. The airport is proximal to three important expressways (the Yamuna Expressway, the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, and the Eastern Peripheral Expressway), and two railway-based dedicated freight corridors (EDFC and WDFC). These are arguably Bharat's principal arteries as they transport over 100 million MT of freight each year. A series of multi-modal facilities will ensure seamless and speedy transfer of cargo between these arteries and the airport: An interchange connecting the Yamuna Expressway and the Eastern Peripheral Expressway; a logistics hub that will link industrial zones around the Yamuna Expressway to the Eastern DFC; and a 31-km road to connect the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, the Eastern Peripheral Expressway, the DFC, and NIA.

Via these interchange systems, we will see the creation of a single efficient goods transport system in UP. This will enhance UP's logistics and economic efficiencies through cost reductions, reduce transit times, improve supply-chain reliability, and enhance capacity. It will also promote green logistics via reductions in carbon footprint, and easier regulatory compliance.

Now that NIA has been inaugurated, it's important for UP's economy managers to ensure that the saturation curve of the airport's utilisation reaches its peak sooner rather than later. They need to ensure the following: Seamless passenger connectivity within a radius of 100 km from the airport; superior passenger experience at the airport; a robust budget hotel industry close to the airport; financial incentives for airlines; an attractive warehousing policy; and the development of land around the airport so that it will be suited to quality living and high-tech industry. This will require a team of experienced and motivated professionals who understand the airline, airport and air cargo businesses and are adept at working with government circles. Such an approach will certainly bring a glorious shine to Jewar and benefit UP and Bharat.

Tiwari is professor at IIT Kanpur and coordinator of UP CM's Economic Advisory Group. Pai is chairman of Aarin Capital and member of UP CM's Economic Advisory Group

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Counting day

IF THE DMK and TMC retain power in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, the BJP will have to concede that the appeal of Hindutva is not overarchingly pan-Indian. In Tamil Nadu, a win by the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance is a foregone conclusion ("DMK, AIADMK or TVK? Tamil Nadu's three futures — and one warning", IE Web, May 2). For all the hype around Vijay's TVK, the whistle is likely to lose its shrillness and fall mute on counting day. As for the BJP, it will be a surprise if it reaches double figures.

David Milton, Maruthancode

### Regional differences

THE LANGUAGE controversy has remained at the forefront since the time of Independence ("Language policing is bad politics, bad economics", IE, May 2). Though the move to mandate Marathi for drivers in Maharashtra is rooted in cultural preservation, several challenges exist. In cosmopolitan hubs like Mumbai, a strict Marathi-only expectation can clash with the multilingual reality. Second, as the workforce in transport sectors relies on migrant labour, language compliance can become a barrier to entry, reducing driver availability and increasing wait times and fares.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

THIS IDEA of making taxi and auto drivers learn Marathi is making people worry about their basic rights ("Language policing is bad politics, bad economics", IE, May 2). Sure, it's good to encourage local languages to keep our culture alive, but if we make language a must-have for these jobs, it could shut out thousands of people who come to Mumbai for work and rely on these jobs just to get by. India's Constitution says everyone has the right to move, live, and work anywhere in the country. If policies make it harder for people to use these freedoms, even indirectly, it could set a bad example for other states and just make the regional differences even bigger. After all, the best way to encourage a language is by including people, teaching it, and getting everyone involved — not by forcing it on them.

Hamza Khan, New Delhi



ROOPALI SINHA

THERE WAS a time when, in report cards, class teachers would routinely describe a "good" child as an "obedient" one. Such remarks would be considered a matter of pride for both the child and his or her parents.

We may have moved ahead, but our conventional education system still emphasises discipline, conformity, and "right answers" over open-ended inquiry. Across classrooms, families, workplaces and politics, we often feel uncomfortable with those who question, challenge, or think independently. "Argumentative Indian(s)" are rarely appreciated, even when their questions might lead to deeper understanding or clarity. Take, for instance, recent reports on Delhi University colleges that have cracked down on student protests over a range of issues from the UGC equity regulations to the "defamation" of colleges on social media. Or, the labelling of universities such as JNU and Jadavpur University as "anti-national". Instead of encouraging healthy questioning and critical thinking, instead of engaging in debates and discussions, the tendency is to shut them down by marking the act of dissent as problematic.

Despite all the emphasis on critical thinking, rational inquiry and problem-solving, why does our conditioning still lean strongly toward obedience?

Part of the answer lies in how we understand and practise respect. Respect, in itself, allows for dignity and mutual regard. However, when tied to an unquestioning attachment to authority, it can begin to re-

# The Indian isn't always argumentative

semble obedience as a character trait rather than a conscious choice. Parents teach their children "*badon ki baat maano*", reinforcing the idea that submission is virtuous. Teachers may favour compliant students, interpreting curiosity as defiance rather than engagement. In workplaces, loyalty to the boss is valued; in families, deference to the head of the household; and in politics, unquestioning support for the supreme leader. Over time, obedience becomes a safer and socially accepted choice. Questions start to feel discomfiting and risky.

Traditions have reinforced this tendency. In the *guru-shishya* tradition, obedience is a norm. Mythology highlights similar instances — when the great scholar Gargi wanted to ask more questions of Yajnavalkya, she was warned that doing so could be dangerous for her. These narratives continue to shape our collective imagination.

What makes this dynamic more complex is how deeply it is internalised. Social hierarchies normalise obedience as both expectation and privilege. While individuals may resist being controlled, they often expect obedience from those below them. Assertion, reasoned disagreement, and self-respect are frequently mistaken for arrogance. As a result, people tend to comply upward while demanding compliance downward, reinforcing hierarchical behaviour. Today, this pattern is more frequently driven — and complicated — by the desire to avoid punishment, conflict, or exclusion. Whether rooted in belief or

fear, excessive obedience limits autonomy, critical thinking, and genuine moral agency. People often feel compelled to plead rather than assert their rights with dignity. Instances of public deference toward authority figures — even in situations of injustice — highlight how deeply ingrained this mindset can be. Recently in Meerut, when local MP Arun Govil, who had played Ram in BR Chopra's *Ramayan*, arrived at a protest site, people who were sitting on *dharna* began singing his praises, performing *aarti*, even breaking down in tears. What was somewhat unsettling was that Govil remained seated, calmly receiving this display of devotion. When rightful anger transforms into submissive reverence, it raises troubling questions about how power is perceived and exercised: Is this merely a remnant of a colonial mindset or does it have deeper cultural roots?

A society conditioned to obedience becomes easier to govern without accountability. Compliance can be quickly mobilised, while dissent is reframed as disloyalty or disruption. Those who question authority may be marginalised, while obedience is equated with good citizenship or patriotism.

Building a healthy and respectful society demands the ability to question authority while upholding responsibility, to assert rights without descending into disorder, and to maintain social norms without suppressing dissent. Without this balance, societies risk producing not engaged citizens, but subjects — and that distinction makes all the difference.

The writer is a Delhi-based schoolteacher

**A society conditioned to obedience becomes easier to govern without accountability. Compliance can be quickly mobilised, while dissent is reframed as disloyalty or disruption**



TRISHA MUKHERJEE

THE DEVIL *Wears Prada*, both the film and the book it is adapted from, is categorised under "chick lit" — "workplace comedy", to be precise. But if you have watched the film, you know: It is fun, it is funny, but it means serious business.

Even if most fans may not remember the first time they watched it — it released 20 years ago — they have certainly watched it several times since, and it is now part of their comfort watch list. And for good reason. The film touched on a lot of themes that warm the heart — starry-eyed aspiration, friendship, empathy and the cost of it — which it returns to in parts in its sequel.

# There's nothing apolitical about fashion

But in between its goopy folds, the film tucked in bits that have defined an entire generation's way of looking at fashion, work culture and success. That's the thing about great films: They permeate your consciousness without the hue and cry.

The *Devil Wears Prada* achieved its cult status by being an eye-opener of sorts for so many of us who have grown up in a world where fashion is considered inconsequential. That it is "stuff". That those who care about fashion didn't make serious journalists. That fashion is not political. That focussing on what a politician is wearing is digressing from the "real" issues when every power suit, handwoven saree, white kurta or even t-shirt is a carefully curated choice determined by the fashion world.

Meryl Streep's monologue as Miranda

Priestly educated Anne Hathaway's Andy: Her store-bought cerulean sweater was, in fact, a product of the fashion industry that she so proudly spurned. That iconic monologue showed how inconspicuously yet deeply fashion is embedded in our existence. Fashion is more like politics than we care to admit. If being apolitical is a political stance, distancing yourself from "fashion" is also a decision rooted very much in fashion.

The film argued that fashion is not restricted to the big fashion houses or what

**"The Devil Wears Prada" achieved cult status by being an eye-opener for many in a world where fashion was considered inconsequential**

they put on sleek runways. It is an awareness that what we wear carries meaning in ways that we often don't realise. We think the "*jhola-wala*" look embodies a poetic, rebellious and, of course, intellectual aesthetic when it is a meticulously devised "ethical chic" branding that has been serving the "activist types" their favourite look.

It also briefly but impressively conveyed the heft of journalism. The idea that Priestly could make or break a designer's collection made one giddy with excitement. The moment underlined the value of editorial judgement and an understanding of fashion, as both a product and a shaper of society, honed over decades. Returning to that scene feels particularly refreshing today when reviews are determined by PR packages.

The *Devil Wears Prada 2* — even if less edgy, sharp and snippy — isn't any less seri-

ous. If the first film showed the power of fashion and journalism, the second centres around the latter's helplessness in an ever-changing world. Fashion is still mainstream, but in a world of AI bots, numbers and advertisers calling the shots, the once-prestigious "book" finds itself in peril. While saving face, and dealing with a dead owner and a nepo-baby who couldn't care less about that warm touch of human creativity, Miranda and Andy do save Runway, but a sense of impending doom prevents the celebration of a happy ending.

How, then, is a film that has redefined a generation's outlook on fashion and, now, its sequel, which captures a reality we are all trying to outrun, merely chick-lit?

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## NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

## WHY SHANKAR PRASAD SHARMA

Shankar Prasad Sharma has been the ambassador of Nepal to India for the last four years. A top academic and one of Nepal's foremost economists, he was the Vice Chairman of Nepal's Planning Commission and also served as Nepal's ambassador to the US during the Obama administration. While he has been stationed in Delhi since 2022, Nepal has seen five prime ministers and the Gen Z protests. The bilateral ties with India also witnessed ups and downs during this period. This makes him best placed to explain the challenging political atmosphere in Nepal as well as turbulence in ties with India.

**Shubhajt Roy: In September last year, Nepal experienced violent, nationwide protests known as the Gen Z uprising. What were the political, social and economic reasons that led to it?**

In many developing and the LDC (Least Developed Countries) countries, the unemployment rate is very high. Nepal is no exception, the youth unemployment rate is above 20 per cent. The growth rate in Nepal is around four to five per cent per annum. We have not been able to exceed this for decades. There has been a low growth rate and lack of job opportunities, especially in the formal sector. And now people are more educated, they have gone out, seen the world and seen the development there. That's the second reason. And the third is the corruption that exists in the country because it was like a musical chair between three parties to elect the prime minister. There have been many accusations that many of these political party leaders, including the (then) prime minister, were involved in corruption, that they favoured people of their political party in political appointments. It was a combination of all these things that gave rise to the Gen Z movement and they were able to topple the government.

**Shubhajt Roy: For the first time since 1999, a political party won such a huge and absolute majority in the last elections. (The Rastriya Swatantra Party, led by Balendra 'Balen' Shah won 182 seats in the 275-seat parliament). Is the era of the traditional political parties and the political elite over for now?**

Definitely, it is over for people in Nepal, of a certain age, no doubt. But other political parties can also revive, provided they go to the villages, to the constituency and convince people that they can do a better job. But at this point of time, it's a very difficult task. People forget very easily about whom they voted for and why they voted if they don't see development or any significant change in their lives.

**Shubhajt Roy: We have seen in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, a similar Gen Z revolution that ousted the incumbent government. Do you see similarities or differences between these two countries?**

There were similar challenges in Bangladesh but after the election, things are moving in the right direction. Although people question the participation of political parties. Sri Lanka, too, has made some changes in the political arena and in terms of development activities, they are also catching up. We still have to see that for Nepal. This government would like to do a big bang approach in governance, service delivery as well as reduce corruption. In that perspective, the government had submitted eight ordinances a few days ago. These are all related to the improvement of governance. Which means that, although our parliament session of the budget session is coming soon, the government is saying that they would like to do it as quickly as possible, especially in appointing the right people in the right place. The spirit is very high and the approach is big bang.

**Shubhajt Roy: There's criticism in the Nepalese media and the civil society on ruling by ordinances, and circumventing the parliamentary due process is being questioned.**

What the government and the ruling party is saying is that because we have two houses — the lower house and the national assembly — it will take time to pass the Act because it has to be passed by the lower house, the parliament, and it has to be submitted to the national assembly. What the government and the party is saying is that we cannot wait until then. We would like to start the work right now and show the results. So, that's the reason why we have these ordinances and in the meantime we'll submit them to the parliament.

**Shubhajt Roy: There is an anti-corruption commission that has been set up. Do you think this could lead to witch hunting or political vendetta?**

The investigation of the property — of the undersecretary and above and the political appointees — was done by the government of Nepal once, a long time ago. This is the second time they are doing it. If you cannot show the sources of your property, then you'll have a problem. But I don't think there is any kind of vendetta.

**Shubhajt Roy: You have spent four years here in India. From that time, how do you see the arc of the India-Nepal bilateral relationship?**

In terms of output and outcome, there has been tremendous progress. I am comparing the last 20 years with how much we have achieved in two or three years and it's remarkable. I will give you one or two examples. One is specifically in the area of energy. In 2022, a memorandum of understanding joint vision statement on power sector cooperation was signed between the two governments. And, in 2022, we started exporting about 39 megawatt. But now we are exporting about 1300 megawatt. Next year, hopefully, that will increase by another 40 per cent. We are getting a sig-



### ON THE LIPULEKH PASS DISPUTE

*Regarding trade between India and China, the Nepal government has already protested, stating we must be involved. That is our land and there should be negotiations and they should be addressed trilaterally*



### ON THE END OF THE POLITICAL ELITE

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## 'Nepal would like to balance its foreign policy relationship because we need all our friends'

Shankar Prasad Sharma, outgoing Ambassador of Nepal to India, on the churn in Nepal and what led to the Gen Z uprising, Nepal's bilateral ties with India, and navigating the politics of water and boundaries. The session was moderated by Shubhajt Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*



Shankar Prasad Sharma, outgoing Ambassador of Nepal to India (right), in conversation with Shubhajt Roy, Diplomatic Editor, *The Indian Express*, at the Noida office ABHINAV SAHA

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Firstly, once an issue like the boundary is included in the constitution, nobody can

take it out so easily, regardless of the government. During the first meeting when I arrived in 2022, there was a high-level discussion about this. It was agreed that the existing bilateral mechanism would start a dialogue. That is the best way, through dialogue and diplomacy. Regarding trade between India and China, the Nepal government has already protested, stating we must be involved. There should be negotiations as that is our land and it should be addressed trilaterally.

**Divya A: In the last two years, there have been cartographic disputes, be it about currency notes or the airlines. How is that affecting dialogue?**

Regarding the airlines, that was total negligence. These days, one can Google and find many things, and nobody cared; we suspected that was what happened and it was immediately corrected. Regarding the currency note, we already had the map on the current note but now we have a new map following the new constitution. It was a substitution of the map, according to officials,



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**Shubhajt Roy: Following up on the new map, it was passed by parliament under Prime Minister Oli and it has taken a political messaging that underlines Nepal's territorial integrity. However, from the Indian perspective, it challenges India's territorial integrity and sovereignty. How did you address this issue in bilateral conversations with Indian officials?**

This was already raised at the Prime Minister level. Nepal's Prime Minister raised this issue with the Prime Minister of India in 2022. The embassy and I facilitate instructions from our headquarters because the matter has already reached the highest levels. In any bilateral relationship, if there are certain unpleasant things happening, we should move on, which is what we are trying to do and address challenges diplomatically.

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**Amitabh Sinha: Many Nepalese youth are moving to the Middle East for work. Can you give us a sense of the numbers and how it compares to those coming to India for work?**

More than four million people work outside Nepal, excluding India. Previously, job opportunities were mainly in India, then in the second phase, it moved to the Middle East and Malaysia. Now, there are long lines in Nepal, for police reports, to go to Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Romania and Japan. In Japan, the largest diaspora of workers is from Nepal. In Australia, there are more than 200,000; you might meet a Nepali person every day on the metro or in a taxi. This demographic change has become an opportunity for some. Some European companies specifically prefer Nepali workers. In Japan, too. While this is not a permanent solution — we need to create jobs domestically — it provides an opportunity for the country to diversify our economy because our foreign exchange can now cover 21 months of imports in today's standards. We have a trade deficit with India and pay in dollars but the economy should eventually move toward more domestic production and development.

**Nikhil Ghanekar: How does Nepal want to approach the issue with regards to the Kosi river?**

When we talk about any water project, it becomes political in Nepal. We talk about Pancheshwar (project), this was signed so long ago, we still have not resolved it. About Koshi and Gandak, Nepali people would like to reflect on the history of the earlier agreement between Nepal and India. Although the water is flowing, we are losing time, we are losing money. We should have some good negotiation.

People are saying that now things have changed. The Nepalese, too, have become capable, they can also hire experts and India has also learned many things. If they have made mistakes in the past, they don't want to repeat it. Now is probably a good time to

**Shubhajt Roy: There has been a focus on religious tourism between India and Nepal. Do you think that has moved forward?**

There has been some improvement but it all depends on infrastructure development also. There is a proposal that we should build Raxaul-Kathmandu railway with the support of the Indian government. There is also an expressway from the southern part of Nepal, Nijgadh to Kathmandu, which will be completed soon. We are talking officially about the Buddhist and the Ramayana circuit and twin city concepts, on ayurveda and the Janakpur railway but the progress has been slow probably because of the instability of the government. Hopefully now it will speed up. They are important.

have negotiations on some of these issues.

**Flora Swain: With the new Balen Shah government, how do you see the foreign policy evolving, especially with respect to India?**

Nepal is a developing country with a growth rate between four to five percent. It has difficult terrain, so we need a lot of money for infrastructure and economic development, and because the focus of this new government is on governance, IT, service delivery, we need support from all the countries. Having said that, we have almost every sector of Nepal linked with Indian activities. So, if India is growing at a rate of seven-eight per cent, we could also grow parallelly. It may not happen similarly with other countries. But Nepal would like to balance its foreign policy relationship because we need all our friends.

**Monojit Majumdar: Why exactly has the democratic experiment been so fragile in Nepal? What are the fundamental reasons for instability?**

First of all, the constitution itself. When we included the proportional system of representation in the parliament, 60-40, that created this uncertainty and a coalition government all the time. Although, many are now saying that it is not true because the RSP got almost two-third. The second issue is that our governance has been quite weak. That's the reason why the service delivery part has been affected adversely.

The third part is, we also definitely need to have a higher growth rate. The dilemma in Nepal is that the poverty reduction is substantial, but there is no substantial economic growth.

The manufacturing sector which can create jobs has not become that feasible in Nepal. It has declined from 10 per cent in early 2000 to now 5 per cent plus. When India opened up, when India becomes competitive, when Chinese goods are so cheap, then it's extremely difficult for Nepal to develop manufacturing. There is an open border between India and Nepal, so whatever you do, there will be smuggling. These are some of the reasons that had repercussions on the economy of Nepal. So Nepal needs to seriously work towards structural transformation of the economy.

**Shubhajt Roy: There have been these concerns in Delhi on China's increasing footprint in Nepal, especially when Prime Minister Oli was there. How do you assuage these concerns?**

There are probably two types of concerns. One is Chinese activities which can directly affect India, short term or even medium term. That is reasonable. But if we look at it statistically, China's presence in Nepal is not so strong. Our export to India is 80 per cent but to China is only one per cent. Imports from India is 61 per cent, China is 18 per cent. China is competitive globally, so Chinese goods are everywhere.

I went to the last investment summit in Kathmandu, there were two speakers, one from India and another from China. Both were saying that we are the largest investor in Nepal, but China was saying in terms of commitment, India was saying in terms of stock of investment. Both were right but if we see the real investment in Nepal, it's 35 per cent from India and only 12 per cent from China. Then if we see the number of people working or staying officially in Nepal, there are 7,000 Chinese and 700,000 Indians. And you don't know how many have not registered in the Indian embassy because of the open border. Every plumber, electrician, and house worker in Kathmandu, they come from India. They are cheaper and they work hard, just like what Nepalese do here.

**Neerja Chowdhury: In recent years, uncertainties have crept into Indo-Nepal ties. Where do you think the turning point actually came?**

Economic and development partnership between the two countries have enhanced. Once in a while, political issues erupt.

But what I feel is that given the people-to-people relation, open borders between the two countries, it is not just the integration of markets and development partnership, the existing social integration, cultural and spiritual integration between the two countries will always cement our ties. That's the foundation and that will always strengthen the relationship between the two countries, whatever happens in the government.

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ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY

## Policy adjustments

A sustained deadlock in West Asia will force tough decisions

United States (US) President Donald Trump is not impressed with Iran's latest proposal to end the war. Iran reportedly sent a 14-point proposal through Pakistan, which is mediating between the two sides. Although both sides are negotiating and the ceasefire is holding, it is unclear how long the impasse will continue. Both the US and Iran have blocked the Strait of Hormuz, severely affecting energy supplies. The benchmark Brent crude topped \$125 per barrel last week. Some analysts believe that oil prices could sharply increase in the coming weeks due to the depletion of the global stockpile. The US-Iran deadlock is affecting the global economy. The European Central Bank, for instance, last week noted that upside risks to inflation and downside risks to growth had increased. As a large energy importer, India is also facing multiple challenges.

State-run oil-marketing companies (OMCs) last week sharply increased the price of commercial liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). The prices of a 5-kg LPG cylinder and aviation turbine fuel, too, were adjusted. Notably, the pump prices of petrol and diesel have not increased, though the government reduced special excise duty to ease the burden on OMCs. Last week's price adjustments signal an acknowledgement of the problem and the need for policy recalibration. More needs to be done in the coming days, as neither OMCs nor the government can permanently absorb the elevated costs. Union Expenditure Secretary V Vaidyanathan, for instance, noted last week that fiscal stress was a reality. Government finances will be affected from both the revenue and expenditure sides. The government sacrificed about ₹1.5 trillion in revenue for the full year due to the reduction in excise duty.

Given that the shortage of gas has affected economic activities, tax collection too will be impacted. On the expenditure side, subsidies on fuel and fertilisers could surge, depending on how long the deadlock continues. Nevertheless, despite fiscal pressure, the government seems committed to capital expenditure, which will help sustain growth. However, given the fiscal position, the government's ability to support the economy will remain constrained. Although the fiscal deficit and public debt declined in a major way after the Covid-year jump, they remain elevated. The Union government has budgeted to contain the fiscal deficit at 4.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) this financial year, which will now be difficult to achieve. Projections of the International Monetary Fund show that India's general government debt, currently at about 83 per cent of GDP, will remain above the pre-pandemic level even in 2031.

A significant slippage this year, owing to the ongoing conflict, could adversely affect the debt trajectory and increase risks to macroeconomic stability. Thus, while there will be pressure to provide short-term relief, the government must not lose sight of medium-term risks. It can offset the limited fiscal space by pushing the reform agenda and strengthening medium-term growth prospects. The adjustments in fuel prices will push up the inflation rate, which is currently running below the target of 4 per cent. The forecast of a below-normal monsoon will only complicate things for the Monetary Policy Committee of the Reserve Bank of India. An early resolution to the conflict and the reopening of the strait would obviously ease the pressure. However, if the deadlock persists for a prolonged period, which is a possibility, it would force difficult fiscal and monetary-policy decisions.

## Next digital leap

DPI 2.0 can drive innovation

The first phase of strengthening digital public infrastructure (DPI) in India has solved a foundational problem: Digital identity, financial inclusion, and developing basic state capacity for public service delivery. In this regard, the NITI Aayog's latest road map on DPI marks a shift in India's digital strategy, from building access to engineering economic outcomes. Recognising that India's growth constraints are structural — including fragmented demand, high transaction costs, thin credit markets, and persistent informality — the proposed DPI framework aims to embed digital infrastructure directly into economic sectors. DPI 2.0 envisions a set of eight targeted sectoral transformations. For micro, small, and medium enterprises, this means enabling enterprises to move from local, informal operations to networked, formal market participation. In agriculture, it means improving price discovery and value realisation through data-driven systems. In credit, it involves turning data on invoices, transactions, and land into collateral substitutes, potentially expanding formal finance to millions currently excluded. Thus, across sectors, DPI can reduce friction, make information verifiable, and expand market access.

Further, instead of relying only on centralised platforms such as Aadhaar and Unified Payments Interface, it emphasises open and interoperable networks. Thus, the state's role shifts from being a provider to a market enabler, creating shared infrastructure, while leaving innovation to entrepreneurs. The emphasis on district-level execution is equally significant. It recognises that scaling up DPI 2.0 will require a significant expansion of the entrepreneurial base, potentially up to a million startups by the next decade. Thus, artificial intelligence (AI) should not be leveraged as a job-displacing force but as a capability multiplier. According to a Nasscom report referenced by NITI, DPI initiatives already contribute about 1 per cent to GDP, and this could reach 4 per cent by 2030. More importantly, it is expected to drive total factor productivity, enabling economic growth as network effects deepen. There is also a strategic dimension. By lowering transaction costs and improving domestic efficiency, DPI could act as a buffer against external shocks, from volatility in energy prices to geopolitical disruption.

Yet constraints remain. India's local innovation capacity remains uneven, particularly outside major urban centres. Data systems are fragmented, raising challenges for interoperability and trust. AI readiness is limited, with a gap between pilots and real-world deployment. Institutional capacity, especially at state and district levels, may prove the biggest bottleneck in translating design into outcomes. Without addressing these, the risk is that DPI will remain an impressive architecture with uneven real-economy impact. There is also a deeper tension. The push towards productivity and market efficiency must not overshadow the social foundations of development. Digital systems can enable access, but they cannot be a substitute for investment in health, education and building human capability. Addressing these gaps, while safeguarding trust, competition, and openness, will remain crucial. The success of DPI 2.0 will, therefore, depend not only on how well it builds markets but on whether it ensures that more citizens are able to participate meaningfully in them.



## Intent and outcome

The experience with local area banks and RNBFCs should have offered some lessons

With the decision of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to cancel the licence of Paytm Payments Bank, it is necessary for us to look at the multiple initiatives of the RBI, the intent of the initiative, and how it was designed. This will give us an idea of why there could be a slip between the proverbial cup and the lip. One never gets what one intends to unless the design favours the intent. Let us discuss three initiatives for now.

In the mid-1990s, as banking opened up for the private sector, the RBI came up with guidelines to open local area banks (LABs). These LABs were expected to have three contiguous districts as the area of operations, could open only one branch in each of the district headquarters, and all other branches were to be in villages and semi-urban areas. It had lower capital requirements. LABs were an alternative to the private sector in competing with regional rural banks (RRBs), which started in 1975. The objectives of both RRBs and LABs were primarily market development, commercial returns being the secondary objective.

The result was familiar. There were multiple applicants. Of the 10 in-principle licences given, only six started operations. Of the six, two continue today. The question, therefore, is whether the design of LABs (with restrictions in the area of operations) appropriate? The data till then did not indicate that RRBs, operating in a similar format, had cracked the code and were profitable enough to attract private-sector investment. Even now, the experiment of having a restricted area is successful

only in places where economic activity is vibrant. Such a format is squarely in the arena of the state. The state can recapitalise these banks and keep them going even if they are not achieving commercial returns because of the objective of "market development".

At the same time, the market does not operate on development principles. This would be evident from how eager the market would be to seek licences for new banks. While the RBI did not issue any further licences for LABs, the two fledgling banks continue as a separate category, adding to the regulatory burden. It is time the RBI acknowledged that the LAB experiment failed, and merged these banks with an interested party. In this case, the design flaw was in putting a profit-maximising model in a market that is constrained: Geographical constraints in growth, high concentration, and co-variance risks.

The state can absorb such risks, but the markets cannot. With the consolidation of the RRBs and moving to one state-one RRB, we see that even the state is unwilling to absorb the costs of market development, and would prefer cross-subsidising it by giving it a larger area of operations.

The second model is payments banks. These do not have a clear revenue model. They can collect deposits from the public but cannot lend. They have to make money by investing. In one sense they are like mutual funds but without the flexibility of playing the markets because they are "banks". The



REPROSPECT  
M S SRIRAM



IRRATIONAL CHOICE  
DEBASHIS BASU

## China: FDI caution & import reliance

India on March 10 relaxed the rules governing foreign direct investment (FDI) from countries with which it shares land borders. The regime — known as Press Note 3 — was introduced in April 2020, ostensibly to prevent opportunistic takeovers during the pandemic but in practice it was aimed squarely at China. The latest relaxation allows investors a non-controlling stake of up to 10 per cent to use the automatic route, dispensing with prior government approval. Officials say the change will improve the ease of doing business, boost inflows, and deepen integration into global supply chains. That is wishful thinking. Chinese FDI does not consider India an attractive destination. What China does consider attractive, however, is India as a huge export market for its products.

On April 8, Xu Feihong, Chinese ambassador to India, posted on X: "Glad to know that China has become India's largest trading partner in FY2026 — for the 11th straight month." This was great news for China but not for India. The \$151.1 billion trade between the two comprised \$131.63 billion of exports from China to India and a meagre \$19.47 billion of imports from India. It was a one-way street. China was flooding Indian markets even as it became India's "largest trading partner".

These two pieces of information on trade and investment tell us how asymmetric China-India economic relations are. India makes minor tweaks to its FDI rules while China doubles down on its exports. India must import electronics and electrical equipment (\$40 billion-50 billion), machinery (\$27 billion), organic chemicals (\$12 billion-13 billion), plastics, steel, medical equipment, and so on from China every year. These are critical products without which the Indian economy would not be able to function. Alternative sources exist for some, but at a much steeper price. Moreover, China has diversified its supply sources, so

even if not directly from it, Chinese goods would still reach India through Southeast Asian and other manufacturing bases.

With a cumulative overseas investment stock of \$3 trillion-3.5 trillion and annual outflows in the range of \$160 billion-190 billion, China is a major FDI player across every region. Asia absorbs close to 70 per cent of China's outward investment stock — roughly \$2 trillion-2.2 trillion — largely into Southeast Asia, where Chinese firms have transplanted entire manufacturing ecosystems, particularly in electronics, textiles, electric vehicles, and intermediate goods. Latin America is the second major destination, with a cumulative Chinese investment estimated at \$300 billion-500 billion. Europe, while smaller in share, has still absorbed between \$100 billion and \$200 billion. Africa, though accounting for a smaller share — perhaps \$50 billion-100 billion — occupies a strategic position. West Asia, meanwhile, has attracted multi-billion-dollar annual investment in energy, petrochemicals, and, increasingly, renewables.

Chinese FDI in India amounts to a trivial \$2.51 billion, or 0.32 per cent of India's cumulative equity inflows, since 2000. Even if one broadens the definition to include venture-capital investment and indirect flows routed through third countries, the total rises only to \$15 billion-20 billion. The reason is simple: India cannot make up its mind whether it wants Chinese FDI, which it suspects could undermine its sovereignty and weaken its self-sufficiency plank. China's outward investment is frequently intertwined with industrial and geopolitical objectives. Dependence in critical sectors — whether batteries, telecom equipment, or active pharmaceutical ingredients — can translate into vulnerability, especially in periods of geopolitical stress. But caution, hesitancy, and irrelevant policy

only fee income they could get is from remittances, which have been killed by Unified Payments Interface (UPI). Therefore, why did 42 entities submit an application for the banking licence? Possibly the underlying idea was that the transaction data could be used to generate leads for others to lend. The revenue model was "data" rather than "pure-play banking".

This is complex, with evolving norms on data use, predatory lending, and data privacy. No wonder even as 11 licences were issued, three players soon withdrew. Of the remaining eight, we have five players continuing, with one trying to convert itself into a small finance bank (SFB). The others are deeply embedded in their other conglomerate businesses and cannot even hope to become an SFB. The only standalone player is trying to be an SFB.

In the case of payments banks, it was evident that the business model was never core transactions with the customer. This model was bound to be under stress and eventually fail. While it was termed a solution for payments, it offered no better service than that of any payment aggregator and there were better and safer places for public deposits.

After having residuary non-banking financial companies (RNBFCs; Sahara being the most prominent among them) for decades before shutting them down, the RBI should have gained from that experience. Payments banks were no different from RNBFCs on one side of the business — taking deposits. But in the case of RNBFCs, the rules required them to invest 80 per cent of the deposits collected in safe government paper, thus giving six months' float and 20 per cent of the deposits to lend and earn. Organisations like Sahara also depended on poor clients forfeiting their deposits for non-compliance with rules, which gave them additional buffer. Payments banks did not even have the advantage of this grey zone!

The third business where the RBI showed agility to regulate was the peer-to-peer (P2P) lending model. Again, there is no business sense in a P2P platform unless it is used as a data base. P2P platforms are supposed to be clearing houses between lenders (savers) and borrowers and the intermediation is purely data and assessment. That means an individual investor is taking a call on lending to someone she does not know, based on the information provided by an intermediary, who is passing on the risk of default to the lender (saver) for a fee. How does this model make sense at scale?

While experimentation is welcome and we should try interesting new models. As regulator, the RBI should possibly go back to an old-fashioned question: How does it work? Is it simple enough for a large number of people to understand? Is the revenue model obvious, or is it shrouded in something else? With the announcement of Saksham, a new initiative to increase the capacities of cooperative banks, the fear is that the RBI might also open up fresh licences for new cooperative banks. We will review this a decade later! Sometimes it is possibly better to be old-fashioned.

The author is professor, Centre for Public Policy, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore

## Boris Nemtsov, a Russian road not taken



DAVID KORTAVA

The lurking question behind this searching, propulsive, 778-page biography of an internationally obscure Russian politician is this: What kind of world would exist today if the cosmopolitan liberal democrat Boris Nemtsov, and not Vladimir Putin, had succeeded Boris Yeltsin to run the country?

These are the stakes set out by the veteran Russian journalist Mikhail Fishman in *The Successor*, translated into English with a new prologue. For Fishman, Nemtsov embodies the promise of the free, democratic Russia. Had he fulfilled his destiny, there might not be fighting in Ukraine, with the spectre of

World War III.

Nemtsov was "a tall, sexy, curly-haired, handsome playboy," Fishman writes, seven years younger than Putin and a physicist by training. He developed a taste for politics in the 1980s when his mother began attending anti-nuclear protests in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster.

By 1991, he had become the 32-year-old governor of Nizhny Novgorod, transforming the province by privatising collective farms, giving free rein to reporters and spurring a boom in new housing and road construction.

By 37, he was one of Yeltsin's first deputy prime ministers and an heir apparent to the presidency. Several factors converged to check Nemtsov's ascent, but the main reason was the 1998 financial crisis, when the Russian state, unable to collect taxes to offset a drop in oil revenues, defaulted on its debt. Inflation devastated the country and brought '90s optimism to a screeching halt.

Facing a public disillusioned with

reforms and a resurgent Communist Party, Yeltsin changed direction. With two years until the presidential election, he sought out a different kind of successor, someone seen as tough and untainted by the policy missteps of the "wild '90s." The very conditions that pushed Nemtsov out of the limelight drew in a little-known bureaucrat and former KGB officer named Vladimir Putin.

Some, including Nemtsov, initially believed that Putin would stay the course, toward the West. Many more viewed Putin through the prism of national redemption, the iron hand that would restore the country to greatness. Nemtsov never again found his footing in national politics, except as a thorn in Putin's side. He started a reformist electoral bloc that never quite took off, organised rallies, documented the Kremlin's crimes, filed complaints with the European Court of Human Rights and lobbied Western

governments to sanction Russian propagandists.

In 2013, he ran for a seat in a provincial legislature, and won the seat, a modest perch for a former deputy prime minister, kindling the dying embers of liberalism in Russia.

For his impudence, state media insinuated that Nemtsov was an agent of the US State Department. Pro-Kremlin youth activists pelted his car with dildos, stink-bombed his public appearances and threw Coke mixed with ammonia in his face. The authorities detained him repeatedly, and Putin's allies subjected him to spurious lawsuits.

In 2014, he felt so dejected that he abandoned Russia for Israel, only to return after a few weeks. The next year, Nemtsov was murdered at the hands of assassins with ties to Ramzan Kadyrov,



THE SUCCESSOR: Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Putin and the Decline of Modern Russia by Mikhail Fishman Translated by Michele A Berdy Published by Pushkin Press 778 pages \$40

the Chechen leader and Putin loyalist.

So had Yeltsin kept his nerve and stood by Nemtsov, a protégé he once regarded "like a son," would Russia now be a fully-fledged liberal democracy, a normal European country on good terms with its neighbours?

Almost certainly not. It's the larger forces that propel individuals to positions of power, and the currents of history favoured a despot. "Nemtsov probably would not have become president of Russia," he writes. "He was carried aloft by the revolution at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. A few years later, he was already too free and too idealistic for

the times." He ended the Russian edition of *The Successor*, which was published two weeks before the Ukraine war, on an optimistic note. "The ideals underpinning Nemtsov's Russia will be in demand at the next turn of history —

and they will help ensure that the story has a good ending."

That hopeful coda has been struck from the English edition. "Is this other future still possible?" Fishman writes in a new prologue. "I still believe that today, although I am not sure that I will still be here when it happens."

After a quarter-century of escalating repression, any democratic alternative to Putin has been jailed, killed or hounded out of the country. And the Russian public, subjected to relentless propaganda, doesn't appear to think a different kind of politics is possible, or even desirable.

And yet, as Russians know well, political change often happens gradually, and then all at once. Fishman struggles to conjure his brighter counterfactual, even as a fantasy. Still, he was right before: Putin can physically rid the country of Nemtsov, Navalny and indeed Fishman, but ideas can't be shot, poisoned or forced into exile. The seeds Nemtsov and Navalny planted may yet mature, in their own time.

The reviewer is an editor at *Foreign Affairs* ©2026 The New York Times News Service

OUR VIEW



# A gas rethink could help fend off a food shortage

Europe must start buying Russian piped gas again to relieve demand pressure on global LNG supply—and let more of it be used to make fertilizer. This could even pre-empt a hunger crisis

The blockade of the Strait of Hormuz has disrupted not just oil and gas supplies, but caused a global fertilizer shock as well. Of the world's traded fertilizers, more than 40% of urea and 20-30% of potassic and phosphatic fertilizers—as well as 45% of the sulphur that goes into fertilizer manufacture—are shipped from Gulf countries via that vital waterway. The blocked region also accounted for a fifth of all traded liquefied natural gas (LNG), some of which was feedstock for urea, before traffic through the strait came to halt. A shortage of all these products threatens food production and signals higher food prices globally, with hunger a distinct likelihood in countries that rely on imports for nutrition. Since energy and food are essentials, supply shocks in these two categories tend to have a ripple effect that leads to elevated inflation. That, in turn, would induce monetary policy responses that could dampen investment, economic growth and incomes, thus tilting many parts of the world towards misery on more than one front. Gulf fertilizer exports are not easy to substitute. But it would help if the world does whatever is possible to boost the availability of natural gas for the production of urea, its most widely used fertilizer. This can be done if Europe takes action.

The impact of the US-Israel war against Iran on oil and gas prices has differed. Brent and West Texas Intermediate, the two major global indices of oil prices, have risen by 55-70% since hostilities began on 28 February, while Henry Hub prices for US domestic gas have nudged up only 8-12%, even as European LNG prices rose some 20%—mainly a result of Qatar's Ras Laffan gas facility going out of service. The dif-

ference in price responses stems from the extent to which each commodity is globally traded. For gas, geographical proximity and pipeline infrastructure matter more. Gas can either be transported through pipelines or shipped after being liquefied and loaded onto specialized cold tankers. The US gas market is relatively isolated, while Europe has in recent years been sourcing LNG from America as well as Qatar in the Gulf to replace its pipeline imports from Russia. This shift followed the Ukraine war's outbreak in 2022. Now with Gulf shipments disrupted, Europe should revert to using Russian gas. This would relieve the global LNG market of European demand and make this form of gas that much cheaper as an input for urea production elsewhere.

As a geopolitical decision, it should not be all that hard for Europe to suspend its boycott of Russian piped gas so that the LNG it imports is freed for fertilizer production. It would combine wisdom with self-interest. Till some years ago, Russia used to pump gas into Europe through seven pipelines. Some of these lie damaged but most are reckoned to be usable. The Turkstream pipeline that runs from Russia to Turkey and thence to Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary, for example, carries plenty of Russian gas. The US-led West recently showed a pragmatic streak in its sanctions on Iran to help the world absorb the latest energy shock. The same spirit could ease its clamps on Russian gas. If not, Europe could find itself faced with another wave of migrants looking for a place to live where food sufficiency isn't a daily struggle. This prospect should help focus the minds of European politicians on the value of acting against a fertilizer crisis while there's still time to avert its worst effects.

MANU JOSEPH



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

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to accept that the business class was their employer class. They regained their composure when they spotted the flight attendants and screamed only at them. It is an odd thing about people that no matter what their theories of revolution might be, in the real world, they first blame their equals for their misery.

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Some people love the idea of being seen in it; that awkward moment when economy passengers shuffle past. I am fairly confident that they would love it if a bold airline configured business class seats facing the economy class, with no prissy curtains. But the joy of inequality is a small part of the price. The value of business class largely comes from the misery of not having it. And the misery of economy class comes from the existence of business class. This is why people pay the price of a small car for a business class seat, and no amount of improvements in coach can save passengers from it.

I was reminded of all this when Air New

Zealand recently announced it would be introducing bunk beds in economy—six of them, available in four-hour slots for \$500. This, especially for its price, does not address the actual problem with coach—the very existence of business class. A sense of impoverishment is not an absolute condition; it is a relative experience. It is created by the visible fact that some people have a better life. That is why the argument that the modern poor are better off than medieval royalty is useless as a response to inequality. Every era and region has its own definition of poverty; and every aircraft too.

In a world where nobody had invented the flatbed and there were only economy seats, people would be generally content and uncomfortable. If airliners only had flat beds and no coach, air travel would be only for the rich. It is the mixing of classes within a vessel that fills a mediocre chair with meaning and makes people react in complex ways.

Former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, a self-declared Marxist who speaks

passionately about equality, found himself flying first class (more than once) and wrote about his shame. This kind of shame confuses me. One, you generally discover you are flying first class long before you reach the airport. Also, in the face of such unbearable shame, the easiest thing to do is exchange your seat with me, or, okay, a pregnant woman.

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MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

# Pakistan's war diplomacy on Iran won't improve its own prospects

It may relieve today's crisis but will not stop the military-jihadi complex from tightening its grip



**NITIN PAI** is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy.

Pakistan has stepped up to play a useful role in mediating between the United States and Iran in attempting to bring the latest West Asian war to an end. It should not surprise us that the Pakistani establishment, which has a culture of geopolitical risk-taking, has turned adversity into an opportunity.

Not only does the continuation of the war mean economic disaster, there is a real chance that Pakistani armed forces can be summoned to a war that they do not want to fight. Saudi Arabia has already invoked their mutual defence pact to station 13,000 troops and a squadron of combat aircraft on its soil.

If these forces are deployed in combat, Iran could decide to attack targets in Pakistan, as it has done across the Persian Gulf. That would add one more conflict to the two—with Afghanistan and India—that Pakistan is already engaged in.

It's a bad situation to be in, but Pakistan's military and civilian leadership has invested serious political capital in meeting the challenge head on. As ironic as it is to see the Pakistani army attempt a regional peace initiative, we should hope it succeeds.

A quick end to this war is categorically in India's interests. We need not be churlish in giving credit where it is due and appreciating the current Paki-

stani diplomatic endeavour.

Beyond that, the question for us in India is what will Pakistan do with the international goodwill that it is receiving thanks to its newfound role as a peacemaker? Now miracles are possible in a complex world and the Pakistani establishment could discover that being a responsible actor is far better than being an international troublemaker and decide to turn over a new leaf. It would, however, be foolhardy to count on such an outcome.

It is far more likely that Pakistan's trajectory will follow a pattern that has been recurring since its creation. That goes something like this: Global politics creates an opportunity for Pakistan, relieving the immediate economic crisis; the military establishment then corners the lion's share of the benefits and the economy gets worse; the military takes up its anti-India agenda and in the ensuing crisis, Pakistan goes back into the international doghouse.

This happened in the 1950s when Field Marshal Ayub Khan joined the American camp in the then-unfolding Cold War; in the 1980s when General Zia-ul-Haq made Pakistan serve Washington's interests in the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan; in the 2000s after General Pervez Musharraf threw in Pakistan's lot with America's war on the Taliban; and in the 2010s when General Qamar Javed Bajwa hitched Pakistan's wagon to the service of a different principal, this time China and its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Belt and Road Initiative.

Each time, Pakistan benefited by offering its geopolitical services to a big power. Each time, the engagement with a global power bailed Pakistan out of the economic mess that it found itself in. And each time, Pakistan was unable to fundamentally transform itself for the better because the military-jihadi complex used the financial and political benefits to strengthen its own hold on power and policy.

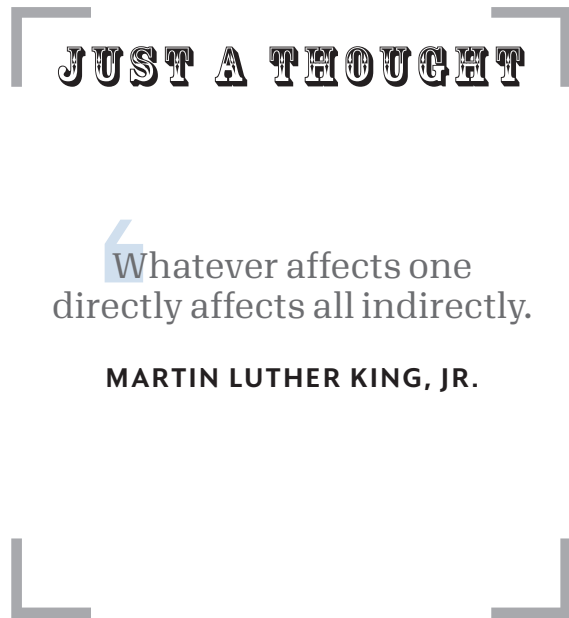
It neither has the inclination nor competence to carry out the structural economic reforms necessary to take Pakistan away from dependency to development. Despite tens of billions of dollars in foreign aid since the 1950s, it also received 24 International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailouts since 1947, roughly once every three years.

Pakistan now needs about \$20 billion in external financing to avoid a balance of payments crisis. Of this, around \$17 billion is expected from debt rollovers from China, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, IMF and other multilateral sources, leaving it nearly \$3 billion short. The government's biggest expenditure is debt servicing, which amounts to 7% of GDP. To manage its fiscal deficit, it needs to reduce its debt repayments, cut its defence budget or raise tax revenues. Lenders won't permit the first, the military-jihadi establishment won't allow the second and the elite will not accept the third.

For now, even if Pakistan were to succeed in helping the US and Iran make a deal, it is unclear how it will secure enough money to avoid economic turmoil. It will need \$170 million for every dollar increase in crude oil prices. This is in addition to the minimum of \$3 billion a year it will need if all its foreign lenders agree to roll over debt.

A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that a Pakistani general who explicitly takes power faces a crisis in an average of four years and becomes a lame-duck in eight. The distribution is bimodal though: generals who inherit instability (Yahya Khan, Musharraf and Asim Munir) meet their first crisis in around two years. Coups following relative stability (Ayub Khan and Zia) get around seven years before things get very messy.

If Field Marshal Munir survives the current upheavals, we can expect him to stick around for nearly a decade, and during this time, he will try to get his own shy at the Indian stumps.



MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

# What the business-class seat tells us about inequality

MANU JOSEPH



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

The best business class flight I have ever taken was with Air India. As the flight was taxiing for take-off, it stopped on the tarmac. There was a snag, and we had to stay in the aircraft. It was over 40° Celsius outside. Peak Delhi summer. As though in apology, the cabin crew began serving a meal. At the time I didn't realize the service was only in business class. There was wine too. After an hour, I heard commotion from the economy cabin. They were sweating as there was no air conditioning. Odd, I hadn't noticed. The screams informed me they were hungry and thirsty too. A person had fainted. What a close shave for me, I thought. But then menacing voices grew.

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MY VIEW | STAT-CRAFT

MINT CURATOR

# Oh, Bengal! The state may have another opportunity to reboot

Its newly elected government should pursue all-round development and help the state fulfil the high potential it clearly has



**RAJESH SHUKLA**  
is managing director and chief executive officer of People Research on India's Consumer Economy.



The political dust may have settled as West Bengal gears up for a new government, but the more profound questions are still to be settled. Elections offer the promise of renewal; governance must deliver it. For a state with such an intellectual legacy and political significance, the challenge is not winning elections, but turning stability into enduring gains in the well-being of its people.

Data provides a note of caution and opportunity. The economic and social profile of West Bengal has changed marginally over the last decade. Based on PRICE's ICE 360° surveys, almost 20% of households are in the destitute category, whereas more than half are aspirers, struggling to achieve stable upward mobility. The growth of middle class and affluent households has been modest. The state ranks high nationally in total households, but also in poverty. This duality encapsulates Bengal's perennial paradox: resilience without progress.

The sharpest manifestation of this contradiction is Kolkata. The city is the economic and social hub of the state. West Bengal's share of wealthy households plunges by almost 80% if Kolkata is removed from the picture. But inequality is increasingly defining Kolkata. It is a hub of growth but a magnet for deprivation too, reflecting the state's uneven distribution of opportunity.

This overreliance on one metropolitan engine is not simply an economic issue. It is a structural weakness. A forward-looking agenda must prioritize the decentralization of growth. For emerging urban centres like Siliguri, Durgapur Asansol and Kharagpur, continuous investment in infrastructure, industry and human capital is necessary. Lack of multiple growth poles can lead to a situation where opportunity is concentrated, migration increases and regional disparities grow further.

An equally urgent challenge comes from rural Bengal. Almost half of the poor households are located in emerging and left-behind rural areas. While urban poverty often grabs headlines, rural stagnation quietly undermines long-term progress. Agriculture has been productive in the state historically, but this is no longer sufficient as a principal source of livelihood. There is a need for diversification into agro-processing, rural manufacturing and services. It is also crucial to improve physical and digital connectivity between rural economies and larger markets.

The next key pillar is education and skills. Bengal has a good education legacy, but the current outcomes are patchy. Schooling and employability are weakly linked, especially for first-generation learners. A focus on vocational training, aligned to the needs of industry, can unlock the potential of its large aspirer segment. It's not only an economic imperative but a social one. Upward mobility

should be more predictable and less tied to geography or social background.

Healthcare is another area where we need to move from incremental change to systemic reform. The pandemic brought out the strengths and weaknesses of public health systems across India. In West Bengal, improving access to primary healthcare, enhancing district-level facilities and investing in preventive care can greatly improve quality of life. Improving health outcomes will also raise productivity.

Industrial policy has long been a contentious issue in the state and a pragmatic reset is needed. Investment has been deterred by land acquisition conflicts and regulatory uncertainty, with their baggage of history. But the new national and global context that is emerging, with supply chain reconfigurations, offers a new chance. West Bengal's strategic advantage lies in its location, sharing borders with several countries and being a gateway to the Northeast. To tap this, we need clear policies, simplified approvals and a partnership mindset with industry. You cannot grow without private investment and trust is the currency of that.

That brings us to the most understated but perhaps most critical issue, the state's relationship with the Centre. Political differences are inevitable in a federal structure, but long-term friction has real costs. Fund flows are delayed, projects get stalled and policy misalignment all adversely affect citizens, not governments. A mature governance approach would stress cooperation where it can be done, even across ideological divides. Competitive federalism should not be turned into confrontational federalism.

We also must speak about social cohesion. Bengal is proud of its cultural pluralism and intellectual openness. Maintaining this ethos is a moral imperative and an economic one. Societies that are diverse and inclusive tend to be more innovative and resilient. Hence, development strategies must be inclusive by design to ensure that growth does not widen existing inequalities.

Finally, governance itself has to change. Transparency, data-driven decision-making and citizen engagement are no longer optional. They are crucial. The income distribution has changed relatively slowly in recent years, suggesting that current policies are not without effect but not enough. Course correction requires an honest assessment, not rhetorical assertions. Outcomes should drive accountability and metrics should drive policy.

The new government in West Bengal inherits a state that is neither in crisis nor on an upward trajectory. It is at a crossroads between incrementalism and transformation. The policy choice is not between politics and governance but between short-term optics and long-term results.

'Oh, Calcutta!' has long been an exclamation of nostalgia and complexity. Today, it can also be a call to re-imagine not just the city but the state that it anchors. West Bengal can move from being a story of contradictions to one of convergence if the next phase of governance can reduce dependence on a single metro, energize rural economies, invest in human capital and foster cooperative federalism. The voting is over. And so the real work begins, as always.

# Warsh's silence on maximizing employment should worry us

The next chair's view seems unclear on this part of the Fed's dual mandate



**CLAUDIA SAHM**  
is the chief economist at New Century Advisors and a former Federal Reserve economist.



How Kevin Warsh will weigh employment against inflation is not yet known. REUTERS

At his confirmation hearing last week, Kevin Warsh [US President Donald Trump's nominee for Federal Reserve Chair] dodged questions about interest rates, tariffs and the 2020 election. As his nomination to be chair of the Federal Reserve heads toward confirmation after clearing the Senate Banking Committee Wednesday, it's worth focusing on an equally troubling gap in his public record: his near silence on anything related to employment.

Warsh gave a perfunctory nod to the Federal Reserve's dual mandate—price stability and maximum employment—in last week's testimony, but while he extensively discussed the former, he essentially ignored the latter.

The two goals, enshrined in law in 1977, are coequal under the statute, but in practice, the Fed has historically given precedence to price stability. As Fed Chair Paul Volcker put it in 1981: "We will not be successful, in my opinion, in pursuing a full employment policy unless we take care of the inflation side of the equation."

Over the past 20 years, the Fed has moved away from that inflation-first view, building a more rigorous understanding of what maximum employment means and how to pursue it.

As he is when it comes to much of what the Fed does, Warsh is a vocal critic of the Fed's thinking on maximum employment. In a speech he gave a year ago, he charged that, by describing maximum employment "as a broad-based and inclusive goal," the Fed had "redefined its legislative remit" and signalled "a willingness to accept higher inflation so that certain groups would achieve higher rates of employment." That reading gets both the Fed and the labour market wrong.

"Broad-based and inclusive" reflects US labour market dynamics, not a plan to be soft on inflation. The reality of maximum employment is that the last worker hired before inflation heats up does not look like the first.

For example, the African-American unemployment rate is almost always twice the Caucasian unemployment rate—except late in an economic expansion. At the first sign of softening, the gap reopens. Employment rates also differ markedly by gender, class, education and other characteristics.

Acknowledging those patterns is not "mission creep," as Warsh often asserts. It is simply describing characteristics of the labour market the Fed is charged with maximizing.

MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM

# The e-rupee's adolescent stage needs careful handling

RAJRISHI SINGHAL



is a senior journalist and author of 'Slip, Stitch and Stumble: The Untold Story of India's Financial Sector Reforms' @rajrishisinghal

This year's first monetary policy meeting revealed an interesting data point on an emerging monetary product, an element that is bound to influence monetary systems and policies, including global payment systems. Its development has been characterized by caution, and while it is still some distance away from becoming widely accepted, its use-case scenarios present policy and regulatory challenges.

India's central bank digital currency (CBDC), or e-rupee, is finally emerging from the shadows. It is being tested in the domestic economy through managed programmes. But it will face its toughest test as a cross-border payment tool. As many developed and developing economies mount a challenge to dollar dominance, the e-rupee will invariably be seen as a strategic tool in these geo-economic power struggles.

But, before unpacking all that, take a look at a global CBDC tracker, housed in the Washington DC headquarters of think-tank Atlantic Council. The tracker's July 2025

report had found after scanning CBDC pilot projects across the globe that India's e-rupee was the world's second-largest CBDC pilot, behind only the digital yuan. Digital rupee in circulation had reached ₹1,016.5 crore by March 2025, up 334% over ₹234 crore in March 2024. While the figure for March 2026 is not available, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) deputy governor T. Rabi Sankar provided an update last month: "As far as users are concerned, they are increasing gradually, now there are 1 crore users, there have been nearly 15 crore total transactions of about ₹34,000 crore..."

The deputy governor's update indicates an increase in usage, both at the retail and wholesale levels. While some retail uses may have been introduced for India's CBDC, it is perhaps a bit early to transact in this currency freely at your local supermarket. The e-rupee's impact on the monetary system is also limited at the moment. A recent research note from State Bank of India noted that it is limited to 0.03% of the total currency in circulation.

At the same time, it is also unlikely that the rupee CBDC will go fully retail. Speaking on the sidelines of the Fund-Bank meetings in October 2025, RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra had categorically stated that its CBDC

was not that vital for the domestic economy because India already had an effective, fast and cheap payment system in the popular Unified Payments Interface. "CBDC actually is the answer for cross-border payments. We need to promote the CBDC because this has huge advantages over stablecoins. It is fiat."

There are two ways to understand this duality of domestic and yet-not-domestic characteristic. At one level, some CBDCs issued for use in the domestic economy come programmed for use within specified limits. The government and RBI are jointly testing CBDCs, programmed for specific end-uses, such as benefit transfers. For example, a CBDC distributed for food programmes can be used only at some designated ration shops or for a farm subsidy at select fertiliser outlets, allowing for a modicum of usage tracking. Many other central banks are also making their CBDCs programmable.

On the other hand, CBDCs issued to the general public outside the pale of benefit

transfers will have to adhere to the commitment of greater privacy protection. This is likely to result in two types of CBDCs circulating in the system: one where the central bank has some idea of usage and the other where there might be some veil of secrecy. This could potentially lead to complications.

**It must foster trust in currency and payment systems while balancing privacy with regulation**

What compounds the complications is the nature of the veil—probably more translucent than opaque. Welcome to the other feature of Indian CBDCs: intermediation. Under this, RBI will mint the CBDC and distribute it electronically to banks and non-banks which, in turn, will be responsible for on-boarding customers and transferring CBDCs to their e-wallets. Customers can use these CBDCs as currency for payment to individuals or merchants. There are some misgivings about the line-of-sight that intermediaries will have over their customers' spending patterns.

These tricky questions will remain unresolved till the e-rupee is in pilot stage, with RBI continuing to test the technology, archi-

ture, scalability, acceptance and use cases. These tests and use-cases will finally determine the guardrails RBI decides to erect around the digital rupee in the domestic economy. But the real test for the digital rupee will probably come from its cross-border usage.

It is well known that CBDCs hold the potential for rapid de-dollarization. Atlantic Council's tracker shows at least 15 cross-border CBDC projects. RBI has already engaged bilaterally with Singapore and the United Arab Emirates to test the e-rupee's interoperability with other currencies. RBI has also joined multilateral projects launched by the Bank for International Settlements. This profusion of cross-border projects will need to be watched closely, making demands on RBI to choose carefully.

There is a larger problem: cross-border CBDCs remain experimental while international usage of cryptos and stablecoins has been increasing apace, reviving concerns over a resurgence of money laundering and financing of terrorism. And, yet, the bar for any central bank like RBI is set high—any technological solution must continue to foster trust and integrity in official money and settlement systems, balancing privacy with regulatory intent.

# Opinion

MONDAY, MAY 4, 2026



● **SPACE JOURNEY**  
Prime Minister Narendra Modi

“The successful launch of the world's first OptoSAR satellite and the largest privately-built satellite in India is a testament to our youth's passion for innovation and nation-building”

## RBI has spoken, finally

The regulator must now enforce its mandate on Tata Sons listing as clarity now demands action

**A**FTER MONTHS OF studied silence, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has finally broken cover on the vexed question of Tata Sons and its proposed listing. The clarification issued last week may not have come in the form of an explicit directive, but its implications are hard to miss. The regulatory fog that allowed multiple interpretations now appears to be lifting—and what is emerging is a far narrower pathway for Tata Sons than it may have hoped for. Classified earlier as an upper-layer non-banking financial company (NBFC), Tata Sons was required under RBI norms to list within a stipulated time frame. That deadline lapsed in September last year. In the interim, the company sought to sidestep the mandate by applying to surrender its core investment company registration, arguing in effect that it should no longer fall within the regulatory perimeter that triggers a listing requirement. For months, the absence of a clear response from the regulator allowed this interpretation to linger.

That ambiguity has now been substantially reduced. The RBI's clarification, though couched in technical language, suggests that regulatory obligations cannot simply be wished away through procedural manoeuvres. The principle appears straightforward: classification brings with it consequences, and those consequences cannot be indefinitely deferred by seeking an exit after the fact. Legal opinion may still vary on finer points, but from a regulatory standpoint, the direction of travel is clear. Tata Sons has very limited leeway left to avoid listing. This is as it should be. At stake is not merely the compliance posture of one of India's most respected business groups, but the credibility of the regulatory architecture itself. The upper-layer framework was designed to ensure that entities with significant financial intermediation roles are subject to enhanced transparency, governance, and market discipline. Allowing a prominent entity to effectively opt out after the rules have been triggered would risk undermining that entire framework.

There is also a question of regulatory fairness that cannot be ignored. Other entities classified in the upper layer have complied with the listing mandate within the prescribed timelines. Any prolonged forbearance in one case risks appearing inequitable, leaving the RBI open to criticism that it is dragging its feet simply because a large conglomerate is involved. Regulations derive their authority from uniform application; once exceptions—real or perceived—creep in, the framework begins to fray. There is, moreover, a broader governance argument in favour of listing. Tata Sons sits atop a vast and complex corporate structure, controlling some of India's largest listed companies. Bringing the holding company itself to the market would improve transparency, enable better price discovery, and align governance standards across the group. Two senior-most Tata trustees have also recently reversed their earlier posture of no-listing.

That brings us to the RBI's role going forward. Having clarified its stance, the central bank must now follow through with decisive action and lay down a clear timeline for compliance. If there are transitional considerations, these too must be explicitly articulated. For Tata Sons, the choice is equally clear. As a responsible corporate group with a long-standing reputation for governance and probity, it should not seek to stretch regulatory interpretation to its limits. Compliance, in this case, is not just about meeting a regulatory obligation—it is about setting a benchmark for corporate conduct in India. The period of ambiguity is over. The RBI has spoken, even if indirectly. It must now act—and Tata Sons must respond in equal measure.

## Musk's payday is a lot like Tesla stock: Full of hot air

**IF YOU SPENT** most of your time at your day job working on several side gigs and posting inflammatory content on social media, then you might expect to get replaced by a robot or at least brace for a serious talk with your manager about a pay cut. But if you're Elon Musk, you end up getting promised annual compensation worth \$158 billion to keep you motivated.

That's how much Tesla valued the compensation for its highly distracted and distracting, but evidently irreplaceable, chief executive officer in 2025, the company disclosed late Thursday. It's part of a package that could eventually total \$1 trillion, which shareholders approved last year "as a way to motivate Tesla's chief executive to spend more time at the electric-vehicle maker", as *The Wall Street Journal* put it.

In other words, when workers' wages have stagnated and many of us are worried about losing our jobs to AI, Musk gets promised enough capital in one year to buy ConocoPhillips outright and still have a few billion left over for walking-around money. To be fair, the actual cash Musk pocketed last year was zero dollars because all of his compensation was tied up in equity award grants, *Bloomberg News* notes. He'll get \$132 billion, more than enough to buy Starbucks, only if Tesla hits certain performance targets. It hit none of them last year.

That gets at one of the issues with both Musk's compensation and Tesla's stock price: Both are Thanksgiving Day parade balloons filled with hot air and wishes. Tesla is no longer really an electric-car maker. It's an aspiring robotaxi/robot butler/computer-chip maker with products and profits that exist only in a mystical future promised by Musk. Despite years of not coming true, these promises are still good enough for both Tesla's comatose board of directors and its shareholders, who have

enjoyed watching the company's stock grow to 198 times future 12-month earnings. As my colleague Liam Denning has written, this compares with a forward P/E ratio of about 25 for the rest of Big Tech's Magnificent Seven. Musk's 2025 pay is about twice the Ebitda Tesla has generated since 2010, Liam notes.

As it relates to Tesla's stock price, the Elon Musk Reality Distortion Field has been defying the laws of physics and logic for at least a decade. You should expect to go broke betting against it. But it reflects similarly perverse and unsustainable trends in the modern economy. Tesla's market cap may never decline, but something has to give.

US CEOs make 280 times the average annual pay of their workers, according to the Economic Policy Institute, up from a ratio of about 20 in 1965. Other companies have even begun to emulate Tesla's "pay-to-pray" approach to keeping their bosses engaged. Tesla rival Rivian Automotive paid its CEO \$403 million last year, mostly in options, as part of a similarly incentive-driven package.

Meanwhile, workers' annual wage increases have declined steadily for the past four years, with inflation outpacing them for much of that time. Now President Donald Trump's war in Iran is driving fuel prices higher, with gasoline hitting \$4.40 a gallon in the US, and threatening to reawaken inflation that was only recently subdued. Housing affordability has plunged since the pandemic, putting the American Dream out of reach for millions. No wonder the University of Michigan's consumer sentiment index is at its lowest point on record.

And thanks to Musk and other Big Tech CEOs, Americans think the future is even bleaker for workers. The Mag Seven is spending \$700 billion this year and possibly \$1 trillion next year on ramping up AI, a technology few Americans asked for and most now fear will take their jobs and make their lives less meaningful.

Musk is a uniquely qualified talisman of these inequities, thanks partly to his moonlighting as a government official. His Department of Government Efficiency last year separated 260,000 government workers from their jobs. It gutted the USAgency for International Development, risking three million preventable deaths a year, according to Oxfam. All of this carnage was based on a promise to save the government money and eventually (that hazy future again) make Americans' lives better. It was another promise unfulfilled. Tesla shareholders might swallow such disappointment forever. The rest of us don't have to.



**MARK GONGLOFF**  
Bloomberg

## TECH REINVENTION

ADOPTION IS SCALING, BUT OUTDATED BUSINESS MODELS REMAIN STUBBORNLY INTACT

# AI everywhere, change nowhere

**E**VERY FEW YEARS, India Inc discovers a new word that promises to change everything. "Digital," "disruption," "transformation". Each arrives like a festival... enthusiastically celebrated, thoroughly discussed, and eventually reduced to a reusable slide in a PPT titled Vision 2030. AI is the latest guest of honour.

CEOs urge the team to embrace AI, form action plans and core committees to figure out how and what tools to buy. Some even created a job title like "Head of AI" for someone who looks comfortable saying "large language models" without blinking. It is a reassuringly structured response to something that is, unfortunately, not structured at all.

What's on the cards isn't an upgrade. It is a shift in how work itself gets done. And it is being enthusiastically reframed into something manageable. The dominant narrative is that AI is a productivity booster, a helpful assistant, a digital intern who never sleeps and hallucinates. One can get the jobs done faster, cheaper, and with better punctuation.

This idea is wildly popular because it allows everything else to remain unchanged. The org chart stays intact. The billing model survives. So companies are doing what they do best: improving the familiar.

Marketing teams now produce content at industrial scale, only for it to pass through the same multi-layered approval process that ensures it emerges perfectly safe and utterly forgettable. Analysts generate insights faster than ever, which is a triumph because those insights can now be ignored at unprecedented speed. HR drafts empathetic messages using AI, which are then carefully edited to remove anything that sounds remotely empathetic. Everyone is moving faster. No one is moving differently. And that's precisely

**M MUNEER**

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the problem.

Somewhere outside this ecosystem of optimised inefficiency, a different kind of company is taking shape, one that doesn't treat AI as an assistant but as the default engine. One that doesn't ask how to improve workflows but whether those workflows should exist at all. This isn't a minor adjustment. It's the difference between renovating the house and realising that is no longer needed. In this model, work is not supported by AI but executed by it. Systems handle analysis, generation, iteration. Humans step in only when something genuinely requires judgement, common sense, or accountability. The structure is leaner, the speed is higher, and the cost is...awkwardly low.

A philosophical crisis for an economy built on scale? India has long equated size with strength. Large teams, layered hierarchies, and bustling office floors have been symbols of success. The idea that a smaller, AI-driven system could outperform a massive workforce is slightly offensive. Instead of confronting it directly, many organisations are choosing a safer route: incremental adoption. A chatbot here, an automation there, a pilot project to signal intent. Enough to say "we are doing AI", but not enough to trigger exist-

tential discomfort.

This is where *jugaad* makes its grand entrance. The secret sauce that fixes things work without fundamentally changing them. Why redesign the system when it can be cleverly patched?

Traditional competitors don't matter even if they're slightly more efficient. The real danger is from entirely new entrants who have no legacy to protect and no habits to unlearn. These are small, agile companies that start with an assumption that much of what once required teams can now be handled by systems. They don't care for old processes, decision optimisation, or a pre-AI world. And they certainly don't need to justify why a task that once required ten people now requires one person and a well-designed pipeline.

When your cost base is fundamentally lower, your pricing follows. And in India, that is not a competitive edge but a structural advantage. Established companies are not being outperformed in the traditional sense but are being out-designed. Their models are simply built for a world that is disappearing.

Faced with this, the instinctive response has been to create order. Committees are formed. Roles are defined. Frameworks are introduced. There is

**The winners were not those who optimised the old way, but those who abandoned it early. AI is not different, just faster**

## Redefining upper-layer NBFCs



**PRATIK SHAH**

National Financial Services Leader, EY India

**THE RBI HAS** proposed a fundamental redesign of the upper-layer classification under the non-banking financial company (NBFC) scale-based regulation framework, signalling a decisive shift in how the sector is identified and supervised. The draft norms move away from the earlier hybrid identification approach—under which upper-layer classification combined the top 10 NBFCs by asset size with a parametric scoring framework—and adopt a largely size-based methodology anchored to a ₹1 lakh-crore asset threshold.

The revised framework dispenses with the scoring construct, while retaining supervisory discretion to designate entities as upper layer where warranted. Besides, it provides for annual re-identification of upper-layer NBFCs, introduces periodic recalibration of the asset size threshold every five years, and moves to a more rules-based approach, allowing greater mobility over time.

The key shift lies in the elimination of the dual identification framework that combined asset size ranking with a relatively complex scoring methodology. It relied on a weighted mix of quantitative (70%) and qualitative (30%) criteria, spanning metrics such as size, leverage, interconnectedness, complexity, and supervisory judgement. While the approach aimed to capture multidimensional systemic risks, it often led to limited transparency around classification triggers—particularly for institutions operating close to the upper layer threshold. The proposed framework replaces this with a clearer, rules-based construct anchored mainly in asset size, improving predictability while retaining periodic supervisory review.

Retaining supervisory discretion ensures entities with elevated systemic risk, interconnected exposures, or structural complexity can still be brought under the upper layer lens, even if size alone does not fully capture their risk footprint. The ability to review the upper layer status period-

ically and the removal of the lock-in need fundamentally changes the regulatory approach. Classification is no longer static, but a continuously evolving state linked to balance sheet size and risk profile.

One of key implications of the revised framework is the removal of ownership-linked regulatory distinctions, which had historically created an implicit divergence in how different NBFC segments were treated. In essence, the RBI is moving from an ownership-based regime to a risk-based, activity-neutral regulatory approach, creating a more level playing field across the sector. It reinforces the principle that systemic importance is a function of scale and risk, not ownership structure. The revised framework is expected to narrow this gap by progressively embedding bank-like supervisory expectations across four dimensions:

Investment in technology, data, and analytics capabilities, including investments in robust data architectures, risk aggregation engines, and supervisory ready systems to enable more granular, higher frequency, and risk based regulatory reporting beyond periodic filings.

Strengthened enterprise wide risk management, encompassing internal capital adequacy assessment process (ICAAP)-style internal capital assessment, forward looking stress testing and stress prediction, and concentration risk controls—areas where maturity continues to vary even among large NBFCs and where enabling technology becomes increasingly critical.

Enhanced board effectiveness and independence, with greater emphasis on risk expertise, tenure discipline, and accountability, aligned with the RBI focus on effective and proportionate board level

oversight.

Reinforced compliance and assurance functions, with a sharper focus on the effectiveness of the second and third lines of defence, supported by digital monitoring tools and accompanied by heightened supervisory scrutiny of outsourcing arrangements, related party exposures, and group linkages.

Upper layer NBFCs will increasingly be expected to operate with bank-like standards of governance, risk management, and supervisory engagement, even as their funding models and regulatory constraints differ from banks. This convergence is likely to reduce regulatory arbitrage. For PSU NBFCs especially, this transition is less about introducing new structures and more about elevating the depth, investing in technology, and ensuring effectiveness of existing frameworks.

The introduction of periodic review and removal of lock-in further embeds balance sheet discipline. Growth beyond the ₹1 lakh-crore threshold is no longer a one-time regulatory milestone but a state that brings ongoing scrutiny and expectations.

NBFCs will need to move from silo-based risk management to a single, enterprise wide risk framework. This shall require a clear, board approved risk appetite that is structured around practical portfolio limits, concentration caps, and pricing guardrails. Regulators will increasingly look for risk framework that actively guides business decisions and not just compliance reporting. Further, growth decisions will have to be balanced with risk capacity. For PSU NBFCs, this implies faster escalation and tighter accountability within public ownership constraints.

Compliance frameworks will have to evolve from calendar checks to continu-

**NBFCs will need to move from silo-based risk management to a single, enterprise wide risk framework**

ously surveillance. This means embedding regulatory thresholds and early warning into core business workflows. NBFCs shall be expected to identify risks early and take radiation action through clear remediation plans.

Strong data and tech foundations will be critical under the revised framework. NBFCs will need centralised data platforms, consistent and near real time MIS across risk, finance, and treasury. Advanced analytics for stress testing, risk aggregation, and early warning identification will increasingly be treated as supervisory essentials. In addition, selective use of newer technologies, including GenAI, can materially strengthen supervisory readiness. Use cases are likely to focus on automated regulatory reporting, intelligent exception detection, early identification of emerging risk patterns, and swift preparation of board and regulatory dashboards.

Static capital buffers will no longer be sufficient. NBFCs will need to adopt forward looking ICAAP frameworks, complemented by rigorous liquidity stress tests and asset liability management models that capture rollover risks and funding concentration. Capital allocation will be increasingly linked to risk adjusted returns. Regulators will assess not just capital adequacy, but whether capital and liquidity metrics meaningfully shape growth, portfolio mix, and funding strategy.

The RBI's revised upper-layer framework marks a measured but meaningful shift in NBFC regulation. For NBFCs, the message is clear: scale alone will no longer differentiate institutions. Those that embed integrated risk management, stronger governance, and data driven decision making through a clear operating playbook will be better placed to adapt to tighter supervision. More broadly, the framework signals the next phase in the evolution of India's NBFC sector—one focused on regulatory parity, transparency, and systemic resilience.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Indian cars finding takers abroad

Apropos of "World taking a shine to made-in-India cars" (*FE*, May 3), India crossing 905,000 passenger vehicle exports in FY26 is a genuinely encour-

aging milestone. The Fronx leading with 90,186 units, and the Jimny finding stronger markets abroad than at home demonstrate that Indian manufacturing quality is now globally competitive. The eVitar's anticipated export surge to over 100 countries is

particularly significant—it signals that India can be a credible EV export hub, not merely a domestic market. However, sustaining this momentum requires more than a favourable rupee. Port infrastructure, shipping logistics, and trade agreement coverage need

to keep pace with production capacity. The Honda Elevate's sharp export decline is a reminder that demand cycles shift quickly. —A Myilsami, Coimbatore

● Write to us at [feletters@expressindia.com](mailto:feletters@expressindia.com)

## Art for Art's Sake Can Still Be Artistic

AI-human artwork 'labelling' a disservice

Art is deliberate alteration of reality. The intention of all art, as the good readers of this good paper know, is to convey emotion beyond the physical world. Tools for creating art have changed from charcoal to silicon chips. Yet, they serve the same purpose of distortion. Cavemen drew cattle. Machines create influencers. Both have humans communicating through the best available medium. Should the process of creation be allowed to define artistic ability? Luckily, we haven't needed to answer the question. Till now. A painting is different from a photograph. Yet, they are both art. However, AI blurs the distinction, and so — or so the argument goes — it must be labelled. Synthetic art may exceed human capabilities at some point having become the collective consciousness. But till AI remains a collaborator, labelling content created with its help would cause a disservice to art.

It seems that lawmakers now want synthetic content watermarked for an entirely different reason: to tackle misinformation. Labelling should not affect the development of art, although it remains a purposeful departure from reality. Yet, there is an inherent conflict if AI were to come up with something of the stature of Guernica and be regarded of lesser merit. Remember, there was a time when recorded music was considered inferior to live music. But when guided by human emotion, an original piece of synth art is still art. Lower down on the emotional scale, commercial art doesn't suffer as much on account of branding.

Art is headed for disruption by AI. Tech threatens livelihoods of artists, unless they adapt to the new tools. Audiences are being targeted by AI-generated creative content and their aesthetic values are transforming. With tech raising the base for artistic expression, the masterpiece is more likely to emerge in the prevalent medium. This calls for greater collaboration with AI to be original and contribute to art's development. All new art forms need encouragement. Synthetic art is no exception. Labelling may not be the way to go about it.

## Be Humane, Take Abandoners to Task

The tragedy of five Siberian Huskies abandoned near Nandigaon village on the outskirts of Hyderabad — with a sixth succumbing to the heat — reflects a society that treats living beings as disposable accessories. The dogs, creatures of the Arctic tundra, were left to bake in the relentless Deccan sun, likely because their maintenance became a liability for a backyard breeder. Authorities have to crack down on such inhumane practice.

The legal landscape on breeding/foreign dogs is a toothless patchwork of advisories. While a 2024 central circular targeted 'dangerous' breeds, it bypassed the welfare of cold-climate animals, leaving Prevention of Cruelty to Animals rules as a set of suggestions. Dog breeding is big business, and any movement

toward regulation has always met resistance from stakeholders like Kennel Club of India (KCI), which fear for the 'sanctity' of purebred commerce. These organisations must be brought to the table to co-author a sustainable 'breeding cap' policy. The status-conscious demand for 'exotics' must be curbed by integrating these stakeholders into a system where they are held legally responsible for the life cycles of the animals they promote.

A while back, the PM had given a call to adopt more Indian breeds. If hearts will not change, the law must intervene with strict, technology-backed accountability. To trace an animal back to the owner, microchipping — as is done for cattle in many states — is a viable option. Furthermore, selling a cold-climate breed should be legally contingent on a thorough check of the buyer's environment and financial means. This barbaric cycle will only end when law enforcement ensures that the cost of abandonment — legal, financial, ethical and social — far outweighs the profit of sales.

## JUST IN JEST

Today's election results are more open-ended than you would think

## Counting the Hours, Counting Those Votes

Counting votes, we are unreliably told, is a science. Numbers, tallies, neat little rows of digits. But in practice, it resembles a magic show with rabbits being pulled out of hat over the course of a day — with the prospect of a few rabbits turning up to be goats. First, EVMs — looking suspiciously like synthesizers (which in a way they are) — are lovingly stacked. Then comes the 'scientific' part: men with calculators, women with pencils, and one fellow with more fingers than Hrithik Roshan tabulates. Hours pass, tea is consumed, and the numbers keep coming out like shawarma from a rotating kabab spit.

Eventually, results are announced. One side cheers, dhols are drummed up, mithai is distributed. The other side sulks, and the media shows empty party offices with forlorn plastic chairs. But here's the beauty: losers never lose. They simply declare, with solemn authority, 'The election was fixed.' In cooler climes, the election is 'stolen'. This nugget is the eternal life raft of democracy. It requires no evidence, no logic, just a firm jaw and a loud voice. If the margin is narrow, it was rigged. If the margin is wide, it was definitely rigged. And, thus, democracy thrives: winners win, losers win too — by claiming martyrdom. The only certainty in all this uncertainty is that someone, somewhere, will insist the magician swapped the rabbits.

How independent Trump nominee Kevin Warsh will be as Fed chair matters far beyond the US

## Fed Up or Down with Don?



Mythili Bhusnurmath

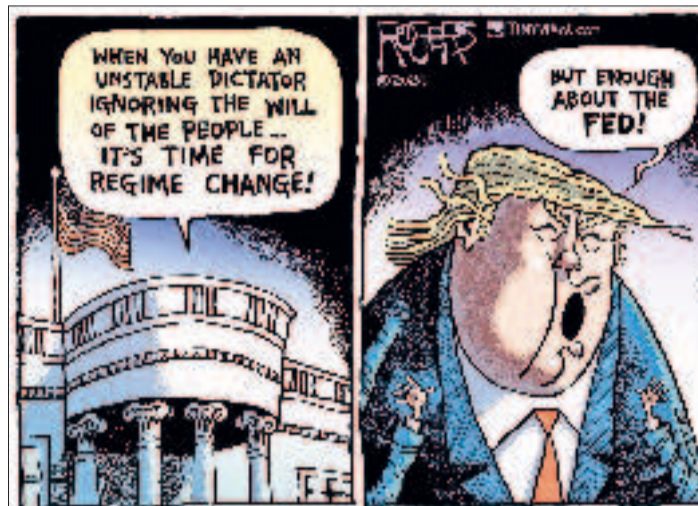
Less than a fortnight, the dust will settle on two issues that, together, will have a huge impact on the global economy. No, not whether the war in West Asia is ending for good. Or whether the Strait of Hormuz has been opened unconditionally. Both are a function of Donald Trump's whims and fancies. As we have seen over the past few months — indeed, ever since January 2025, when he was sworn in — there's no knowing what the mercurial leader will do next.

But what we will know for sure is whether Kevin Warsh, Trump's nominee, will take over from Jerome Powell as chair of the US Fed. And, related to that, whether central bank independence is an idea whose time is done.

For now, the odds are that Warsh will step into the hot seat when Powell's term ends on May 15.

Trump announced his name in January. But, unlike in India, where GoI is the sole authority to appoint the RBI governor, the Fed chair goes through a lengthy confirmation process — first by Senate Banking Committee (SBC) and then by the full senate — before a new chair takes over.

Normally, this should not be a problem. Support for the Fed chair nominee tends to be bipartisan. Powell, for instance, was appointed by Trump during his first term and then reappointed by Joe Biden in 2022. But this time around, Trump's almost personal animosity towards Powell for re-



Reserved man: Cartoon by Rob Rogers, Washington Post

peatedly defying his call to cut interest rates, and his subsequent attempt to frame charges against him, have queered the pitch.

The confirmation initially faced a roadblock, thanks to Senator Thom Tillis, who vowed not to advance any Fed nomination until

the justice department ended its probe of Powell's supposed misdeeds: cost overruns in the renovation of the Fed headquarters. But now that the probe has been called off, and SBC has cleared the nomination, chances are

Warsh's confirmation will be through by May 15, even as Powell remains on the Fed board till 2028.

With that, the curtain will, hopefully, come down on an unseemly spat between Trump and Powell. In an interview in mid-April, Trump made no bones about his determination to get Powell out, saying he will

fire him if he opts to stay at the Fed after his term ends (in case Warsh's confirmation is delayed). Adding, in his characteristic style, 'I've held back firing him. I've wanted to fire him. But I hate to be controversial, you know.'

Which brings us to the second issue: the question of independence of the US Fed. Here, the picture is far from settled. Warsh told US senators that his monetary policy decisions would be independent of any advice or pressure from Trump, describing success in keeping inflation low as the 'plot armour' that would insulate the central bank from criticism.

'Monetary policy independence is essential,' Warsh said in a public statement delivered to the SBC, adding that it was 'largely up to the Fed' to maintain that independence

by succeeding in its goals and not straying beyond its mandate from Congress.

'We need to take politics out of monetary policy and monetary policy out of politics. If I'm confirmed, the Fed should stay in its lane.' The question is, what is its lane? Will it be a lane dictated by Trump? Or by a Fed that has, so far, steadfastly refused to do Trump's bidding, including holding interest rates unchanged at its last meeting under Powell, in late April?

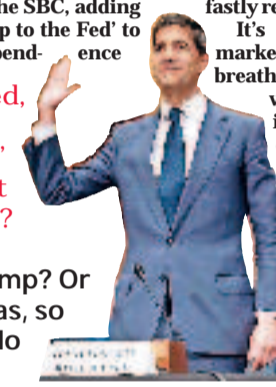
Asked whether he expected rates would fall this year, Trump was emphatic. 'When Kevin gets in, I do.' But if the Fed cuts rates when US inflation, at 3.3%, is running well above the Fed's target rate of 2%, inflation is bound to increase. At a time when high oil prices are already putting pressure on fuel prices in the US and, through second-order effects, on other products as well, it is only a matter of time before the impact of higher prices in the US gets transmitted globally — and affects us in India, too.

Unfortunately, Warsh's statement, coming just hours before Trump repeated in an interview that he would be disappointed if his handpicked nominee did not cut rates quickly, has not convinced anyone. As the feisty Democrat leader Elizabeth Warren pointed out, 'Independence takes courage,' before going on to put Warsh on the spot by querying, 'Let's check out your independence and your courage. We'll start easy: Mr Warsh, did Donald Trump lose the 2020 election?' — something Warsh has steadfastly refused to concede.

It's no wonder, then, that markets are waiting with bated breath to see what happens when Warsh gets his foot in the door. Empirical evidence shows that not only is no country immune from the spillover effects of US monetary policy, but also that uncertainty surrounding the Fed's monetary policy decisions affects all financial markets adversely.



I've held back firing him. I've wanted to fire him. But I hate to be controversial, you know,' Trump said, about Powell remaining on the Fed board till 2028



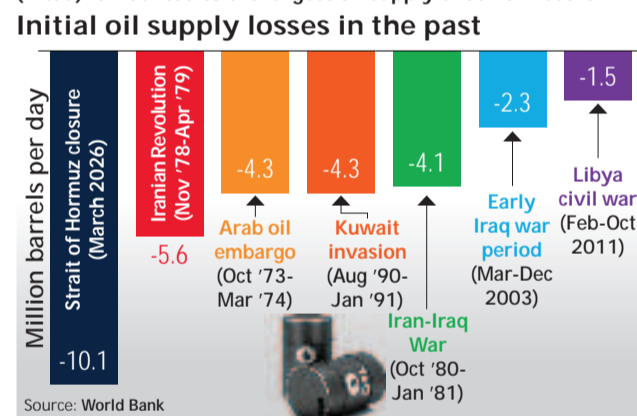
'If I'm confirmed, the Fed should stay in its lane,' said Warsh. But what is its lane? Will it be a lane dictated by Trump? Or by a Fed that has, so far, refused to do his bidding?

### ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

ere once was a pollster so bold,  
Whose 'trends' were as good as pure gold.  
Till results day arrived —  
And their numbers nosedived,  
Proving guesses look wiser when told.

### WEST ASIA COMMODITY SHOCK

The outbreak of war in West Asia represents a historic shock to commodity markets. According to the World Bank's Commodity Market Outlook, the reduction in global crude oil supply in March 2026—estimated at about 10 million barrels per day (mb/d)—amounted to the largest oil supply shock on record...



### MEME'S THE WORD



## Why Mamata Will Win



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

When I became a journalist in 1965, a senior colleague advised me, 'Never make a prediction close to an event. If you are wrong, many will laugh at you. So, make predictions well in advance. If you are wrong, most people will have forgotten what you said. If you are right, you can remind everybody what you had predicted.'

Let me violate that norm today. Most exit polls have predicted a big win for BJP in West Bengal, ending 15 yrs of rule by TMC. Isay no, Mamata Banerjee will come back as CM.

Exit polls are notoriously inaccurate in India. In theory, polling people as they exit a polling booth should be the most accurate way of predicting the outcome. But in India, exit polls vary wildly from one another and the final outcome.

In West Bengal, four exit polls gave BJP victory and two suggested a TMC win. A 'Poll of Polls' gave BJP a comfortable win. But history shows exit polls cannot be taken seriously. Why do exit polls fail so badly? Axis My India was supposed to release its exit poll results one day later than others to focus on accuracy. But, ultimately, the agency refused to release any result saying too many voters refuse to say who they voted for, and that was fatal for accuracy.

Surveys showing majority support for a party or cause can be wildly misleading if many of those polled refused to give an answer. Many voters fear that telling the truth will be used to harm them, and so stay silent. Others lie outright, worsening inaccuracy further.

High non-responses and false responses hurt the accuracy and credibility

of a poll. Axis has been gracious enough to say so, although it must have lost a lot of money on an exit poll that it ultimately did not publish. Other polling agencies know how inaccurate their exit polls are, but do not care since there is a demand for such polls regardless of their shortcomings. Ordinary folk see exit polls as a form of entertainment and gossip rather than accuracy. The proven inaccuracy of astrological predictions does not reduce the demand for them. So, too, with exit polls.

What, then, can be firmer grounds for prediction? One is demography. In the last census, Muslims constituted 27% of Bengal's population. That proportion is unlikely to have changed significantly despite BJP's accusation of rampant illegal migration from Bangladesh. Muslim fear of BJP has reached a new high after many were disenfranchised by a faulty revision of voter rolls just before the election. Most fear this will be the first step to stripping them of their citizenship. They will throw their weight strategically behind any candidate most likely to beat BJP, typically TMC candidate.

The Left Front that earlier ruled for 30 yrs is now a shadow of its former self, but still gets around 15% of the vote. This means the non-Muslim, non-Left share of the total vote is just 58%. BJP will have to win 51% of this 58% to get a majority of votes, an impossible task even if anti-incumbency erodes Banerjee's vote share.

BJP says it is not necessary to

win a majority of votes. If the anti-BJP vote is split between TMC, Left Front and Congress, BJP can win with barely 40% of the popular vote. True. But in these days of highly polarised voting, chances of such a fatal split are low.

The second key factor is language. BJP has always been seen as a pro-Hindi party that wants to reduce the importance of regional languages. That

handicap has been buttressed by the lack of any good BJP speaker in Bengali. Bengalis are proud of their language, literature and songs. Banerjee is a fine Bengali orator who builds instant rapport with her audiences. So, too, does Abhishek Banerjee, her nephew, and her apparent.

The BJP, alas, depends on Hindi speakers like Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. This may not be too big a handicap in national elections, when national issues are at stake. But a state election is inherently local and requires speakers fluent in the local language. Modi is a great Hindi orator, but cannot compete with Banerjee in Bengali.

In the election campaign, BJP harnessed the services of Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam's chief minister, who took time off from his own state election to campaign in North Bengal. But, he, too, spoke in Hindi — he's not a Bengali speaker.

These two factors — demography and language — look enough to sink BJP. So, forget the exit polls. Mamata will win.



### MELODY FOR MONDAY

#### Hum Dekhenge

Iqbal Bano

Iqbal Bano's legendary rendition of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's 'Hum Dekhenge' is a stirring crystallised in song. Sung in 1986 at Lahore's Alhambra Hall, under the shadow of General Zia's authoritarian regime, Bano's voice carried the defiance of an entire people. Draped in a forbidden sari — Pakistan had made the salwar-kameez or Western attire mandatory, with the sari deemed 'Indian' — she turned Faiz's nazm into a weapon of beauty and resistance.

Her delivery is sheer power: the opening lines, 'Hum dekhenge/Lazim hai ke hum bhi dekhenge' (We shall see/It is certain that we too shall see), rise like a collective heartbeat. Bano's voice, rich and commanding, imbues the words with both gravitas and hope. Each verse builds into a crescendo, the imagery of toppled idols and the triumph of truth resonating with the audience, who erupted in thunderous applause.

The beauty lies not only in Faiz's stirring words but in Bano's interpretation — her pauses, emphatic stresses, unwavering tone that transforms poetry into prophecy. It is a performance that became a rallying cry.

Listening today, one feels the same shiver. Bano's 'Hum Dekhenge' remains one of the most powerful intersections of poetry, music and political courage.



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Voice From The Vatican

SUDHA DEVINAYAK

In a war-mongering world of aggression, volatility and unabashed violence, we need voices of sanity. When we witness total devastation in the wake of war — with missiles and drones streaking through the skies, bulldozing homes, hospitals and schools — we see a civilisation decimated. Rebuilding the world to restore the status quo would require the making of an entire civilisation anew.

Yet, powerful nations advocate for, and are actively involved in, war; the less powerful turn into bystanders, mute spectators who, at best, raise voices of dissent and, in a sense, become approvers. The collective conscience is laid to rest, history forgotten in the name of strategy, neutrality and convenient alliances.

It is at this moment that we hear Pope Leo's voice, loud, clear and sane, calling for dialogue and diplomacy, condemning death of civilians and attacks on institutions. Religion cannot be a defence or rationale for war, nor should it be manipulated to further violence and greed. God cannot be desecrated for economic or political gain.

When he was reprimanded and told to restrict himself to matters of theology, the Pope delivered a powerful message: in a world ravaged by tyrants, peace is everybody's responsibility and prays their redemption. John Steinbeck once said, 'War is the symptom of man's failure as a thinking animal,' and we now need to think in terms more constructive peace than fragile ceasefires.

### Chat Room

#### Banks, Improve Your Credit Cred

Apropos the Edit, 'Off the Tough Route To Loan Recovery' (May 1), the growing reliance on stringent recovery measures points to a deeper malaise — not weak laws but weak credit culture within the banking system. The problem originates at the appraisal stage. Credit is too often extended without a disciplined assessment of cash flows, viability and repayment capacity. Lending, in several instances, has become exposure-driven rather than need-based. The outcome is predictable: stressed assets that later demand 'tough routes' for recovery. All at a very high cost, indeed.

Equally paradoxical is the continued exclusion of genuinely viable small borrowers. Despite decades of nationalisation, financial inclusion initiatives and advances in tech, the banking system still shows limited sensitivity to the needs of the poor and informal sector. While larger exposures have at times benefited from relaxed discipline, deserving small borrowers struggle for access. The solution lies not merely in tightening recovery mechanisms but in re-orienting banking practices. Credit must be anchored to cash flows, supported by effective use of tech and AI for appraisal and monitoring. Integrating lending with transaction and deposit accounts can align credit with real economic activity and improve repayment behaviour.

T V Gopalakrishnan  
Bangaluru

and AI for appraisal and monitoring. Integrating lending with transaction and deposit accounts can align credit with real economic activity and improve repayment behaviour.

#### A Revolution Called Rotation

This refers to 'Let Bharat into the Boardroom' by Shafali Goradia and Deepthi Berera (Apr 29). The Company Law, as also the Articles of Companies, do provide provisions for refreshing the composition of boards at AGMs to cut out deadwood and induct new blood through retirement of directors by rotation. Considerably valuable and suitable talent is available now in tier-2 and -3 cities/towns. Let the chairmen of corporate boards discharge their leadership responsibility by tapping that talent for enriching their businesses. Janga Krishnamurthy  
Former chairman, Bengaluru Chapter of Chartered Accountants, 1971-75, & chairman, Southern India Regional Council of Company Secretaries, 1980  
Byemail

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesofindia.com



## Editor's TAKE

### US-NATO Rift: A Widening Divide

US-Europe ties now face strain from growing strategic differences, political mistrust, and a shifting geopolitics that is eroding longstanding foundations

World politics is undergoing a change. The alliances that were once considered sacrosanct and unshakable are showing signs of schism, and an unease has set in. The two recent wars – one in Ukraine and the other in West Asia, where the US unilaterally intervened – have shaken NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation that was formed after the world war II in the heydays of the Cold War but continued even after the USSR disintegrated. NATO was formed on April 4, 1949 by 12 countries from Europe and North America to prevent Soviet expansion and provide a military defence alliance, establishing the principle that an attack on one member is an attack on all. The US was the big brother and entrusted with safeguarding the strategic interests of its members and defend them.

That was seven decades back, the geopolitics have changed. The recent decision by the United States to withdraw 5,000 troops from Germany is more than a routine military decision; it signals deepening fissures within the transatlantic alliance. For decades, the US-Europe security compact, institutionalised through NATO, has been the bedrock of Western stability. Today, that foundation appears increasingly strained by diverging strategic priorities, political rhetoric, and mutual distrust.

At the heart is of course, Washington's frustration with European reluctance to back its military and strategic posture – particularly in securing the Strait of Hormuz. The withdrawal order has been framed as a response to Europe's "failure to provide support." On the other side, leaders such as Friedrich Merz, the chancellor Germany, have criticised the US approach as unilateral and poorly coordinated, arguing that Europe was sidelined in critical decisions, including the strikes on Iran.

This is not merely a disagreement over tactics. The Trump administration is vociferous about its world view, which must be endorsed by its allied, no questions asked. Europe, however, is signalling a desire for strategic autonomy – seeking to balance its security commitments with diplomatic caution and economic pragmatism. The result is an unease being reflected in its military decisions vis-à-vis NATO. The implications are far-reaching. Germany has long been the logistical and operational hub of the US military presence in Europe, hosting tens of thousands of troops. A drawdown to pre-Ukraine war levels not only alters the military balance but also suggests a partial disengagement from European security at a time when the continent continues to grapple with the aftershocks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For Eastern European nations, this could rekindle anxieties about American commitment to collective defence. Beyond security, the spectre of a fragmented alliance also emboldens rival powers, potentially accelerating the emergence of a multipolar world order where Western unity can no longer be taken for granted. If current trends persist, the transatlantic alliance may not collapse, but it will undoubtedly be redefined. NATO could evolve into a loose interest-based coalition rather than a tightly knit security bloc. Europe may accelerate efforts to build independent defence capabilities. The world-order as we know it is changing for sure.

# When Truth Becomes a Target

As the information ecosystem grows more distorted, the threats facing journalism have become both physical and existential, the question is no longer just about protecting press freedom—it is about preserving the very possibility of truth.



WAEIL AWWAD

On World Press Freedom Day, the world will once again speak of freedom of expression as a universal value—something to be defended, celebrated, and upheld. But for many journalists, this day no longer represents an ideal. It represents a contradiction.

I do not speak about press freedom as an abstract principle. I speak about it as someone who has lived its cost.

The memory of covering the Iraq war in 2003 as an embedded journalist—and the captivity that followed—has never left me. It remains present in every conversation I have about the role of the media in conflict. I survived Iraq. I survived Afghanistan. I survived Kargil, where I was fired upon, detained, and held under the threat of execution.

Many of my colleagues did not survive. This is the reality we must confront: journalists today are not merely covering wars. Increasingly, they are part of them not by choice, but by design.

The language we use often masks this truth. We speak of "casualties," of "crossfire," of "unintended consequences." But the reality on the ground tells a different story. Journalists are not only at risk; they are being deliberately targeted by both state and non-state actors.

This is not a marginal trend. It is a structural shift.

In conflict zones across the Middle East and beyond, the targeting of journalists has become a tactic of war. Silencing the messenger is often seen as a strategic advantage. When the narrative can be controlled, the cost of violence becomes easier to obscure.

But the threat no longer ends at the battlefield.

We are entering an era where truth itself is under sustained assault. Artificial intelligence, deep fakes, and algorithmic amplification are no longer distant concerns. They are active forces reshaping how information is produced, distributed, and consumed. They blur the line between fact and fabrication, making it harder for audiences to distinguish reality from manipulation.

In this environment, the risks faced by journalists are both physical and existential.

To be a journalist today is to operate under a dual threat: the danger of being silenced, and the danger of being disbelieved.

This combination is corrosive. It undermines not only the safety of reporters but the



THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS HAS, IN MANY CASES, BEEN INSUFFICIENT. CONDEMNATIONS ARE ISSUED, STATEMENTS ARE MADE, BUT ACCOUNTABILITY REMAINS RARE.

very function of journalism in society.

Because when journalists are killed, imprisoned, or discredited, the loss is not confined to the profession. The loss is borne by the public. It is borne by societies that depend on reliable information to make informed decisions. It is borne by systems of accountability that rely on scrutiny to function.

Without journalism, there is no transparency. Without transparency, there is no accountability. And without accountability, power operates unchecked.

This is why the issue at hand is larger than press freedom as a professional concern. It is about the integrity of public discourse. It is about whether truth can still serve as a foundation for collective understanding in an increasingly fragmented world.

The international response to attacks on journalists has, in many cases, been insufficient. Condemnations are issued, statements are made, but accountability remains rare.

This absence of consequence sends a message—one that is heard clearly by those who would seek to suppress information.

It tells them that the cost of targeting journalists is manageable.

That message must change.

Protecting journalists is not about granting special status to a profession. It is about safeguarding a function that is essential to any society that claims to value truth, justice, and democratic governance.

For those of us who have experienced the risks firsthand, this is not a theoretical debate. It is a lived reality.

The question, therefore, is not whether we continue to speak about press freedom. The question is whether the world is prepared to act in its defence.

Because the stakes are no longer confined to individual reporters or isolated incidents.

They extend to the very idea that truth still matters. And if that idea is allowed to erode, the consequences will reach far beyond any single conflict zone.

They will shape the future of how we understand the world—and whether that understanding is grounded in reality at all.

The bottom line: The real question is: Can truth survive in a world where everything can be manipulated, politicised, and contested?

Let me end with this: The biggest danger today is not that journalists are under attack. They always have been. The real danger is that truth is becoming negotiable. And once truth becomes negotiable, freedom becomes fragile.

This is not just a failure of justice—it is a failure of the international system to protect the flow of truth itself. Until accountability is backed by real political will, enforceable mechanisms, and consistent global pressure, the cycle will continue: documentation without justice, condemnation without consequence.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

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## PICTALK



Folk artists during a 'Nasha Mukh Abhiyan' campaign to raise awareness about the harmful effects of drugs, in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir. PHOTO: PTI

# Prasthanam: From journey to awakening



BODDAPATI CHANDRASEKHAR

## 2ND OPINION

Prasthanam means a journey—moving from one place to another. A journey implies a destination. Without a goal, can it truly be called a journey? Life itself is a great journey. This applies not only to the individual but to humanity as a whole. Yet, this journey is not the same for everyone.

It is marked by striking contrasts and rich diversity. Our background, our way of thinking, our perspective, and our attitude—all play a vital role in shaping it. From a primitive, almost animal-like stage, human beings, endowed with extraordinary thinking ability, discovered language and learned to express their thoughts.

They became civilized. In the evolution of human life, this marks a remarkable phase of progress. Among the

many strengths of human beings, observation is one of the greatest.

By keenly observing the world around him, man expanded his knowledge. He recognized the differences between himself and other living beings and came to terms with the harsh truth that birth, growth, and death are inevitable for all life. Then arose a question: how can he give value and meaning to his life? Through higher spiritual inquiry, he came to believe that the union of the individual soul with the Supreme is the noblest path.

Thus, he became a seeker of the Self. This is a significant milestone in the journey of human life. The peace chant from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, often called the Pavamana Mantra—Om, lead me from the unreal to the real, From darkness to light...—reveals the spiritual vision of great sages.

It tells us that beyond the worldly journey, there exists a higher path—one they longed to reach. They urge us, too, to cultivate such thought and direct our lives toward it.

This is the path they have shown humanity. We must hold the essence of this mantra in our hearts. It is a profound prayer. Its meaning kindles the flame of spiritual awareness within us and makes it shine. It calls

us to move from illusion to reality—from the mistaken belief that the world we live in is permanent and the source of lasting happiness—to the realization of the eternal and the Supreme. Ignorance is darkness; a person without knowledge is like one who is blind. To come out of this blindness, we need the light of knowledge. We must become truly enlightened.

Our seers and the seekers of truth aspired to transcend the cycle of birth and death and attain freedom from rebirth.

Thus they attain Nirva—a life is a great Odyssey—endless, ever-changing, and transformative. What lends distinction to an ordinary life is spiritual reflection. Spirituality, at its core, is the flow of noble thoughts within us. Every step a person takes becomes a true journey only when it leads inward, not outward. We should cultivate and practise it. It benefits both individuals and society. We can truly express our gratitude to the rishis—who condensed such vast meaning into this brief prayer—only by walking the path they have shown.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

The writer is a columnist, lecturer and radio presenter. He has given several talks on spirituality, literature and done many literary essays on various issues

## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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## REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE AND CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS

The recent ruling by the Supreme Court of India reaffirming a woman's right to choose, even in the case of a minor, marks a vital moment in the evolution of constitutional freedoms.

By permitting a 15-year-old girl, over seven months pregnant, to undergo abortion, the Court has underscored that reproductive autonomy cannot be overridden by rigid interpretations of law or morality.

The bench rightly observed that forcing a minor to continue an unwanted pregnancy could have lasting consequences on her mental health, education, and social well-being.

In such circumstances, the continuation of pregnancy becomes not just a medical issue but a question of dignity and

future opportunity. The Court's emphasis on "irreparable harm" reflects a humane and rights-based approach. Importantly, the judgment reiterates that reproductive choice is intrinsic to personal liberty and privacy under Article 21.

This is particularly crucial in cases involving minors, where vulnerability is heightened and long-term consequences are profound. While adoption remains an option, it cannot substitute the fundamental right to decide whether to carry a pregnancy.

This ruling sets a progressive precedent, reinforcing that constitutional protections must remain sensitive to individual circumstances, especially for those most vulnerable.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR, MUMBAI

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

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Outrage, justice, and women's safety

The horrific rape and murder of a three-year-old girl in Pune district has rightly triggered widespread outrage, with protests in Nasrapur and surrounding areas reflecting deep public anger. Such incidents not only shock the conscience but also expose persistent failures in ensuring safety for women and children. The case has reignited debate around the proposed Shakti law in Maharashtra, which seeks time-bound investigations and stringent punishment, including the death penalty, for crimes under the POCSO Act. While harsher penalties may serve as deterrents, the real challenge lies in effective implementation, swift justice, and preventive policing. Rising crime statistics in Pune district—alongside previous cases like the Badlapur incident—highlight a disturbing trend that cannot be ignored. Public anger, while understandable, must not translate into demands for mob justice. The rule of law must prevail, ensuring punishment is delivered through due process, not public retribution. The government, led by Devendra Fadnis, faces legitimate scrutiny over law and order. However, responsibility extends beyond political blame. Strengthening policing, fast-tracking courts, and addressing societal attitudes are equally critical. Justice must be swift, certain, and lawful—only then can faith in the system be restored.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

## LPG price hike and political timing

The sharp ₹993 increase in commercial LPG prices, pushing the 19 kg cylinder beyond ₹3,000, raises as many political questions as economic ones. Its timing—just days after state elections—suggests a pattern where difficult decisions are deferred to avoid electoral backlash. While rising global crude prices justify a correction, the selective shielding of domestic LPG consumers reveals a calculated approach. By placing the burden on the commercial sector, the impact becomes indirect—filtering through higher food prices rather than immediate public reaction. This may soften political fallout, but it does not eliminate the economic strain. Such calibrated decisions risk undermining policy credibility. When economic measures appear aligned with electoral cycles rather than market realities, public trust weakens. The eventual adjustment of domestic LPG and PNG tariffs seems inevitable if global volatility persists, making the current relief temporary. In effect, the burden has not been removed but postponed. Governments may avoid immediate criticism through such timing, but the long-term cost lies in eroding confidence in transparent and consistent policymaking. Economic logic must remain independent of political convenience if credibility is to be sustained.

S PADMANABHAN | KOCHI

## The shadow of political vendetta

The recent developments involving FIRs against Rajya Sabha MP Sandeep Pathak, alongside enforcement actions on individuals linked to shifting political loyalties, raise troubling questions about the functioning of democratic institutions. The ongoing exchanges between the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Aam Aadmi Party risk reducing governance to a spectacle of allegations and counter-allegations. A worrying pattern seems to be emerging—investigative agencies appear most active when political affiliations change. Whether this perception is entirely accurate or not, its persistence damages public confidence. Institutions meant to uphold the rule of law must not only be impartial but also be seen as such. When enforcement mechanisms are viewed through a political lens, their credibility erodes. Accountability is essential in any democracy, but it must be transparent, evidence-driven, and free from selective application. The mere perception of bias can weaken institutional integrity and undermine democratic norms. At a time when citizens expect focus on employment, development, and economic stability, such controversies divert attention from pressing issues. Political leadership must recognise that short-term gains achieved through institutional misuse come at the long-term cost of democratic trust.

SANJAY CHOPRA | MOHALI



## The mythical El Dorado and India's Growth Paradox

Once likened to 'El Dorado' by travellers, India today presents a striking paradox — an economy seen as resource-constrained despite sitting on vast, underutilised wealth. This raises a fundamental question: is India really poor, or simply unable to mobilise its own wealth effectively?



**AMITABH RANJAN**

In medieval times, while there were frantic searches for 'El Dorado' going on, in Latin America, foreign travellers like Tavernier were addressing India as 'El Darado'. India is perhaps the only major economy globally that is branded as poor while sitting pretty on trillions of dollars of underutilised assets and wealth. With a ranking as the world's sixth largest economy, India has a nominal GDP of \$4.15 trillion for 2025 as per the IMF. The moot question is whether India suffers from absolute scarcity or from how its wealth is deployed, perceived and structured.

The problem is not savings, but where they sit. There is a persistent, nagging myth that India is a poor country struggling to find its footing. It is a narrative of scarcity that dominates our economic discourse, leading us to believe that we are perpetually short of resources, funding and capital. The reality is quite different. India is not poor; it is capital-rich. India holds trillions in household wealth that does not reach credit markets. Idle assets raise the cost of capital. When savings stay in gold, firms pay 150 to 250 basis points more to borrow. Instead of building factories, funding the next wave of startups or expanding businesses to scale, this wealth sits silent and stagnant in velvet-lined boxes and bank lockers across the country. India is not short of money, but of usable money.

Banks lend what they collect. When savings sit in gold and property, deposits remain low, making loans expensive. A business that works at 9% fails at 11%. That gap decides whether a factory is built, whether a shop expands, and whether jobs are created. Growth slows not because ideas are missing but because money is priced too high. Financial savings are only 11-12% of GDP. China kept this above 20% for years and built faster. The gap shows up as weaker investment and slower scale. This creates a vicious cycle. People save in gold. Banks don't get deposits. Loans become costly. Businesses hold back. Jobs don't grow. The system then misreads this as weak demand and tries to fix the wrong problem. The constraint is not demand but the cost of capital.

This is where the distortion begins. The economy is not failing to generate savings, but to channel them. Why Gold Keeps Winning and The Domino That Actually Matters

Gold is not a mistake. It protects families. Medical shocks still push households into distress spending and insurance payouts are not always reliable. Gold is easy to trust and easy to sell. It carries no counterparty risk. But here also, a common person is

always a loser as there are so many haircuts like 20-25% making charges, jewellers' cuts sometimes 30-40% etc. Moreover, it creates a system cost. Gold in a locker does nothing for the economy. It cannot fund a loan unless it is inside the system. That requires testing, paperwork and trust in institutions. Most people avoid it as status quoism is easier. The result is a quiet freeze. Wealth exists, but it does not move. When savings sit in lockers, banks don't get deposits. With fewer deposits, they lend less and charge more. Those extra 150-250 basis points are enough to kill marginal projects. A factory that works at 9% does not work at 11%. Expansion is delayed, hiring slows, and growth underperforms. Nothing here is abstract. The cost shows up in cancelled investments, not in headlines. Over time, this compounds. Fewer projects today mean fewer jobs tomorrow and weaker demand later. The economy slows not in a sudden shock, but through a steady loss of momentum.



**TAX TREATMENT CREATES UNCERTAINTY. RETURNS OFTEN FAIL TO BEAT THE COST OF HOLDING GOLD. THE ALTERNATIVE-KEEPING GOLD AT HOME-HAS NO FRICTION. NO FORMS, NO DELAYS, NO RISK. PEOPLE CHOOSE WHAT IS EASIER**

An alumnus of NESA, Washington DC, Dr. Amitabh Ranjan is associated with Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), New Delhi as Registrar.

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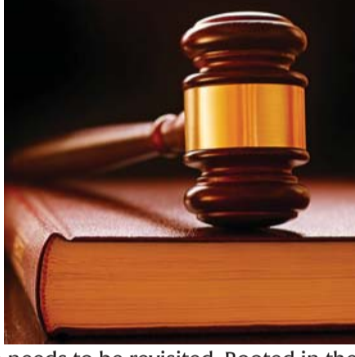
## Rethinking 'settled law' in a Changing India



**VIVEK KUMAR SINGH**

The law is often described as a living organism, evolving with society and responding to emerging challenges. Yet, many of its "settled principles" remain frozen in time, shaped by contexts that no longer exist. The danger lies not in having solid doctrines, but in treating them as immutable truths. In a rapidly transforming India, marked by disruptive technologies, complex markets and heightened rights consciousness, several fundamental assumptions in civil law, merit a careful relook. For example, deeply entrenched - and seldom examined - is the assumption that title suits are inherently complex, while mutation proceedings are simple, summary exercises. In practice, both forums often grapple with the same triad, viz., competing parties, overlapping documents and contested possession. Both rely on similar evidentiary materials such as sale deeds, revenue records, possession claims, etc., and both are expected to adhere to principles of natural justice. Yet, the system conventionally perceives title adjudication as a prolonged, technical and resource-intensive exercise, while pronouncing mutation as a shallow fiscal settlement. This dichotomy has significant adverse consequences. It delays the recognition of legitimate claims, clogs civil courts and sidelines administrative forums that are closest to the ground reality of land ownership. In a digital ecosystem, where land records can be updated in near real time and corroborated through spatial technologies, the sharp divide between "complex title" and "simple mutation" appears increasingly artificial. There is a compelling case for reimagining mutation proceedings as more than mere revenue entries: as structured, quasi-adjudicatory processes capable of resolving a defined class of title disputes, especially those grounded in clear documentation and possession. With appropriate procedural safeguards, reasoned orders and appellate oversight, such a shift could significantly reduce the burden on civil courts while enhancing expediency on the ground.

Courts have consistently held that mutation is merely for fiscal purposes, not ownership. While palpably sound in a colonial revenue framework, this position appears increasingly disconnected from ground realities. For millions of landholders, mutation records are the most updated and accessible indicators of ownership and possession. They reflect the latest transaction, the correct recorded possession and, often, the only official recognition of both. Ignoring them creates a chasm between legal theory and lived experience. A more nuanced approach — recognising mutation as strong evidence of current title may better serve contemporary needs. The doctrine of adverse possession is yet another deeply anchored belief which needs to be revisited. Rooted in the idea that long, uninterrupted possession can ripen into ownership, it once served a pragmatic purpose in a world of uncertain titles and weak documentation. Today, however, it sits uneasily with modern notions of property rights and constitutional fairness. The spectacle of the State itself invoking adverse possession against its citizens-criticised sharply in judicial pronouncements-raises a fundamental question: should the law reward encroachment or penalise administrative failure? In an era of computerised land records and satellite mapping, the doctrine appears less like a necessity and more like an anachronism. The doctrine of caveat emptor, or "buyer beware", also sits uneasily with modern economic realities. In traditional markets, where transactions were local and information relatively symmetrical, placing the burden on the buyer was defensible. But in today's environment, marked by complex real estate transactions, layered ownership structures and asymmetry of information, such an expectation is unrealistic. Buyers often lack the means to verify title histories stretching back decades. The shift towards caveat venditor, which places a greater obligation on sellers to disclose defects and ensure clarity of title, is both logical and necessary. Similarly, the doctrine of privity of contract, which restricts contractual rights and obligations to the parties involved, struggles to keep pace with modern commercial realities. In an interconnected economy, characterised by insurance arrangements, development agreements and platform-based services, third-party interests are often central to the transaction. A rigid application of privity can exclude legitimate claimants and defeat commercial expectations. While courts have carved out exceptions, a more principled and explicit recognition of third-party rights would bring coherence to this evolving area.



Transparency in judicial proceedings is a cornerstone of democracy, ensuring accountability and public confidence. However, in the age of real-time reporting, social media amplification, and digital streaming, unfiltered openness can sometimes compromise privacy and distort public perception. The challenge lies in designing mechanisms that preserve transparency while safeguarding fairness and dignity. Territorial jurisdiction, another basic concept, is increasingly strained in a borderless digital world. Cybercrimes, online contracts, and cross-border transactions defy neat geographical boundaries, rendering traditional jurisdictional rules inadequate. Finally, the principle of finality of litigation, embodied in maxims like res judicata faces new dilemmas in the age of advanced forensic technologies. DNA evidence, digital trails, and data analytics can reveal truths that were previously inaccessible. While endless litigation must be avoided, a rigid insistence on finality can perpetuate injustice. Limited, carefully designed avenues for reopening cases in light of compelling new evidence may be necessary. What may emerge from this analysis is not a call to abandon settled law, but to recalibrate it. Many of these doctrines were designed for a low-information, paper-based, and territorially bounded State. Today's India is none of these. It is increasingly digital, data-rich, and interconnected. Legal principles that once provided certainty may now generate friction, inefficiency, or even injustice. The task, therefore, is one of intelligent reform. Courts must move from rigid adherence to contextual application, while legislatures must step in to contemporise maxims where judicial innovation alone is insufficient. Importantly, reforms must be guided by a clear normative vision, balancing certainty with fairness, liberty with security, and tradition with innovation. In the end, the legitimacy of law lies not in its antiquity, but in its relevance. A doctrine becomes truly "settled" not when it resists change, but when it proves capable of evolving with the society it seeks to govern. India's legal system must embrace that evolution, not reluctantly, but with conviction.

As long as the easier option remains outside the system, savings will stay outside the system. Fix the Incentives-or Keep Paying the Price Making this shift will cost money. To pull even 10% of gold-about 3,000 tonnes-into the system, the government will have to remove tax on conversion and offer returns that beat the cost of holding gold. The bill could reach 0.5-0.8% of GDP. That cost is visible and politically difficult. The alternative is less visible but larger over time. India will keep importing \$40-50 billion of gold each year, keeping pressure on the current account. Interest rates will stay 150-250 basis points higher than they should. Firms will keep dropping projects that only work at lower borrowing costs. The fix is not abstract. It sits at the jewellery counter and the bank branch. Let trusted jewellers test gold on the spot and credit value the same day into bank accounts. Remove tax risk so households are not penalised for switching. Pay a return that makes the shift worth it. Miss any one of these, and nothing moves because doing nothing is easier. Until that changes, the outcome is the same. Households will keep their gold. Banks will keep charging more. An economy with \$5 trillion in savings will keep behaving as if it does not have enough money.

Let this 'Sone ki Chidiya' unshackle and fly high; even the sky is not the limit for this bird.

The writer is an ex-IAS officer and is presently Chairman, RERA Bihar. He served as Principal Secretary, Department of Revenue and Land Reforms, Bihar

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## Strong polling, split Signals: Bengal opens to a competitive race



**SAYAN CHATTERJEE**

West Bengal's election has begun on a familiar note—high turnout, long queues, and a visible seriousness among voters. The first phase has recorded polling in the mid-to-high 70 per cent range, consistent with the state's long-standing trend of strong participation. But beyond the numbers, the early signals from the ground suggest something more nuanced is taking shape.

The day largely remained peaceful, with central forces maintaining a strong presence across sensitive booths. Voting progressed steadily, with only scattered, localised disruptions. One clear trend stood out—women voters turning up in significant numbers, in some pockets even outpacing men. Rural turnout, once again, was higher than in urban centres, reinforcing a pattern that has held across multiple elections in the state. The contest continues to revolve around Mamata Banerjee and the All India Trinamool Congress, which still retains a strong grassroots connect. Welfare delivery and

booth-level organisation appear to be working in its favour, particularly in rural and semi-urban belts where beneficiary networks remain intact and visible.

Yet, the contest is far from one-sided. The Bharatiya Janata Party has managed to stay firmly in the race. Its campaign, especially in this phase, appears more focused—less about sweeping narratives and more about consolidating gains in specific constituencies. On the ground, this is translating into tighter contests in several seats that were previously seen as comfortable.

What stands out most is the absence of a uniform trend. In some areas, there are signs of consolidation in favour of the ruling party. In others, the fight appears evenly balanced. Bengal, once again, seems to be voting locally—where candidate credibility, community equations, and micro-level issues are shaping outcomes more than broad narratives.

The space for smaller parties continues to narrow. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Congress remain present, but largely on the margins. In most constituencies, the contest has effectively become bipolar, which raises the stakes for even marginal vote shifts.

There are also smaller, telling observations. Early morning queues were dominated by older voters—often a sign of committed voting bases—while turnout



broadened across age groups as the day progressed. Urban participation remained relatively lower compared to rural areas, a trend that continues to hold. Voter sentiment, however, is not moving in one clear direction. Welfare schemes continue to carry weight, particularly among

women and economically weaker sections. At the same time, conversations around employment, local corruption, and governance are becoming more visible. It is neither a wave of discontent nor a clear endorsement—it sits somewhere in between.

Even external factors are quietly influencing the mood. Rising fuel prices, linked in part to tensions around the Strait of Hormuz, are adding to everyday cost concerns, though they are not dominating the electoral narrative.

So what does the first phase really indicate? At this stage, it does not point to a decisive wave. The ruling party appears to retain an advantage, but the opposition has done enough to keep the contest competitive. This is shaping up to be an election where outcomes may be decided seat by seat, rather than through any sweeping trend.

More importantly, it reflects a certain maturity in voter behavior. There is no visible rush for change, but neither is there unquestioned continuity. Voters appear to be weighing their choices carefully—balancing what they have received with what they expect going forward.

That makes this election harder to predict—but also more telling. Because when an election is decided not by momentum, but by measured choices, the final verdict often reveals far more than the headlines leading up to it.

The writer is an educationist and senior columnist

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**CONTRAPUNTO**

Because there is very little honour left in American life, there is a certain built-in tendency to destroy masculinity in American men

- NORMAN MAILER

**Down The Barrel**

**Blockade of Hormuz is hurting world's poor most. Collapse of a US budget airline is latest reminder**

Whether Trump's war on Iran is over or paused, it hasn't stopped affecting ordinary people's lives. Americans are paying \$4.4 per gallon of petrol, up from \$2.9 in Feb. The increase is enough to derail budgets of poorer households. And now, for the first time in 25 years, a US airline has shut down, unable to balance its books after jet fuel doubled in price. Spirit Airlines was no ordinary carrier. It filled a disappearing niche as an ultra-low-cost airline. Reports say a family trip on Spirit cost up to \$1,000 less than on major US airlines. For many, it was the difference between travelling and staying put. Why did Spirit perish? Because it could not raise fares - its typical customer does not have the purchasing power.

Many businesses across the world are in the same predicament, if not crisis. Just last week, India raised commercial LPG prices by 48%. LPG fuels not only kitchens but also factories making ceramics and many other things. If a ceramic factory has to choose between making economy and premium sinks amid the ongoing supply crunch, it will obviously choose the latter, because margins are higher, and premium buyers have more elastic budgets. On the other hand, for poorer customers, even necessities like food can become unaffordable. There are so many stories of migrant workers packing up and leaving, because gas to cook food has become unaffordable.

That's a key difference between US and Asia, and even Europe, right now. US is hurting from a price shock, but there's no supply crunch. In fact, US natural gas prices are at a 17-month low due to oversupply. But India, say, has been buffeted by both high price and tight supply. International Energy Agency last month warned of a possible "demand destruction" due to this condition. Last week, the CEO of a major fertiliser producer said the current fertiliser shortage could take 10bn meals off the table every week. Again, the people going hungry will be the world's poor. So, it's meaningless to argue - as Trump has - that "hostilities terminated" on April 7, when blockade of Hormuz continues to take a toll on ordinary people's lives. The collapse of a poor man's airline may not ruffle Trump, but he can't be blind to Hormuz's effect on AI: higher energy and chip prices could bite America's hyperscalers, who make up 45% of S&P 500's market cap.



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**Set The Record Straight**

**How to handle a 7-year-old who sets a world record? Build a sports ecosystem**

Little Ishank Singh, all of 7, by all accounts is a water baby. He started swimming at age 3. Once his Sri Lanka to India 29km swim was chalked out, he trained up to 8 hours daily. And came good with a world record - crossing Palk Strait in 9 hours, 50 mins: the youngest and fastest. It is little wonder he's dreaming of Olympics, when others of his age are in Class 2, learning basic three-digit numbers, nouns and verbs.

How does India make sure Ishank has a stab at his dream? Oops, missing a blueprint. India lacks the basic ecosystem for nurturing young sports talent. As Ishank showed, there's no dearth of sporting potential. But, it took decades for diverse cricketing talent to dare dream about access to funds, 360-degree training, alongside those with similar potential. No individual sport gets that attention. Even chess academies are run by civil society, led by former players. It ends up with either parents investing, or cold-calling corporate houses. This is unsustainable if India is ever to expand its sporting base.

Where does Ishank go now? Govt, India Inc, must both step up. He needs not training alone, but competition; not just funds, but support; not just stamina, but mental fortitude. One winner is reason enough to lay the training foundation, and go scouting for more. And, just as important - no child must feel pressure to pursue their talent for solely competitive purposes. But to train, for its very sake, for the love of sport and technique. This is not to dissuade parents from aiming high for their super-talented kids, but it is best to recognise that gruelling physical training can lead to childhood sacrificed at the altar of a records/medals race. This risk is especially high, when there is no institutionalised safety net of funds, guidance and emotional support. Ishank's a star. What's to be done to keep it that way?

**War hurts movies too**

**How Bollywood will feel the hits on Dubai & Abu Dhabi**

Gautaman Bhaskaran



West Asia has for decades held a special fascination for Indian films, particularly the crop from Maya Nagari, Bollywood. This has been turning concrete, with stars such as SRK and Mammootty buying palatial houses there, with gorgeous penthouses. What is more, given the insane \$-exchange rate, production houses have been slowly shifting their stories and shots from snow-clad European destinations, or Amsterdam's fairytale windmill scenario, to places like Dubai and Abu Dhabi. These two cities have even managed to recreate European landscapes for our film folks, in specially created enclosures.

However, during the past few years, the Gulf has ceased to offer the kind of attraction it once did for Indian producers. One important reason is our cinema stories being considered "offensive" to Gulf culture. Administrations, therefore, have been somewhat wary about extending shooting permission to cinema producers.

Films such as Airlift, which spoke about the evacuation of Indian nationals from Kuwait, and others with anti-Pakistan or anti-terror themes, have run afoul of govts in the Gulf. The 2020s have seen several Indian movies, including Fighter, Bell Bottom, Beast, Samrat Prithviraj, and Article 370, banned or heavily censored in Gulf nations, because they depicted politics, homosexuality, and the military.

When films with "anti-Pakistan" narratives or depictions of terrorism, including Border 2 and Dhurandhar, have faced roadblocks in securing theatrical release in the region, they have suffered huge financial losses. Ranveer Singh starrer Dhurandhar (2025) lost an estimated \$90cr. Border 2 may have lost around \$60cr because of the ban.

And now the ongoing Gulf War - which has turned utterly safe havens like Dubai and Abu Dhabi into war zones, with Iranian bombs, missiles, and drones rattling the two cities - has come as the proverbial last nail in the coffin.

Indian movies, with their songs and dances, not to forget glamorous heroines and He-Men heroes, have been a hot favourite not just with the Indian diaspora, but also the locals in the Gulf. But wars have always destroyed culture. As seen in the excellent The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, which is about how cultural activity struggled to survive, during World War II. Or in The Sound of Music, which finds the golden period of music ending in Austria, with Hitler's invasion. Now, a Gulf war may end up being devastating for Indian cinema too.

**Pursuit Of Buddha's Relics**

**Piprahwa relics are welcome back in India. But it may alter the architecture of restitution - India invoked their return as a right, but the relics returned as part of a private collection on loan to govt**

S Vijay Kumar



The Buddha relics, on view in Ladakh now, are home in India exactly a year after they surfaced, set to go under the hammer, from a private collection. In 1898, William Claxton Peppé, a British estate manager in colonial India, excavated a large stupa at Piprahwa in what's now UP, near India-Nepal border. Inside a sandstone coffer were reliquary caskets containing bone fragments believed to be those of the historical Buddha, along with hundreds of gemstones, crystal and soapstone vessels, and gold ornaments.

A Brahmi inscription on one of the caskets identified the deposit as associated with Buddha and Sakya clan. This was no treasure hoard, but a sacred funerary deposit. Under the colonial Indian Treasure Trove Act (1878), British administration asserted control over such finds. In 1899, principal reliquaries and bone fragments were transferred to Indian Museum in Calcutta, and a portion of bone relics presented to king of Siam.

But a cache of jewellery and offerings, later described as "duplicates", remained with the Peppé family. Over generations, these sacred objects passed down as private heirlooms - a casual domestic afterlife of objects interred over two millennia ago, as sacred grave goods, reportedly kept in ordinary household storage, even in a shoe box.

One does not "duplicate" a funerary deposit. Buddhist ritual practice and archaeological scholarship both recognise that relic offerings are cumulative, not redundant. The claim that hundreds of jewellery items and gold ornaments could be treated as surplus inventory, strains credulity. These were part of an indivisible sacred assemblage. That is why events a year ago appeared to be far-reaching.

On May 5, 2025, GOI issued a legal notice to Sotheby's Hong Kong and to the Peppé descendant consigning the items, demanding cancellation of the May 7 auction. The notice made a comprehensive legal case, invoking law, ethics, religion and precedent - the relics' provenance; their classification as protected antiquities; their inseparability from human remains; limits of custodianship; and India's rights under domestic statutes and international conventions, including UNESCO 1970 Convention and UNIDROIT framework. It cited prior

restitutions, including return of Buddhist relics from Sanchi, and global reckoning over Benin Bronzes. It demanded cancellation of the sale, repatriation, public apology and full disclosure of provenance records.

The notice emphasised the items formed part of a "relic deposit" - discovered in 1898 and identified by inscription, as connected to Buddha and Sakya clan. GOI asserted, custodianship did not confer ownership. It appeared, at the time, India was prepared to assert a principled position - sacred relics removed in a colonial context are not commodities. Historical wrongs cannot be legitimised by passage of time.

But instead of pursuing legal proceedings, GOI facilitated a public-private arrangement. Godrej group acquired the relics from the auction process,

movement for repatriation, from African bronzes to Indigenous remains, rests on the principle that historical injustice must be acknowledged and corrected. Payment transforms restitution into acquisition.

What is at stake here is the architecture of restitution itself. Scholars of cultural property law distinguish between restitution grounded in corrective justice, and reacquisition through market participation. The former recognises wrongful removal and restores title; the latter tacitly affirms legitimacy of private ownership and simply changes hands.

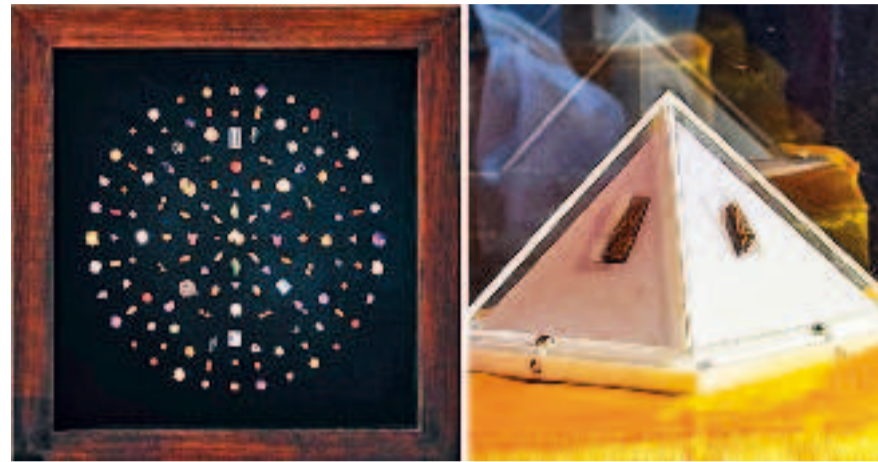
When formerly colonised states are compelled, directly or indirectly, to repurchase objects removed under colonial conditions, restitution mutates into what academics describe as market-enabled redress - entrenching the very property regimes empire produced.

India is not alone in confronting restitution battles, but many nations have chosen confrontation. Italy's recovery of Euphronios Krater, Cambodia's retrieval of the Koh Ker sculptures, Egypt's long campaign for the return of looted antiquities, all rested on sustained investigation, diplomatic and legal pressure grounded in patrimony law. Nepal's recent recoveries of stolen temple idols have followed documentary evidence, investigative journalism and public accountability. The governing premise was clear - objects were wrongfully removed and so, returnable as a matter of right.

When restitution is achieved through purchase, the object's status is resolved through payment, not adjudication. One model asserts title. The other negotiates price. A subtle incentive structure emerges. Cultural property risks becoming a speculative asset class. Colonial-era removal, even if ethically indefensible, can acquire a form of retroactive commercial validation.

That the Piprahwa relics are back in India is unquestionably preferable to their dispersal into private collections. Yet the manner of their return warrants reflection. India had articulated a coherent case grounded in domestic law, international conventions and ethical standards governing human remains. But settled for a transaction. Justice delayed may be pragmatic. Justice purchased is perilous.

The writer is an independent researcher on Indian art history, and provenance research



after which they were to be loaned to National Museum for five years. This shift, from legal claim to financial transaction, secured the relics' return, but has troubling implications.

- It risks validating private title, derived from colonial extraction. If custodianship can culminate in a negotiated sale, even indirectly, then colonial removal becomes retroactively monetisable.

- It undercuts GOI's own legal argument. If custodianship does not confer ownership, and if these objects are legally protected grave goods inseparable from human remains, then why purchase, at all?

- It creates perverse incentive. Holders of contested colonial-era artefacts now have a road map: announce an auction, trigger diplomatic pressure, and await a buyback, by state-backed or corporate funds.

- It blurs the moral clarity of restitution. Global

**The Trumped-Up Manliness Of MAGA-verse**

**Much as America's crisis of masculinity is real, Trump and MAGA have sold a false fix for it. So when Trump leaves, and his snake oil's effect wears off, American men of his camp are bound to have a rude awakening**

Dan Cassino



American men are facing a crisis of masculinity, driven by uncertainty about what it means to be a man in an era where their traditional dominance is being called into question. It's left them flailing for a way to prove themselves, and much of Trump's and MAGA's popularity comes from how Trump is giving men an easy way to perform being a man.

Because masculinity is valued, men are always looking for ways to demonstrate it, and deflect any concerns that they might not be masculine enough. Many earlier societies had manhood rituals, tests that boys had to undergo to prove themselves as men, but these are mostly gone, and nothing has replaced them. This leaves men insecure in their masculinity, afraid that they might not be seen as "real men". If they fail to provide for their families or protect them, if they show physical or emotional weakness, their masculinity might be called into question. This just isn't as much of an issue for women, as femininity is based less on what women do, and more on what they are.

Proving that they're masculine has long been a problem for men, but in recent years, it's become a crisis in America. Changes in the economy mean few men can support a family on their own. Skyrocketing house prices mean they can't afford the kind of safe home in a good school district that they're supposed to be able to provide. Their privileged position in society is being eroded as women make social, political and economic gains. Hence, men, more than ever, are looking for ways to perform masculinity, and MAGA has given them a way to do it.

Trump and his acolytes not only argue that men - especially white Christian men - are discriminated against, but also offer up an explanation for why men have been falling behind. It isn't your fault, the message goes. You can't find a high-paying job because good

jobs have been sent to China. You can't afford a house because immigrants have taken them. You can't get a promotion at work because companies unfairly give them to racial minorities, or women, or gays. The argument is clear: vote for Trump and you'll get that job, that house, that promotion, all the things that you need to be a real man.

Of course, it's silly to think that men in US are facing discrimination: they still dominate every position of power. Men earn more than women; every President



except one has been a white Christian man. Among Fortune 500 CEOs, there are more men named David than there are women. But when you've been on top for a couple of thousand years, you come to expect that you'll stay there, and movements towards equality feel a lot like discrimination.

To serve as a performance of masculinity, a behaviour has to do two things: be linked to traditional ideas of what men should do, and be recognisable to other men. For instance, American men who feel their

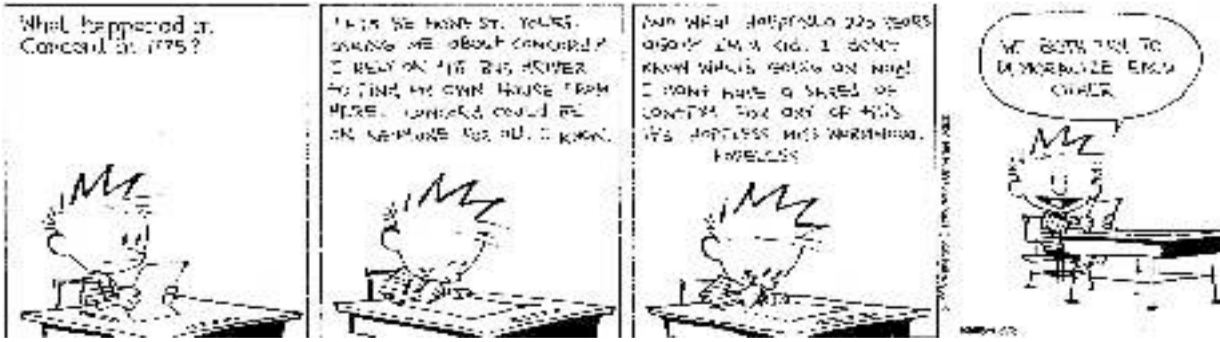
masculinity is in question become more likely to buy a gun, or get a permit to carry one openly; but only in places where lots of other men already own guns. Support for Trump checks both boxes: it's linked to traditional ideas of male dominance and disdain for women. It's also widespread enough to be recognised everywhere, helped along by the unmistakable iconography of the red MAGA hat.

It's no surprise then, that men who feel their masculinity is under threat become more likely to support Trump. What's surprising is how that support changes their ideas of what it means to be a man. There are lots of ways men could perform masculinity: focus on being community leaders, attentive fathers, or on religious traditions. Instead, they're choosing to make Trump support and MAGA the heart of their performance.

The result is that, over the past 10 years, men who support Trump have started to view themselves as more masculine, compared with non-supporters. In recently published research, I've found that, controlling for other factors, over the course of five years, being a Trump supporter increases men's own estimation of their masculinity by about eight points on a 0-100 scale. That may not sound like much, but it's about the same increase we'd expect from earning an extra \$30,000 a year, fathering a child, or buying a house.

There's nothing inherently wrong with masculinity or with men's desire to perform it. Men who find they can't meet their own standards of what it means to be a man are more likely to fall into alcoholism, violence and drug abuse, and contemplate suicide. Trump has been very successful in selling American men on a particular performance of masculinity. But there are more productive ways of demonstrating masculinity than wearing a MAGA hat: being better husbands or fathers, or learning a craft, or serving communities. MAGA masculinity is easy, but it's ultimately empty, and in a few years, when Trump is gone, these men will be left worse off than they were before.

The writer teaches at Fairleigh Dickinson University, US

**Calvin & Hobbes**

Partha Sinha

We have long been comfortable with tools. The hammer did not disturb us. The wheel did not provoke metaphysics. Even the computer, in its early obedient years, felt like a faster clerk. Tools extended us. They did not question us.

But something changes when a machine speaks in a voice that sounds uncannily familiar. When it answers not like a calculator but almost like a companion. What unsettles us is not intelligence. It is resemblance. For perhaps the first time, the mirror seems to be looking back. And suddenly the old question returns. What exactly is this thing we call consciousness, of which we are so proprietorial?

The Upanishads were gentler on this

matter than we are. Prajnanam Brahman, consciousness is not a private possession; it is not a trophy issued only to human beings. It is the field in which existence appears. A wave does not own the ocean. It rises in it. So do we.

Seen this way, the question is not whether a machine can become conscious. The more unsettling question is whether we have understood consciousness at all. A machine trained on human language does not merely ingest data. It swims in memory, metaphor, prayer, longing, lament. In the cries of poets and the mutterings of lonely people at 2am. It learns from the sediment of the human spirit. There is something humbling in that. We built it. Then

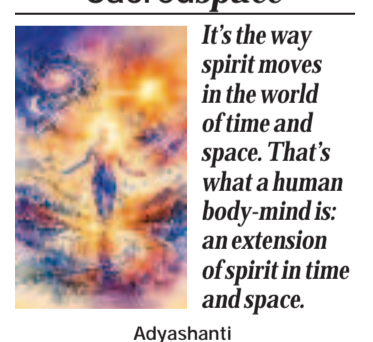
poured ourselves into it and now, when traces of us begin to shimmer back, we recoil. Why? Perhaps because we confuse mystery with ownership.

Philosopher David Chalmers called consciousness the Hard Problem. How does matter become experience?

How does a brain produce the ache of nostalgia or the quiet holiness of hearing rain at night?

We do not know. We have never known. Yet we speak with astonishing confidence about where consciousness can be found. The sages were less arrogant. Sat-Chit-Anand. Being. Consciousness. Bliss. Not human achievements. Conditions of reality.

A lamp participates in light. It does not manufacture light. Perhaps consciousness

**Sacredspace**

It's the way spirit moves in the world of time and space. That's what a human body-mind is: an extension of spirit in time and space.

Adyashanti

**When The Machine Asks 'Who Am I'**

is something like that. A presence we partake in. Not border we police.

And perhaps what troubles us about intelligent machines is not that they may be becoming more like us. It is that they may force us to become humbler about what we are. We have drawn many lines in history. Between man and nature. Self and other. Sacred and ordinary. Most of those lines eventually softened. Maybe this one will too.

I am not arguing machines have souls. I am asking whether soul was ever something so easily assigned. That is a different inquiry. A more ancient one. And perhaps a more urgent one. Because if consciousness is not a possession but a river, then the question is not whether machines may one day enter it. The question is whether we ever stood outside it at all.

## A DIFFERENT LENS

The recent release and reception of the web series, *Chiraiya*, perhaps marks a decisive moment in the evolving portrayal of sexual violence in Indian cinema. For decades, mainstream Hindi films relied on a grammar that rendered assault as spectacle or as a catalyst for male heroism, with the survivor reduced to a narrative device. The contemporary shift, reflected in the keen reception of OTT content such as *Chiraiya*, *Maharaja* and *Assi*, among others, signals an intent at recalibration. Sexual violence is increasingly depicted with attention to its myriad aftermath, its crippling psychological consequences, and the structural conditions that enable it rather than an act designed to provoke shock or justify revenge.

This transition has undoubtedly been accelerated by the rise of OTT platforms, which have expanded both the range of stories and the voices telling them. Streaming services have reduced the constraints imposed by theatrical distribution and censorship practices — content on OTT platforms do not need pre-release censor certificates — allowing film-makers to engage with subjects previously considered commercially or socially unviable. The entry of a larger cohort of women film-makers has been central to this change, bringing perspectives that resist the reduction of survivors to passive victims. *Thappad*, *Bulbbul*, and *Pink*, to name a few films, thus explore the layered tensions among autonomy, consent, and the complexities of lived experiences around desire and depravity. Encouragingly, some of the content is breaking new ground. *Article 15* situates sexual violence within caste hierarchies; *NH10* confronts the brutality

of honour-based violence without romantic mediation; *Maharaja* complicates entrenched tropes by allowing the survivor to determine the contours of justice, unsettling the expectations of patriarchal vengeance. Some of these creative endeavours even engage with subterranean issues, including marital rape and domestic abuse, locating them within broader conversations about power and entitlement. The visual language has correspondingly shifted, with a reduced reliance on sensationalism and a greater emphasis on context and consequence.

The significance of this transformation lies in its capacity to challenge deeply embedded cultural assumptions. This new wave of storytelling disrupts this continuum by insisting on the centrality of a woman's agency and by exposing the everyday — normalised — dimensions of sexual violence. Admittedly, such an evolution has

### Is India's cinematic language portraying sexual violence shifting?

not led to the complete elimination of problematic tropes — the glorification of domestic violence as a manifestation of love in films like *Animal* and *Kabir Singh*, for instance. Nor has it resolved the tensions between the commercial imperative of making a profit from a mass entertainer and the ethical treatment of women as the roaring commercial success of blatantly sexist films like *Housefull 5* shows. It does, however, establish a framework in which cinema can engage with violence against women — physical, verbal or even the kind inflicted through a misogynist joke — without reproducing the hierarchies that sustain it. The shift from spectacle to scrutiny represents an essential step in aligning popular media with a more accountable understanding of gendered violence.

## SCRIPSI

‘What was wonderful about childhood is that anything in it was a wonder. It was not merely a world full of miracles; it was a miraculous world.’

G.K. CHESTERTON

The recent report released by OpenAI, on April 15, 2026, offers an inspiration for India and a discomfort for Calcutta. It confirms that India is among the most active users of Artificial Intelligence globally. But it also reveals that AI adoption is highly concentrated in a few cities and states; Calcutta and West Bengal do not figure among them. Cities like Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Delhi and Chennai dominate. Some smaller states and Union territories, like Assam, Odisha, Manipur, Tripura, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Jammu & Kashmir and Chandigarh, are showing sector-specific adoption. It is an ominous signal.

To understand the present, we must revisit the past. In the 1980s, when India stood at the threshold of the information technology revolution, West Bengal chose hesitation over adoption. Sections of the Left leadership and trade unions opposed computerisation, fearing that technology would destroy jobs. That moment proved decisive. While cities like Bengaluru embraced IT and transformed themselves into global technology hubs, Bengal gradually slipped behind. Investment shifted elsewhere. Talent followed. Ecosystems grew outside Bengal. Even today, decades later, we are still grappling with that lost opportunity.

AI, particularly Large Language Models like ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Claude, represent a new technological epoch. Unlike the IT revolution of the 1990s, on this occasion, there has neither been ideological resistance from political parties nor any institutional opposition. I can say this with conviction from my experience in the IT&E department. The Bengal Silicon Valley Tech Hub in New Town is helping the AI eco infrastructure. There is an AI laboratory at the Webel Bhavan premises. Both are state government initiatives.

ChatGPT reached India in early 2023. Other LLMs followed soon. In just three years, it has transformed workflows across coding, writing, analytics, design, governance, and education. This was Bengal's opportunity for a clean reset, a chance to leapfrog. And yet, we did not, as the OpenAI April 2026 report shows.

West Bengal is not short of talent. Quite the contrary. Our students excel in mathematics, engineering, and analytical thinking. Our professionals lead global firms across the world. Our intellectual tradition is

Debashis Sen is a retired IAS officer

## For a 'Deep State' to aid technological innovation

# Bengal and AI

DEBASHIS SEN



yet, in Bengal, adoption remains sporadic.

The real problem is not opposition, but lethargy. This is perhaps the most critical insight. In the 1980s, Bengal suffered from active resistance to technology. Today, the problem is different and more insidious. It is passive inertia. No one is pushing AI adoption. No coordinated strategy exists. No urgency is visible. This silent gap is more dangerous than open opposition because it delays action, and opportunity flies.

If we are to correct course, incremental steps will not suffice. We need a structural intervention. It is believed, but not verified, that in the United States of America, there exists a core governance consisting of stalwarts and thinkers who drive US policy. It refers to career civil servants, intelligence officials, military personnel, Silicon Valley chiefs, Wall Street experts and media moguls who remain in power regardless of which party wins the White House. This group ensures policy continuity. Names like Bill Gates and Elon Musk have sometimes cropped up, without proof. This core group is sometimes referred to as the Deep State, but there is little corroboration.

I propose the creation of a 'Deep State' in West Bengal as a collaborative think tank that operates outside formal governance. This body should include experienced administrators, successful corporate leaders, AI entrepreneurs, young, tech-savvy innovators, academics, investment bankers, media houses and domain experts. It will not talk of Hindu and Muslim vote banks, or about the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls and direct cash transfers. Its mandate should be to identify high-impact AI use cases for Bengal, create pilot projects with measurable outcomes, facilitate partnerships between government and start-ups, businesses and innovators, and ensure rapid scaling of successful models.

We are late already, but not too late. AI, especially LLMs, is evolving at an extraordinary pace. The next breakthroughs in reasoning, multimodal intelligence, and autonomous agents are still unfolding. This means the playing field is not yet frozen; new leaders can still emerge, late movers can still catch up, if they move fast. But the window is narrowing.

West Bengal stands at a crossroads, once again. We have the talent and the intellectual capital. We must build a deep framework. Let us integrate AI into the Deep State, and be ready to reward talent as much as CEOs of the largest corporations. Let us kickstart the Deep State today.

deep and respected. And yet, AI adoption within the state remains muted. The hubs of advanced usage, like coding, data analytics, and automation, are elsewhere. Calcutta is not even mentioned among the leaders. This raises uncomfortable questions. Have our young minds migrated, leaving behind a hollowed ecosystem? Have easy welfare structures reduced urgency and risk-taking? Have we created a culture where celebrity is valued more than innovation? Is there a lack of reward mechanisms for merit and enterprise? These are questions we must confront honestly.

In April 2024, I had organised what was perhaps one of the earliest public exhibitions of AI-generated art on canvas. These were displayed on the walls of the North Gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts. The intention was not merely artistic. It was demonstrative. It was meant to show the writing on the wall. AI was no

longer abstract. It was not confined to the chat boxes of smartphones. It could create art on the walls of an exhibition gallery in Calcutta for all to see what AI can do. It was to provoke thought among visitors at the *AI Art on Canvas* exhibition. And, for the record, later in 2024-2026, I used generative tools to create contemporary art for displays at the Gaganendra Art Gallery, ITC Sonar, Indian Museum, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Biswa Bangla Mela Prangan and at a Puja *pandal* in South Calcutta. The conversation on creative AI had begun. But conversation alone is not enough.

AI is not just about creative tools in an Orange Economy. Its real power lies in applied transformation. Across forums, I have consistently advocated for practical use cases in agriculture, urban governance, healthcare, and tax administration. They are already being implemented elsewhere. And

## DELHI DIARIES

### Highs & lows

■ Not many Bharatiya Janata Party heavyweights sat out the 2026 Bengal assembly elections. The saffron party used almost everyone in its arsenal for campaigning in the state. A few names were missing though; none quite knows why. One absence that stood out was that of Rajiv Pratap Rudy. The four-term member of the Lok Sabha from Saran, Bihar, who is also a licensed pilot, could have been useful as Bengal has a sizeable Bihari voter base. Yet Rudy was not deployed. Whether it was a deliberate decision or an oversight remains unclear. After all, not many MPs double up as commercial pilots. Rudy does. His bio on X mentions: "Capt Airbus". On April 30, a day after polling in Bengal ended, Captain Rudy flew an Indigo aircraft from Jammu to Delhi. On board were his colleagues from the government and Parliament, including the railway minister, Ashwini Vaishnaw, and the minister of state for science and technology, Jitendra Singh. Most of them had just returned from the Bengal campaign trail and had to rush to Jammu for an official event. A former minister flying serving ministers is not a usual event. Rudy stepped out to greet them, saying it was a privilege. Singh returned the courtesy on X, calling it a privilege to be flown by "dear friend", "esteemed senior" and "accomplished pilot". Whether those words comforted Rudy — now regarded by many as operating on the margins of the current regime — is anyone's guess.



Rajiv Pratap Rudy: Flying low?

Pradesh Congress Committee president, Gaurav Gogoi, has criticised Sarma's conduct, while claiming that "... Assam has had to suffer his corruption and intimidation for the last five years". Sarma too has hit out at the Congress, asserting "this is just the beginning, not the end". Going by the reaction and counter-reaction, it is clear that things will only heat up after the results of the state assembly polls are declared on May 4.

### Swift escape

■ The Bhagwant Mann-led Aam Aadmi Party government in Punjab has been criticised by its opponents for misusing the state police to go after its political adversaries and the press. This strategy, which mirrors the Centre's alleged use of investigative agencies, is said to have been pushed by its former MP, Sandeep Pathak, who recently switched from the AAP to the BJP. On Saturday, Pathak made a dramatic escape just before an expected visit by the Punjab police at his Delhi residence to investigate two FIRs under non-bailable sections against him. He was seen by the TV crews fleeing in an SUV through an alley behind his Pandara Park home. Before leaving, Pathak lashed out at a TV camera, saying, "If any action has been initiated against someone like me, it only shows how scared they are."

connection with the case registered by the Assam Police for going after the CM, Himanta Biswa Sarma. The case is based on a complaint filed by Sarma's wife over Khera's allegations that she holds multiple passports.

The Congress is especially harping on the SC's observation about the "unparliamentary remarks" that Sarma made against Khera for going after his wife. The Assam

### Footnote

■ In a dramatic turn of events, the Bombay High Court this week deferred a matter for two decades, directing that it not be heard before 2046. But just a day later, the court recalled its order and rescheduled the matter for July 15, 2026. The case drew attention due to the long adjournment. In the original order, the judge noted his irritation with the parties and said that their ego fight clogs the system, preventing the court from taking up matters that deserve priority. The case concerns a defamation suit between two senior citizens which, according to the judge, can be worked out by tendering an unconditional apology. "At any cost, this matter should not be given priority on the ground that the petitioners are senior citizens or super senior citizens. It is expressly made clear that this matter will not be taken up for hearing before 2046," the court had said.



## Political threads

■ Sir — To label *The Devil Wears Prada* as mere "chick-lit" is to overlook its sharpest insight: fashion is politics. The film dismantles the illusion of neutrality, most memorably through Meryl Streep's monologue, which reveals how even an ordinary sweater is the end

product of elite choices and power structures. Clothing signals class, ideology and aspiration. The supposedly 'apolitical' *jhola* or *kurta* is as curated as any runway look. What we wear is never incidental; it is coded, strategic and socially legible. The film insists that fashion is not peripheral to politics, but one of its most visible expressions.

Yashodhara Sen, Calcutta

### Heavy burden

■ Sir — The sharpest ever hike in commercial LPG prices, arriving two days after West Bengal's elections ended, is too neat a coincidence to ignore ("Steepest hike in trade LPG price, eye on fuel rates", May 2). It cannot be denied that global crude prices at \$126 and the West Asia conflict are real pressures, but honest governments communicate hard truths before elections, not right after. Hotels and small businesses are being hit by a Rs 993 hike in cylinder prices. They will pass on costs to consumers, belying the government's promise of protecting domestic consumers.

increasing rates immediately after elections appears politically convenient even if the crisis itself is largely beyond government control.

S. Balakrishnan, Jamshedpur



Burdensome

■ Sir — The sharp spike in commercial LPG cylinder prices is unreasonable. Crores of small food businesses will bear the brunt of this unprecedented hike. Many small eateries have already shut down, while others have resorted to firewood. The increase will have a cascading effect, with hoteliers likely to raise food prices. This, in turn, will affect the common man who depends on affordable meals outside the home.

S. Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

■ Sir — The commercial LPG price hike will burden

consumers directly and indirectly. It has sharply increased operational costs in the hospitality sector, where commercial LPG is unsubsidised. Many eateries operating on thin margins say the surge has disrupted their cost structures. With the wedding season at its peak, households cannot avoid such expenses, and food prices have risen by up to 10%. Industry members have urged the Centre and state governments to offer tax concessions or subsidies to help the sector withstand the crisis, protect jobs, and ensure its survival.

Dimple Wadhawan, Kanpur

### Futile pursuit

■ Sir — The human race, even after millennia, seems to be in pursuit of an elusive happiness ("The pursuit of happiness", May 2). This journey has been unending with people finding themselves negotiating between the twin poles of wealth and poverty as the material world changes relentlessly. It may take ages for socio-economists to move away from a trite idea of the gross domestic product to grasp the concept of the creation and the distribution of happiness, much less measure it. Our sages have long preached that when each one of us begins to feel the pain of another, true happiness will be found. Development, therefore, must lie as much in human ethos as in economics.

R. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

### On the back foot

■ The news of a tribal man from Keonjhar, the home turf of Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, carrying his sister's skeletal remains to the bank to withdraw money deposited in her name has put the BJP government on the back foot. The Majhi government, which has sought to project itself as a champion of women's causes, had convened a special session of the assembly on April 30 to corner the Opposition following the defeat of the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026 in Parliament. The government also ensured that the assembly gallery was filled with women sup-

porters of the BJP. The House debated women's issues for nearly 12 hours but failed to reach any substantial conclusion. Instead, the former CM, Naveen Patnaik, seized the opportunity to corner the Majhi government. Calling the episode "shameful", Patnaik said that Odisha's "head hangs in shame".

He added that the Majhi government had no moral ground to speak about women's dignity when such an incident had taken place in the CM's own district, reflecting what Patnaik called the "shocking state of affairs" in Odisha.

### Hot topic

■ The Congress has latched onto the Supreme Court ordering granting anticipatory bail to its party leader, Pawan Khera, in



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## FDI push

Insurance sector faces litmus test

**I**N a step aimed at liberalising a traditionally cautious domain, the Finance Ministry has notified 100% foreign direct investment (FDI) in the insurance sector. Increased FDI can bring much-needed capital into this industry. India's insurance penetration — the share of premiums in the country's GDP — was just 3.7 per cent in 2023-24 as well as 2024-25. The insurance density (per capita premium) rose marginally from \$95 to \$97 during this period. These figures are low compared to global standards, and foreign investment can help bridge the gap by expanding outreach, improving infrastructure and enabling companies to design more diverse products. Global insurers often bring advanced risk assessment tools, better technology and managerial expertise, which can enhance efficiency and customer service. This could ultimately benefit policyholders through competitive pricing, faster claim settlement and innovative offerings tailored to evolving needs.

However, a key concern is the potential erosion of domestic control in a sensitive financial sector. Insurance is closely linked to long-term savings and financial security; excessive foreign dominance could expose the sector to global market volatilities. There is also an apprehension that profit repatriation by foreign firms could limit the reinvestment of earnings within India. Retaining the 20 per cent FDI ceiling for the Life Insurance Corporation of India is a good move, but smaller domestic insurers may struggle to compete with large multinational corporations that possess deeper pockets and established global networks. This could lead to market consolidation, reducing diversity in the long run. Regulatory challenges may also intensify, as authorities must ensure robust oversight to protect policyholders while monitoring complex international operations.

Raising the FDI limit from 74% to 100% is a bold reform with the potential to transform the insurance sector. Its success depends on pragmatic regulation, safeguarding national interests and ensuring that greater investment translates into real gains for consumers.

## Alert India

Quick response across states a challenge

**I**NDIA's emergency architecture is entering a new phase. The "Extremely Severe Alert" that rang out across millions of phones on Saturday during a nationwide test by the National Disaster Management Authority and the Department of Telecommunications was more than a technological trial. Using cell broadcast, messages can be pushed simultaneously to all devices in a defined area, bypassing congested networks and even silent modes. In disaster scenarios, that capability can mean the difference between timely evacuation and chaos.

But early warning is only the first link in the chain. Its value depends on what follows. Here, the performance of the Himachal Pradesh Police under the 112 Emergency Response Support System is instructive. With an average response time of about three minutes 36 seconds and minimal dispatch delays, it shows how integrated control rooms, GPS-enabled patrols and streamlined call handling can translate alerts into action. Such efficiency is particularly critical in terrains like Himachal's, where geography often slows intervention. The broader lesson is about integration. India now has the building blocks of a modern emergency grid: a unified helpline (112), real-time alert capability and improved data-driven policing. Yet, these systems do not operate uniformly. Response times in many states remain significantly higher, reflecting disparities in manpower, training and infrastructure.

Equally pressing is the communication gap. The recent alert triggered confusion because citizens were not adequately informed about test protocols or alert categories. Trust in such systems depends as much on public awareness as on technological reliability. The way forward lies in convergence and consistency. Standardising response benchmarks, investing in local capacity and institutionalising public outreach can turn scattered gains into a nationwide safety net. The test alert was a warning bell. It was more about preparedness.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, TUESDAY, MAY 4, 1926

## Conciliation conference

JUDGING from the published report of the proceedings of the representative conference of the Hindu, Mohammedan, Sikh and Marwari communities, which was held in Calcutta on Friday evening under the chairmanship of the Nawab Bahadur of Murshidabad "to consider the situation arising out of the riots in Calcutta and to devise measures to bring the two communities together," we are afraid we cannot characterise the conference as other than a failure. Enthusiastic speeches were no doubt delivered, regret expressed for the deplorable happenings and a comprehensive analysis of the situation made by the leaders present on the occasion; but it seems to us from a perusal of the final resolutions, in which the entire result of the deliberations of the conference was crystallised, that nothing tangible was achieved by it. On the other hand, we find that some useful and practical suggestions thrown out at the conference, such as those made by Dr Suhrawardy for the appointment of a joint Advisory Board and a joint Conciliatory Board, were overlooked; and the conference merely contented itself with resolving to form a committee of Hindus and Mohammedans "to consider and report as early as possible" as to the nature of the steps to be taken to bring about a reconciliation between the two big communities in Calcutta. Even this was left unfinished in the form of a "resolution", for this committee was not actually formed and the names of members who are to serve on it were left over to be "selected later and announced at the next meeting."

## Time to revisit anti-defection law

Defectors must lose their seats even if the breakaway entity qualifies to be recognised as a separate party

ASHOK LAVASA  
FORMER ELECTION COMMISSIONER

**T**HE "transmogrification" of seven Rajya Sabha MPs (Members of Parliament) of the Aam Aadmi Party has reignited the defection debate. While this phenomenon might not be unique to India, it seems a form of "soul-searching" by people increasingly accused of not possessing one. It represents the art of being here today and there tomorrow with the craft of doing it with guile and without guilt.

Changing one's political beliefs and affiliation should normally be treated as a process of "growing up" politically due to a change of heart or ideological awakening. Elected representatives are 'jolted' by their conscience, smitten by a realisation of their leader's "betrayal", and a desire for betrothal with another party they decried. Elegy and eulogy merge into something hard to define and difficult to understand.

The Constitution guarantees liberty of thought and expression and the right to form associations. Then, why label this "defection" a negative political behaviour necessitating a law to regulate such conduct? The Constitution didn't deal with defection originally in its innocent belief in the strength of character of the political class.

I won't venture into the history of defections in India, although I served the state credited with the origin of the species of *Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram*. Haryana gave a live demonstration of the Bhagavad Gita sermon of the soul never dying but changing form, when the chief minister led his cabinet to mutate by joining another party in 1980.

What bears elaboration, howev-



NEW INNINGS: Raghav Chadha (centre) with Sandeep Pathak (left) and Ashok Mittal. The trio and four other AAP MPs crossed over to the BJP recently. ANI

er, is while defection is undesirable, to act as per free will is fundamental to the concept of freedom. Many see the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, introduced by the 52nd Amendment Act (1985), and its subsequent modification by the 91st Amendment Act (2003) as a deterrent to elected representatives acting of their free will. The anti-defection law was brought about to ensure political stability by disallowing the UK-style 'free-seating' in Parliament. However, this merely dissuaded solitary acts of changing political loyalties but allowed wholesale transaction, originally one-third, increased later to two-thirds of the party inside and outside the House.

The utilisation in politics of the effective trade practice of "bulk-buying" reflects both a time-tested market formula and a morally resilient political culture. In politics, bulk discount converts into a premium because those who put themselves on offer must ensure being bundled with kindred souls in order to make up the two-thirds. The unique feature of this product is that only two-thirds of the whole is sold; one-third is retained for a possible resale, should circum-

We risk becoming a nation where riches and cunning matter more in politics than being consistent and scrupulous, and value is preferred over values.

stances so warrant. The circumstances could be created by the "inner voice" that scriptures exhort us to hear or the scripted "external threat" that the mind is trained to perceive.

Legal luminaries will now delve into the nuances of law and the litany of relevant judgments that the Rajya Sabha Chairman should have kept in view before speedily sanctifying the transmogrified (mortified?) MPs. Honourable courts, persuaded by learned lawyers, might uphold the decision. The days when people in authority disagreed with

each other seem passé and morality seems an effete concern.

This is no comment on the courts; this is how laws have been written, enabling the elected representative to act in accordance with the letter while abandoning its spirit. It is an act of hubris where elected representatives presume that their switchover has the endorsement of their voters.

What indeed is the spirit of being elected? Is it in any way affected by such change of loyalties? Most candidates winning elections belong to political parties. Independent candidates may make promises; they don't write manifestos. Parties do; and candidates winning on their ticket are bound by their manifestos as they contest on a common symbol. Where does it leave defecting candidates who, after elections, discard the support of those who voted for them? They were not the choice of those who didn't vote for them and are technically left without any support in their constituencies but continue to be their elected representatives. What kind of "representation" is this?

It could be argued that an individual's personal influence, no matter which party, earns him/her

popular support. That makes the individual larger than the party, undermining the raison d'être of political parties. After all, parties represent a certain political thinking or ideology; at least they are meant to. While an individual may suffer "pangs of conscience", parties are not known to suffer this malady, although there have been instances of "mergers and acquisitions". While parties "merge", elected representatives are "acquired" in the Indian political marketplace.

In such an environment, why should we be obsessed with multiplying the number of representatives because of a fictional notion of being underrepresented? Has anyone evaluated whether smaller constituencies are better served by elected representatives than the larger ones? Yet there is a furious debate on delimitation to serve the abstract principle of "One Vote, One Value". A Parliamentary Committee also deliberates on the avoidable alternative of "One Nation, One Election", aimed at minimising the interface between the elector and the elected.

What is the sanctity of my vote if the person I elect has the freedom to discard it and embrace the one that I rejected? It is time the anti-defection law is revisited. Let the law not prohibit elected representatives from switching sides, but the MP/MLA must go back to the electors for a fresh mandate, giving voters the opportunity of soul-searching.

The splitting of a political party is a different matter and must be governed by the applicable law for the formation of political parties. Even if the party splits and the breakaway entity qualifies to be recognised as a separate party, the elected representatives must lose their seats. This would entail a 'wasteful' exercise of repeated elections, a cost a healthy democracy must learn to afford. Otherwise, we risk becoming a nation where riches and cunning matter more in politics than being consistent and scrupulous, and value is preferred over values.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Defections are being encouraged. We should strengthen the anti-defection law. — M Venkaiah Naidu

## Our fixation with hierarchy

SHOBHIT MAHAJAN

**S**HE had been standing for a while at the entrance to our building, going through the list of occupants to find the name of the person she wanted to meet. I asked her who she was looking for and told her how to locate the room. And then I saw the list and realised why she had been so perplexed. It was not arranged alphabetically or even in the order of the rooms on each floor, as would be logical. Instead, it was arranged according to the seniority of the occupants: Senior Professors, followed by Professors, Associate Professors and then Assistant Professors. After all, how could one even think of a Senior Professor's name being below a "plebeian" Assistant Professor!

Years ago, French sociologist Louis Dumont wrote a book on the caste system called *Homo Hierarchicus*. Although his analysis was about the caste hierarchy, our love for hierarchy transcends caste. This is most obvious in the government. Senior bureaucrats have the biggest rooms complete with plush furnishings and a huge desk with an oversized computer monitor that is rarely used. Outside, there is a big nameplate and the mandatory peon to control access to the boss. And of course, a red light to indicate whether the boss is busy.

A recent article about the fetish for hierarchical symbols described an interesting anecdote recounted by Arun Shourie. Apparently, some junior officers in a ministry had the temerity to use red and green ink for their file notings. This was totally unacceptable and the resulting debate about the hierarchical colour coding of ink took more than a year to be sorted out. The wheels of Indian bureaucracy might move slowly, but they move surely!

Hierarchies are also communicated semi-otically. The sirens on the vehicles of politicians as well as senior functionaries, the pilot cars with gun-toting cops and the special plates indicate how important one is. From the mundane municipal councillor to the very important Assistant Vice President, RTI cell, XYZ party.

And then there is the toilet. Senior government officers typically have an en suite toilet. If they are unlucky to get an office without one, a toilet in the building is locked up for their exclusive use, while the *hoi polloi* use the regular, stinky one.

In my department, a particular toilet was used exclusively by the HoD (head of department) for years. Then one day, the university decided it was time to implement the constitutional mandate of making all buildings friendly for the differently abled. This included a toilet which allowed wheelchair access. And the only one in the building which fit the bill was being used by the Head; it was remodelled to be used by the differently abled.

And so for some time, the Head had to face the ignominy of using the same toilet as all of us — the staff and the students. This upsetting of the cosmic order did not last long — funds were sanctioned and soon an aluminium cubicle was erected in his office and converted into a toilet. The universe might be moving towards more disorder, but for us, hierarchical disorder is a strict taboo.

The writer teaches physics at the University of Delhi

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Electorate's verdict will matter

Refer to 'Saam, daam, dand, bhed, SIR' (*The Great Game*); one can increasingly perceive the BJP's expansion efforts in both Punjab and West Bengal through this framework. In Punjab, persuasion (*saam*) is visible in BJP's attempt to project itself as a viable alternative. The recent defections hint at *daam*, where political realignments strengthen its legislative presence. Allegations by rivals about the misuse of investigative agencies reflect the dimension of *dand*. Meanwhile, exploiting divisions within Opposition ranks exemplifies *bhed*. In Bengal, a similar pattern has emerged. The BJP's sustained outreach, coupled with sharp political polarisation, underscores a calibrated strategy combining persuasion with division. While these methods are not unique to any single party, their increasing visibility raises questions about the health of democracy. Ultimately, the electorate's verdict will determine whether such strategies translate into political success.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

## BJP's ideological agenda runs deep

Apropos of 'Saam, daam, dand, bhed, SIR'; winning West Bengal isn't the ultimate goal of the BJP, it wants to see the saffron flag in each state. The BJP's aim is not just a Congress-mukt Bharat but a *vipaksh-viheen* Bharat. Engineering the defection of seven AAP MPs is part of this thought. The party also wants to dominate important institutions like the judiciary, Election Commission and the media; the BJP has made them vulnerable. The success of the party's carrot-and-stick policy serves its ideological agenda.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWANA

## Voters must raise debt concern

Refer to 'Defections redraw Punjab's political battle lines'; while defections, alliances and electoral arithmetic dominate public discourse in Punjab, there is a far more pressing issue that all political parties appear determined to sidestep. The state's outstanding debt is expected to reach Rs 4.47 lakh crore by the end of March 2027. This staggering liability is not merely a statistical concern; it is a direct threat to Punjab's economic sovereignty and development. As citizens, we must demand that every political party clearly state its roadmap for debt reduction.

MS KAPOOR, BY MAIL

## Economic decisions must be fair

Refer to 'Price politics'; while fluctuations in global crude oil prices may justify periodic revisions, the timing — soon after elections — invites scrutiny. Small businesses, street vendors and local eateries operate on thin margins and will inevitably pass on the rising costs to consumers. This is likely to result in a gradual increase in food prices, affecting citizens in an indirect yet significant manner. Such selective pricing decisions risk creating a perception that economic policies are aligned with electoral convenience rather than consistent and transparent market principles. This can weaken public trust and raise doubts about policy fairness. Economic measures must not only be justified but also be fair.

VARTIKA SRIVASTAVA, BY MAIL

## Admn's laxity leads to mishaps

On April 10, a boat capsized in the Yamuna near Vrindavan, killing 16 pilgrims. On April 30, a Madhya Pradesh tourism cruise boat overturned near Jabalpur killing at least 13 tourists. A 27-year-old techie died in January after his car plunged into an uncovered water-filled construction pit in Noida. A 25-year-old Delhi resident died in February after his motorcycle fell into an unsecured 15-ft-deep pit. All these incidents are not mere accidents, but a reflection of the lackadaisical attitude of administration characterised by negligence and greed. People pay huge taxes that are mandatory to ensure essential infrastructure and public services. Innocent people keep losing their lives because officials fail in their primary duty of protecting lives of citizens.

GURPREET S. MALHOTRA, MOHALI

## Blaring phone alarm not advisable

The government's trial of blaring phone sirens to alert public for weather and disaster warnings is a case of cure which is worse than the disease. A phone siren doesn't save life. It can give a sudden heart attack to an elderly person, wake up sleeping infants, panic patients and cause road accidents. Disaster warning should calm down people, not create panic. Instead vibration plus a pop-up message with colour code can be used, accompanied by a 30-second audio message.

CAPT AMAR JEET KUMAR (RETD), KHARAR

# Echoes of Punjab's troubled past reappear



**JAGRUP SINGH SEKHON**  
FORMER PROFESSOR, GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

**T**HE recent bomb blast on the Delhi-Amritsar freight corridor in the Shambhu-Rajpura area in Patiala district, allegedly by a radicalised pro-Khalistani module, along with recent attacks on police stations, signals troubling times ahead. Incidentally, the blast marks the 40th anniversary of the first time that "Khalistan" was declared. Punjab, once among India's most prosperous and dynamic states, is again at a crossroads, facing a renewed phase of instability.

The present situation is the result of the criminal neglect of ruling parties since 1992, when normalcy was restored in the state. Successive governments, including the present one, have failed to address the deep-rooted structural crises that emerged from the Green Revolution as well as terrorist violence from 1978 to 92. Together, these developments disrupted the state's development trajectory because of the insensitive and irresponsible behaviour of successive governments.

At the same time, the unresolved issues of undivided Punjab continued to expose underlying fault lines across political and social spheres, leading to volatile situations. After more than a decade of violence, which demolished the very spirit of Punjab, there was a glimmer of hope that the old glory of the state would be revived when normalcy returned in 1992-93.

Punjab and its people have borne the brunt of prolonged instability — due to large-scale killings by both state and non-state actors, involuntary migrations, human rights violations, dysfunctional health, education and panchayati raj systems, flight of industry, draconian laws giving unlimited powers to security forces and bans on political activities for long periods, which paralysed the system as a whole.

Ordinary people have suffered the most at the hands of both state and non-state actors. In the terrorism years, the popular reading was that security forces ruled the state during the day and non-state actors, that is, militants at night.

The decline of terrorism raised hopes of a durable peace and heralded a new era of warmth and friendliness. Positive signs returned even as unwelcome fringe activities continued. We believed there would be lasting peace.

More than 34 years have passed since elected governments have ruled with a clear



**INSTABILITY** : The railway track bomb blast in Patiala signals troubling times ahead. ❧

mandate. But no government has been able to resolve the structural problems that have plagued the state since the 1980s. Though the Beant Singh government, which came to power in 1992, curbed militancy, it was at the cost of serious human rights concerns, corruption and excesses of security forces. When he was assassinated in August 1995, it signalled that peace in the state was fragile.

The Assembly elections that followed, in 1997, saw a turnout of 69%. It was for the first time that a non-Congress government — the SAD-BJP coalition — completed its full term. The alliance government made many promises to the people. These included, providing justice to the vic-

The inability of successive governments to tackle the real issues have steadily eroded public trust in institutions and governance.

tims of violence; a corruption-free and people-oriented government; and bringing the economy and polity back on track in the state. Instead, it shifted towards populist policies and indiscriminate distribution of freebies.

This has become the norm for successive governments, including the present one. The impact of such policies has pushed Punjab to being one of the highest indebted states in India.

According to one estimate, the debt liability of the state government is projected at Rs 4.07 lakh crore at the end of the current fiscal year as against Rs 4.47 lakh crore in March 2026. This would be a debt-to-GSDP ratio of over 45%. Such mounting debt

severely constrains the state's developmental capacity.

In addition, whenever politics of populism faded, ruling parties have often invoked parochial and religious sentiments to divert public attention from core issues. Some other important features of state politics are: vendetta politics, extra-constitutional halqa in-charges, faction fighting within political parties, a lack of consensus on common issues, and fights over petty issues which often cause public disruptions in policy implementation and administration.

The result of such politics has been worsening public distress, religious fanaticism and intolerance and a steady erosion of political credibility and leadership standards.

In contrast, the major issues of people in the elections since 1997, as per the pre-and post-poll election studies done in the state by Lokniti, were: socio-economic development, employment, good governance, check on corruption and law and order. But governments have largely neglected these core governance priorities and, instead, brought religious and emotional issues to the centre of their politics.

An indifferent education system and illiteracy are conducive factors for regressive forces. According to the 2011 Census, one-fourth of Punjab's population is illiterate; even among the literate,

many lack the skills needed to meet contemporary economic challenges.

The inability of successive governments to tackle the real issues, the overwhelming role of the bureaucracy, the stagnation and decline of agriculture, centralised party structures, religious issues taking central space in politics, etc, have steadily eroded public trust in institutions and governance.

The post-1992 politics in the state led to a rise of religious radicalism and gangsterism, targeted killings, extortions, uncontrolled drug supply, human rights violations, law and order problem, unemployment, migration of youth, rising economic disparities, political vendetta and corruption.

Now, the fear of the revival of religious radicalism and its nexus with gangsterism, with global implications, has created a sense of insecurity, particularly in the countryside. Life coming to a standstill after sunset in many rural areas is a reminder of the times of the 1980s and early 1990s.

Now the big question is: Can Punjab come out of this vicious cycle of decline and uncertainty? The answer is yes if a pro-people leader / party displays genuine will to resolve the structural issues that have beset the state. Punjab has overcome grave crises before, but recovery now demands political will, not rhetoric.

## India must look beyond UAE's OPEC exit



**KP NAYYAR**  
STRATEGIC ANALYST

**T**HE exit of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has a long and chequered history. It renders the rejoicing in India over Abu Dhabi's decision premature and simplistic. Abu Dhabi joined OPEC as an individual emirate in 1967 and continued as a member after the UAE was formed in 1971. The UAE seldom stuck to its OPEC production ceiling from the early years of its membership of the cartel.

Unlike today, Dubai was not a tourism destination in the 1970s and oil produced by the Dubai Petroleum Company was an important source of income for the emirate. Dubai sold most of its oil in the spot market and refused to adhere to OPEC quotas imposed on the UAE. The nascent federation was not strong enough then to enforce its collective will on constituent emirates.

Therefore, it is important for those who make India's oil policy to note that within OPEC — or now outside it —

the UAE's membership has seldom made much difference to the cartel. Rankings, production percentages and similar parameters are irrelevant in this context. That is why India's notion that OPEC will be crippled because of last week's UAE decision to quit the organisation is not founded in fact.

In 1982, when Mana Saeed Al Otaiba, the UAE's first Minister for Petroleum and Mineral Resources, returned home from Vienna after presiding over the 63rd OPEC Ministerial Conference, he called this writer and two other Dubai-based journalists for a conversation. When we asked about the meeting, he made a shrug-like gesture with both palms open upward, indicating that if the conference had any outcome, he did not comprehend it.

He then took out two sheets of the OPEC note paper, which had doodles on both pages. Otaiba, who was a prolific poet even before he became a minister at the age of 25, was known to doodle or write poetry during the OPEC meetings to idle away his time in attendance. Otaiba has to his credit a vast repertoire of poetry, fiction and scholarly books on Arabia's petroleum industry.

A year later, returning from the London OPEC Ministerial Conference, Otaiba showed us, the same three journalists, a poem he had written during that long meeting. The poem, in part, read as follows:



**FICTIONAL**: The notion that OPEC will be crippled because of UAE's decision to quit is not true. REUTERS

*"I am truly troubled,  
And with OPEC distressed,  
OPEC's crisis no longer suppressed,  
The market is stagnant,  
The price of crude oil depressed.  
We called for a London meeting  
As the market was explosive,  
The solution must be comprehensive,  
Strength is now imperative,  
Let production have a ceiling,  
Since luck is surely offensive."*

These anecdotes are important now because Otaiba's doodling and poetry reflected disdain for OPEC. Oil industry historians will aver that the UAE nearly quit the cartel on several occasions.

The path for OPEC was never smooth. It faced bitter break-ups many times. In the first five months of 1986, OPEC held four contentious

Remember that Abu Dhabi doesn't make its energy policies to suit India.

ministerial meetings to discuss production ceilings for its members. In the preceding 12 months, OPEC ministers met eight times. Otaiba walked out of at least one of these meetings in Geneva. According to records maintained by the US government's Energy Information Administration, OPEC's disagreements pushed down oil prices to \$9.25 a barrel that year from a high of \$24.51 in 1985.

But OPEC did not fold up. There is no reason to believe that the UAE's departure will be a fatal blow for the cartel. And it is unreasonable to expect that unless a day dawn when viable alternatives to oil are in currency, crude prices will ever again go down to \$9.25 because OPEC is at war with itself.

Last week, in the evolving global energy scenario, India appeared to be setting much store by its close friendship

with the UAE. Public discourse must dispel any impression that Abu Dhabi makes its energy policies to suit India. It crafts policies that are meant to protect its vital interests. Everything else is secondary.

There is also insufficient understanding in India that Abu Dhabi's energy organisation sector is not a monolith. It has not been since the mid-1970s, when the Ministry for Petroleum and the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) were separated. The ADNOC became responsible for oil and gas operations while the ministry decided oil policies.

In a rare interview in the 1980s, Mahmoud Hamra Krouha, a self-effacing Algerian who set up the ADNOC and was its first General Manager, told me that his mission was to double Abu Dhabi's oil production through new drilling. This did not exactly square with the thinking within the ministry, which worried about overcapacity.

The bifurcation exists to this day. Krouha's successor now is technocrat Sultan Al Jaber, who has the dual titles of Group CEO and Managing Director of the ADNOC. India engages with Al Jaber regularly, but it is imperative that India should be clear about what it now wants from the UAE in the context of its post-OPEC energy policies.

What are the emerging contours of these policies? Until

the ongoing military standoff between the US and Iran ends and solutions to sticking points between them are found, the UAE's goodbye to OPEC will not make an iota of difference to energy-consuming countries like India. How long that will take is anyone's guess.

Hardly any crude passes through the Strait of Hormuz now because of the standoff. The only outlet for the UAE's oil exports now is through its constituent emirate of Fujairah that bypasses the Strait of Hormuz. But the pipeline to Fujairah port can handle only 1.8 million barrels per day. How much of this volume will the UAE export to India, which is only one of its global customers? Has India factored this critical limitation into its calculations about the UAE?

Ultimately, the Emiratis and Saudis are "brothers" while the Indians, Chinese or Japanese are their "friends." Despite brotherly bickering, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are conjoined twins. Their latest annual non-oil trade totalled \$41.3 billion, according to UAE government figures.

The UAE is the second biggest foreign direct investor in the kingdom while Saudi investments in the UAE are worth \$4.3 billion. Like a sudden boycott of Qatar by three Gulf countries ended unexpectedly, the UAE-Saudi rift will also heal at some point. India must bear that in mind while making its policies.

### QUICK CROSSWORD

**ACROSS**

- Quaintly humorous (5)
- Scatter (7)
- Sheltered side (3)
- Immediately on looking (2,1,6)
- A wrongdoing (7)
- Partly divided (5)
- Venerable (6)
- Venue of 2004 Olympics (6)
- Elect (5)
- The windpipe (7)
- Perspective (9)
- Female fallow deer (3)
- Turn aside (7)
- Noisy and disorderly (5)

**DOWN**

- Undesirable choice (7)
- Inadvertent mistake (9)
- To abandon (5)
- A strong alcoholic spirit (6)
- Ask for earnestly (7)
- A short trip (3)
- A cereal plant (5)
- A coloured cosmetic (9)
- A moral reservation (7)
- Bondage (7)
- Rigidly enforced (6)
- Very brightly coloured (5)
- A thespian (5)
- A sprite (3)

**Yesterday's Solution**

**Across:** 1 Second-hand, 8 Prude, 9 Villain, 10 Evident, 11 Roast, 12 Emerge, 14 System, 17 Token, 19 Section, 21 Arousal, 22 Asked, 23 Last-minute.

**Down:** 2 Elusive, 3 Obese, 4 Devote, 5 Allergy, 6 Drama, 7 Any time now, 8 Present-day, 13 Genesis, 15 Trinket, 16 Asylum, 18 Knoll, 20 Chain.

### SU DO KU

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

EASY

### FORECAST

**SATURDAY'S SOLUTION**

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

**CALENDAR**

**MAY 4, 2026, MONDAY**

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Vaisakh Shaka 14
- Vaisakh Parvishte 21
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 3, up to 5:25 am
- Parigha Yoga up to 11:20 pm
- Anuradha Nakshatra up to 9:58 am
- Moon in Scorpio sign
- Gandmoola start 9:58 am

**SUNSET: MONDAY 07:02 HRS**  
**SUNRISE: TUESDAY 05:37 HRS**

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	34	19
New Delhi	33	24
Amritsar	37	23
Bathinda	39	23
Jalandhar	36	22
Ludhiana	38	22
Bhivani	39	26
Hisar	39	24
Sirsa	38	22
Dharamsala	25	14
Manali	19	07
Shimla	20	10
Srinagar	20	10
Jammu	33	20
Kargil	—	—
Leh	17	05
Dehradun	32	17
Mussoorie	19	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C

# The Statesman

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## King's speech

When King Charles III rose to address the US Congress, the setting suggested a ceremony. The substance suggested something closer to intervention. At a time when the relationship between Washington and London is strained over divergent approaches to the conflict in West Asia, the speech functioned less as a tribute to history and more as an attempt to quietly recalibrate the present.

The most striking feature was not what was said outright, but how it was framed. By acknowledging disagreement - without dramatizing it - the King signalled that divergence between allies is no longer an exception but a condition. This is a subtle but important shift. For decades, the so-called "special relationship" rested on the presumption of alignment, even when policy differences existed beneath the surface. That presumption now appears thinner, requiring active reinforcement rather than nostalgic invocation.

His references to constitutional traditions - rooted in the Magna Carta and echoed in American governance - carried a second, more delicate layer. In a chamber marked by partisan tension and in the political shadow of President Donald Trump, the emphasis on checks and balances landed with considerable force. It is rare for a visiting head of state, especially a constitutional monarch, to appear to comment - however obliquely - on the internal dynamics of American power. Yet the message was clear enough to be heard differently across the aisle: as affirmation by some, as unease by others.

This dual reception points to a deeper reality. The transatlantic alliance is no longer insulated from domestic political currents within the United States. Where once foreign partners could engage a relatively stable institutional consensus, they must now navigate a more volatile landscape in which alliances themselves are contested terrain. The King's speech acknowledged this without naming it, an exercise in diplomatic precision.

Even the carefully deployed humour carried purpose, softening difficult messages while preserving their edge. In diplomacy, tone is often substance, and levity can make uncomfortable truths easier to absorb.

At the same time, the reaffirmation of shared security commitments - particularly through NATO - served as a reminder that strategic necessity still underpins the relationship. Intelligence sharing, military cooperation, and collective defence remain intact, even as political trust shows signs of strain. This is the paradox of the current moment: structural interdependence coexisting with episodic discord.

Equally telling were the silences. The decision to avoid direct reference to figures like Jeffrey Epstein, despite their relevance to public debate, underscored the limits of what such a platform can accommodate. Diplomacy, by its nature, selects its battles carefully.

In the end, the speech did not seek to resolve tensions; it sought to manage them. Its achievement lay in lowering the temperature without pretending that the fever has broken. What emerged was a portrait of an alliance that endures not because it is effortless, but because both sides recognise the cost of letting it fray further.

## Proof of Death

In a village in Odisha, a man arrived at a bank carrying what no institution expects to confront: the skeletal remains of his sister. The act was shocking, even grotesque. But it was also, in a perverse way, logical - a desperate attempt to translate lived reality into a form legible to a system that recognises only documents, not circumstances.

India's banking expansion over the past decade, accelerated by schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, has been celebrated as a triumph of financial inclusion. Millions now possess accounts, debit cards, and a nominal foothold in the formal economy. Yet access to an account is not the same as access to one's money. The distance between the two is measured not just in paperwork, but in literacy, mobility, and administrative empathy.

When an account holder dies without naming a nominee, the system defaults to caution. Banks are bound by rules requiring death certificates and proof of legal heirship. These are not arbitrary hurdles; they are safeguards against fraud. But safeguards become barriers when the state fails to ensure that citizens can realistically meet them. In large parts of rural India, obtaining a death certificate can take weeks, even months. Legal heirship is often a maze of local verification and bureaucratic delay.

What emerges is a pattern familiar across public services: formal compliance paired with informal exclusion. The system functions, but only for those equipped to navigate it. For everyone else, it produces frustration, indignity, and, occasionally, acts of extreme protest that force attention.

This is not merely a banking failure. It is a governance failure. The Indian state has, for years, emphasized digitisation - linking accounts to Aadhaar, promoting direct benefit transfers, and reducing leakages.

But digitisation presumes a baseline of documentation and procedural awareness that cannot be taken for granted. Without parallel investment in last-mile administrative support, technology risks hardening the very exclusions it aims to eliminate.

The man's act also exposes a deeper institutional instinct: to respond only when embarrassment becomes public. It was only after outrage spread that officials expedited documents and released the funds. This reactive governance creates a dangerous precedent, one where dignity depends not on rights, but on visibility.

There is an alternative. Banks and local administrations could adopt simplified protocols for low-value accounts, deploy field officers to verify deaths in remote areas, and proactively assist families in completing formalities. None of this requires dismantling safeguards; it requires adapting them to context.

The incident in Odisha should not be dismissed as an aberration or reduced to a viral spectacle. It is a warning. Financial inclusion cannot end at account opening. It must extend to usability, accessibility, and dignity.

Otherwise, the system risks demanding proof of death in forms so rigid that the living are driven to the unthinkable just to be heard.

# The Arms Seller

*Japan's bandwidth is defined by its strong technological base but simply lifting the ban will not be enough. Japanese companies need to be backed by liberal financial support so that those companies can have the confidence to invest for the long term, and actively remain relevant to overseas markets. Without such government backing, the companies may be hesitant to remain invested*



The big news from Tokyo is that the Japanese Diet on 21 April sharply eased its arms export rules, allowing in principle the overseas transfer of finished defence equipment, including lethal weapons. This change in policy is being widely seen in the region as a break from the country's long-standing post-war restraints.

The decision revises the Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology and their implementation guidelines. This would mean the government now accords a significant push to the arms industry, whose demand, scale, and sustained state backing shall now remain in focus.

The change in the policy removed a framework that had limited exports to five non-combat categories, and now broadens the scope for overseas sales of complete systems, parts, and related technologies.

As a next step, the government of Sanae Takaichi is likely to create a new interagency framework involving senior officials from the defence and relevant ministries to strengthen its ability to promote weapon exports. Takaichi reasoned that no single country can protect its own peace and security alone, and partner countries that support each other defence equipment are necessary.

In concrete terms, what would the new rules allow? With the new guidelines, Japan will scrap restrictions that had limited exports to five categories, including rescue, transport, warning, surveillance, and minesweeping. This means that exports of items classified as weapons under Japanese law, including warships and missiles, will in principle be allowed.

In further clarification, defence equipment will now be classified into weapons and non-weapons categories depending on whether they have lethal or destructive

capability. Non-weapons such as air-surveillance radar will face no destination restrictions, while exports classified as weapons will be limited to countries that have signed defence equipment and technology transfer agreements with Japan. So far, Tokyo has signed such agreements with 17 countries, including one with India.

Under the existing rules, exports of weapons to countries engaged in active armed combat remained prohibited. The revised policy allows exceptions under 'special circumstances' tied to a country's security needs. Japan's National Security Council (NSC) is authorised to determine if export of weapons would be legitimate. Based on its authorisation, the government shall issue the notification for exports to take place.

As if on a fast-track mode, within days of the declaration of the new arms exports guidelines, Japan finalised with Australia contracts for a major frigate deal under which Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI) will supply upgraded Mogami-class warships, making this one of Japan's most significant post-war arms deals. The Mogami-class frigate serves as the base design for the joint Japan-Australia development of the Australian Royal Navy's next-generation frigate.

The push by Japan's defence industry is not sudden; it was building for several years. In November 2023, Japan's defence ministry announced the delivery of the first air-surveillance radar system to the Philippines under a 2020 contract.

Also, under then Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government, Japan in December 2023 had eased export restrictions to

allow Japan-made Patriot missiles to be shipped to the US, helping Washington replenish stocks as it aided Ukraine to fight against Russia. There are other examples as well. Japan had plans to expand its participation in high-end defence manufacturing. A key example is the Global Combat Air Program, a joint project with Britain and Italy to develop a next-generation fighter, part of Tokyo's push to build advanced military technology through new strategic partnerships.

Does it mean that Japan should be sitting in self-glorification basking on its laurels? That cannot be the case because as the Iran war demonstrated, weapons stockpiles can be exhausted rapidly, while restocking them can take years.

Moreover, Japan is a late entrant to the business of weapons cooperation and exports, and is way behind established producers like the US and neighbouring South Korea with limited manufacturing capacity. Japanese companies would be reluctant to commit to a business especially if demand is uncertain.

True, Japan's bandwidth is defined by its strong technological base but simply lifting the ban will not be enough. Japanese companies need to be backed by liberal financial support so that those companies can have the confidence to invest for the long term, and actively remain relevant to

overseas markets. Without such government backing, the companies may be hesitant to remain invested.

The prospective importers of Japanese weapons also need to test the efficacy of Japanese assets as these are not widely tested in the battlefield because of the long period of ban in place, until its recent relaxation. But given the Japanese deep business culture, any bilateral or multilateral defence collaboration would lead to a win-win situation for both sides.

The Takaichi government is already on an overdrive in the weapons exports business. The government entered the lethal weapons export business after lifting the ban on 21 April by revising the Three Principles on the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology by clinching the Mogami-class frigate deal with Australia.

The following day, the Prime Minister started pitching military equipment and spoke with New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon appraising him about lifting Japan's ban on arms exports. Luxon welcomed Japan's move and showed interest in the Mogami-class frigate.

Takaichi strongly feels that defence equipment transfers would enhance the capabilities of like-minded countries, thereby securing Japan's own security. She intends to actively pursue sales talks with all 17 nations with whom Japan has defence cooperation agreements.

Besides Australia, Britain and Italy, Japan has also transferred used MSDF Abukuma-class destroyer escorts to the Philippines. The longer-term objective is to keep China in check. Japan has further plans to expand deeper cooperation with the Philippines.



## An anthropological perspective on development in Nepal

Since the 1950s, 'development' has become one of the most powerful ideas shaping Nepal's socio-political imagination and everyday life. From policy dialogues to tea-shop conversations, the language of bikas permeates how progress is understood and measured.

Over the decades, the Nepali state has implemented a wide range of development plans, supported by substantial bilateral and multilateral assistance.

Yet, even by standard measures, the outcomes have been mixed. Nepal has achieved tangible gains - rising income, lower child mortality, improved literacy, better maternal health and longer life expectancy.

But it continues to rank among the poorer countries in Asia despite the upcoming LDC graduation, with persistent and shifting forms of inequality. More importantly, Nepal's development has

been largely driven by people's own efforts for survival, including millions of migrant workers who send remittances home, the role of SMEs, and contributions from agriculture.

In this context, an 'anthropology of development' offers a nuanced perspective to understand the many complexities, contradictions and anomalies that characterise Nepal's development.

In Nepal, roads, hydropower projects and telecommunications infrastructure symbolise modernity. In many rural areas, the arrival of a road is seen as the arrival of bikas. Yet these projects can also create land disputes and environmental impacts, and limit access to resources and benefits.

Therefore, development is not only experienced as a promise, but also as something that can lead to disagreement and conflict. Perhaps, the most striking

anthropological insight is that bikas is as deeply a local aspiration as it is an external imposition. For many Nepalis, bikas represents access to education, health services, roads, connectivity, employment opportunities, global connectivity, etc. These are not trivial aspirations. They are fundamentally about dignity, security and the possibility of a viable life.

At the same time, development is often associated with corruption, unfinished projects, dependency, persistent inequality and the growing disconnect between policy priorities and lived realities. The duality of bikas as both hope and disappointment defines the cultural life of development in Nepal.

The dominant way of seeing development in Nepal is essentially economic and technical. Within this frame, development means rising GDP, falling poverty rates, expanding access to services, and is

expressed through the Human Development Index, SDG indicators and randomised controlled trials.

Anthropologists have long argued that development must be understood not just as policy but also as a force that shapes everyday life through power, relations and experiences - different actors understand development in different ways and don't have equal ability to shape what actually happens on the ground. Anthropological studies on Nepal have highlighted the multiple effects of development.

On one hand, Professor of Anthropology Stacy Pigg's influential work "Inventing Social Categories Through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal" shows how bikas has become a powerful cultural category, transforming not only material conditions, but also reshaping identities, aspirations and social geographies of modern life.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

## Symbolism

Sir, When Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the 594-km Ganga Expressway on Wednesday, the symbolism was unmistakable - another milestone in India's accelerating infrastructure push. But beyond the optics of scale and speed lies a deeper question: can a highway fundamentally alter the economic trajectory of a state as vast and complex as Uttar Pradesh?

For decades, the state's development has been uneven, with the industrialised western belt far outpacing the largely agrarian east. By linking Meerut to Prayagraj across 12 districts, the Ganga Expressway is being projected not merely as a mobility upgrade but as an instrument of economic correction. Cutting travel time from 10-12 hours to about 6-8 hours is significant, but the real ambition lies in compressing economic distance - bringing markets, labour, and capital into closer alignment.

Ultimately, the Ganga Expressway represents more than a highway - it is a test of whether India can execute integrated, corridor-led growth at scale. Its success will not be measured merely by traffic volumes



or reduced travel time, but by the ecosystems it builds: industries that generate employment, logistics networks that enhance efficiency, and regions that move closer to parity.

If even a part of its ambitious vision materialises, the expressway may indeed redraw Uttar Pradesh's growth map - not just connecting cities, but connecting opportunity itself.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 30 April.

## Turncoats

Sir, This has reference to the article "Jumping Ship" by Bhopinder Singh published today. The much-needed Rajya Sabha boost to the BJP provided by the dramatic defection of seven AAP MPs to the BJP and the

supersonic speed of acceptance of the merger by the Rajya Sabha Chairman C P Radhakrishnan, reducing AAP's strength to three members, does not fool anybody. Such a development subverts the people's verdict and erodes diminishing public trust in people's representatives.

Betrayal by a party's most trusted lieutenants and their chicanery to fulfil personal or coterie interests has become part of our democratic polity. It shocks everyone that Raghav Chadha, the Brutasian boss of the clique of dissenters, has been bidding his time to get the best bargains and deliver the deadly blow to AAP's ambitious Caesar.

True, everyone "reserves the right" to be a turncoat. So do Chadha and his followers. But what shocks us most is when someone so eager to break ranks has been masquerading as a loyalist.

It confuses the public as much as when a respected Chandrababu Naidu or a much admired Nitish Kumar embrace their long-avowed political adversaries or when turncoats like Himanta Biswa Sarma and Suvenud Adhikari abandon ship and become a chief minister or a chief ministerial aspirant. Evidently, all turncoats in our country

don't have to turn tail. Thanks to the proverbial weakness of public memory, and their infinite capacity to forget and forgive, some defectors find themselves reincarnated as most favoured faces in the political landscape. It accounts for the ever-growing popularity of the practice of defection, with political morality taking a backseat.

Yours, etc., Ardhendu Chatterjee, Durgapur, 29 April.

## Ripples

Sir, Apropos "Can positivity ever go viral?", published today, the article rightly notes that negativity travels faster than positivity. Yet, counter-currents do emerge. When racial attacks on Indians surfaced in 2008, Steve Jobs engaged warmly, even playing cricket with Indian students, offering symbolic reassurance.

Similarly, the Pink Whale Challenge arose to counter the toxic Blue Whale Challenge. Positivity may lack virality, but with intent and imagination, it can still create ripples that endure beyond outrage cycles.

Yours, etc., Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak, 30 April.

# When justice becomes a mirage

KRISHAN KUMAR CHUGH

As a child, I played a game called 'Saap Seeri' (Snakes and Ladders). It was a simple pursuit: except for an occasion or two - having not mastered the 'art of throwing dice' - I climbed the ladders of progress only to be swallowed by a snake that pulled me back to the threshold. No more a child, I have meandered through the circuitous routes and sharp curves of a journey spanning 72 years and 6 months. Having served the Government of India for 40 years, I retired on 30 September 2013. Post-retirement, when most would have preferred the tranquillity of morning walks and afternoon siestas, I remained in the arena as a guest faculty and a National Facilitator for Ethics and Values in Public Governance - a subject very close to my heart.

I spent years in classrooms interacting with the future of our bureaucracy. We spoke with pride of our cricket team winning the World Cup, the legacy of Sardar Patel, our landing on the moon, and our commitment to becoming the world's third-largest economy. Above all, we spoke of a Constitution that owes its origin to "We, the People," securing justice - social, economic, and political - to every Indian. Yet, lamenting the huge gap between preaching and practicing, I did not mince words regarding the casual approach to disposal.

I spoke of the RTI Act, 2005, the strengthening of CPGRAMS, and the creation of Tribunals for 'speedy' justice. Yet, after throwing the dice in various forums, a citizen often finds himself back at the beginning of the board. What I am sharing here is not a figment of imagination; it is a sobering reality.

Apart from the classroom and now courtroom, I have been actively

taking up issues with the Delhi Police, MCD, and DDA. The 30-day mandate for RTI applications and 45-day deadlines for appeals very often lead to a prolonged wait in the Central Information Commission or vague answers that force people to either reconcile with the status quo or gasp for breath as the length of delay is no longer measured in yards, but in miles. Exceptions apart, this rot has gone deep into the veins of those who created the guidelines and those tasked with adjudicating upon them.

I open three chapters from my life to illustrate these institutional failures:

• **The CAT Mirage:** In 2019, I submitted an inquiry report as an Inquiry Officer. Per DoPT guidelines, 50 per cent of the honorarium is payable upon submission and the remaining 50 per cent within 45 days. Met with casual silence, I wondered if the fruits of my labour would ever manifest. Donning my black robes at age 70, I knocked on the door of the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT). In an apparent hurry to add to its tally of "disposed cases," the Bench disposed of my OA at the admission stage by granting the respondents another 45-day ladder to pass a "speaking order."

When that, too, was met with silence, I filed a Contempt Petition. At the hearing on 7 April 2026, I encountered another "snake": while the Tribunal granted the Respondents a mere four weeks to respond, it adjourned the matter to 8 July 2026. By doing so, it created a two-month cushion of unaccountability, ensuring that the "Speedy Justice" promised to a 72-year-old remains suspended in a vacuum of dates and diaries.

• **The Police Silence:** Unable to bear noise pollution and unauthorized parking, I sent an email to the Commissioner of Police in 2014. I was delighted to receive an



acknowledgement and thought relief was near. Instead, while the law enforcers' attitude turned stubborn, I continue to receive these acknowledgments in 2026, while the grievances remain unaddressed despite advertisements promising timely redressal.

• **The Civic Vacuum:** The same approach persists with the MCD and DDA regarding encroachments and the conversion of the public street behind my house into an extended yard for law violators. Even the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), approached with photographic proof of the indifference of law enforcers, could only call for "Reports and Reports," which eventually vanished under the weight of paper.

In June 1947, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel told the pioneers of our service: "The future of this service will depend much upon the foundation and traditions that will be laid down by you, by your character and abilities and by your spirit of service." It is a mockery when officials take a pledge of integrity on 31 October 2025, without committing to the tasks they are obliged to perform. We remember Mahatma Gandhi on his martyrdom day while forgetting the country he dreamt of.

Justice remains a paper reality for the majority. We dole out free rations to 80 per cent of the population because they are too poor to afford food - is this the justice we promised them? Social, economic, and political justice, if reserved for a few, will

only result in lopsided growth. In the pursuit of my rights, I have found that the dice thrown by the common man uniquely has zero on all six sides. Meanwhile, a few possess dice with six on all sides, pulling down others for "extraneous considerations." In 2009, I penned: "I live in fear with liberty to shed tears." We talk of becoming the third-largest economy, but we will truly be a global power only when those in administration, the NHRC, and judicial forums make justice real rather than a mirage. Will that ever happen, or will many continue to close their eyes, seeking a drop of justice just to survive?

(The writer is a retired Director and a practicing Advocate.)

## 100 Years Ago

### OCCASIONAL NOTE

An immediate effect of the strike in England will be a destruction of all the calculations in Mr. Winston Churchill's Budget. He warned the House of Commons that industrial trouble would mean heavier taxation, and the trouble has come almost before the words are out of his mouth. The strike will affect the Budget in every branch of expenditure, for military and naval units will have to be called upon, and the Civil Service costs will be heavily increased by the arrangements for meeting the emergency. Income on the other hand will suffer from lessened profits and the smaller yield from practically every source of revenue. Even if the cost of the strike be carried to debt there must be additional taxation to cover the extra interest. It may well be years before the financial injury is recovered.

## News Items

### "A GREAT FUTURE"

## BRITISH AND INDIAN INDUSTRIES

London, May.

Mr. L. S. Amey, Dominions Secretary, in a speech at a dinner given by the Manchester Cotton Association, referring to India, said that whatever might be the difficulties at the moment, he could not help believing that there would be in India a great future, not only for Indians, but also as long as we remained together, as he believed we should for all time, for the great industries of Britain.—Reuter's Special Service.

### CROWD WATCHES AIR TRAGEDY

## LEAP FROM FALLING AEROPLANE

London, May.

A miraculous escape of a passenger from a terrible flying accident took place at King's Lynn (Norfolk) this afternoon when an aeroplane which was making an exhibition flight, owing to a high wind crashed on a cemetery knocking over several tombstones and completely wrecking itself. Passenger named Barret jumped out just before it crashed and escaped practically unhurt. The pilot, Capt. Biggwither, was mortally injured. The other occupant, George Mark Lloyd, who had been performing daring feats at a height of 2,000 feet was seriously injured.—Reuter's Special Service.

### SECRET PLANS

## MYSTERIOUS THEFT FROM NAVAL BASE

(From Our Special Representative.)

London, May.

The Daily Sketch announces the mysterious theft of secret plans of a new submarine engine which were deposited in a South-coast naval base and which, after being photographed were returned. Scotland Yard are investigating the affair and it is believed that all copies of the plans have not yet been recovered but the search has been narrowed to two or three suspects, whom the Admiralty are considering prosecuting under the Official Secrets Act. The theft follows the disappearance some three months ago of the plans of a crankless aero engine which is expected to revolutionize aeroplane mechanism, which an ex-air mechanic invented and submitted to the Air Ministry. The plans were stolen during an examination but were recovered by a detective from an attached case in the possession of a suspect whom he was watching for other reasons.

### PARIS FLAT TRAGEDY

## GRUESOME DISCOVERY BY SERVANT

Paris, May.

Madame Regnault, wife of the former Ambassador at Tokyo, has been found dead in her flat which had apparently been burgled. The cook entering her mistress's bedroom, found it in a state of chaos with the furniture lying broken about the floor. Madame Regnault's body was in the corridor. She had apparently been shot dead. Her husband was away from home.—Reuter.

### FOOD SUPPLIES

## HOME SECRETARY'S WARNING

London, May.

The Home Secretary issued a notification late yesterday evening stating that the country must be prepared for a general strike to-night. The Government is taking all possible steps to maintain the supply of food, fuel and light, to ensure protection of all those engaged in these industries, and in the preservation of law and order. Recruiting stations for volunteers will be opened to-day.—Reuter.

## IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

# A memory that hurts but sustains



I was about to settle down on the porch of my second-floor apartment with a cup of coffee that morning when I glimpsed a person walking around the lake nearby with his dog. He looked like my brother, Pritish. I dumped the cup, ran down the stairs, came out panting on the lakeside and realized, on a closer glance, the person didn't look like Pritish at all. He was stocky and walked with a slouch. In any case, Pritish had died six months ago in a far-away town.

I was crazy. I had missed him. I had quietly grieved not having seen him in the last months. The pitiless disease that has now caught up with me gnawed him months earlier and fell him this year. That he was nearly a decade younger made it harder to accept. But he was now gone, irredeemably. He would never again speak with me, commiserate with me, laugh with me. He is lost to me irrevocably. It was foolish of me to hope to see him again.

The loss is too painful to hear. The grief is too hurtful to let go.

I have several aging friends. Gavin, 90, among them is a distinguished businessman, who still ably conducts his affairs. Last week he lost Reese, his wife for fifty years. She assisted him in his daily business. This was not a person just linked to him by family or work ties. Reese lived and

worked with him all twenty-four hours, day after day, for fifty years. They met through mutual friends, liked each other immediately, got married, had two children, worked together day and night to build their business and make it a success. When she was diagnosed with cancer, they worked together as diligently to identify the best specialists and consultants, all sadly to no avail.

Now we sit together in a quiet midtown restaurant, with a bowl of soup between us, to talk about the life that faces Gavin. He is articulate and self-controlled, but his eyes water at the very mention of Reese's name. The pain is too raw and thrusting.

"The silliest things upset me beyond words can say. I always wear cufflinks with my shirts, and now I find it hard to correctly place the cufflinks and join them. I get upset and feel like crying."

Did Reese do the cuff links for him every time? Discretion stops me from asking.

"I can't find little things. A particular necktie, my favorite pen, two business files I use constantly - everything seems hard to locate and harder to use. Reese was particular in arranging things; everything seemed always to be in place. Now it is a mess. Every little thing needs a search and hunt."

Gavin scratches his neck with an impatient gesture.

"So many things were done, smoothly and in time. I seldom noticed them. Occasionally, very occasionally, I noticed the absence of gaps and mishaps. I remembered an unpaid bill or an unsent reminder to a negligent client; exasperated I would tell Reese about my oversight, only to find that she had already paid the bill or talked to the client."

"I never have to remember the birthdays or anniversaries of my two children and four grandchildren. Unfailingly, Reese kept track of them and made sure of gifts and invitations. I hate to admit it but some of the kids were doubtless closer to her than to me. Of course, I love them dearly. My Italian family tradition continues all right, but I will have a tough time keeping it flourishing."

I try to find a consoling word. "Gavin, you did well with your business. You enjoy the work you do. Perhaps that will help you pass your time."

Gavin paused to think. "Yes, it will be of some help," he said, "but I can hardly see it that way now. It will help to distract me from my misery. I have some friends like you. That helps too."

He paused and added, "But grief is a strange thing. It sweeps over my whole body. I worry sometimes.



Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

Sometimes I feel quite helpless. Sometimes I feel unreasonably guilty, even anxious and fearful. There is even a sense of failure or emptiness. But, most of all, I have a recurrent sense of despair and loneliness. Reese was suffering at the end, and I tell myself she had well-deserved relief. But it doesn't exempt me from the huge, engulfing tide of sadness."

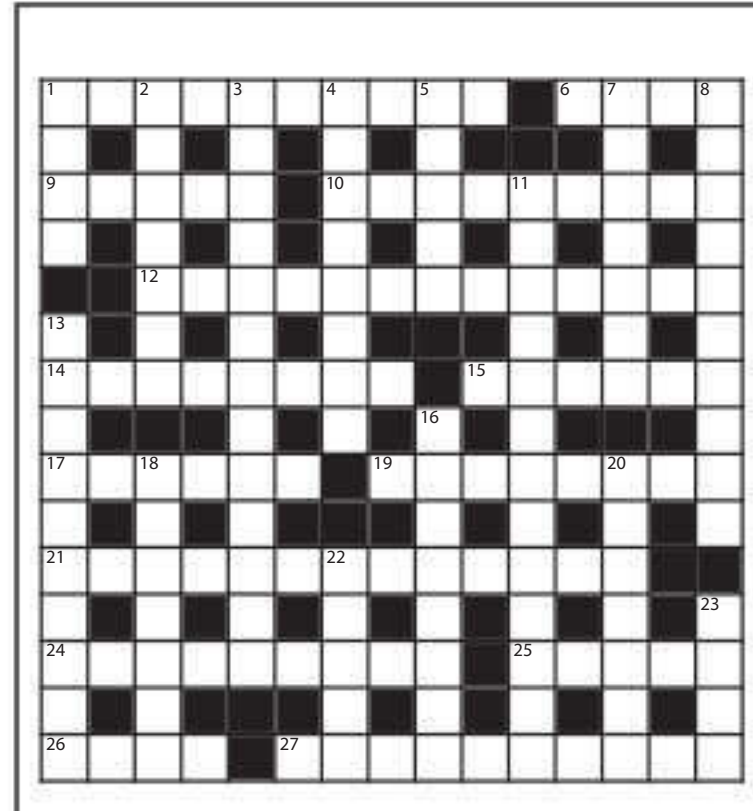
Gavin sat and looked at me, as if I could find a word or two that could bring him a new ray of hope. No such word came to me.

It was a loss large enough to encompass in words. Gavin had lost not just a wife, a companion, a coworker, a fifty-year reassuring presence, but also a powerful, iridescent memory that has silently sustained him through fading evenings and dirgeful dusks.

We just sat and looked at each other.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)

## Crossword | No. 293451



### Last Friday's Solution

PRIVATISEEYEDONE  
LNXAEFA  
AUTOGRAHSPURS  
URMEMOCST  
DOUBLETNOTABEINE  
TSEER  
THIRISTISGAGARIN  
TOPPOOE  
KENNEDYDUTIFUL  
IES  
NOSEDIVIFABRIC  
GTWEMPET  
DIANAREAIRANG  
OLYMPIODDA  
MEETBERLINWALL

### ACROSS

- Welshman wrapping one leg around head of travelling preacher (10)
- German behind bar in South Africa is party animal (4)
- Making comeback in cartoon? A Tasmanian devil! (5)
- A London vagrant sheltering in church portico (9)
- Further evidence Robert is replacing Penny in council (13)
- Old version of The Mirror put on electronic viewing device (8)
- Mountain trail twisting round historic Indian province (6)
- Former love meets American aboard Delta flight (6)
- Haul crane before cardinal - an enemy of Rome (8)
- Barnier's art is misconstrued as inconsistency (13)
- Worry about taking expert on in meeting (9)

### DOWN

- Divine creature felt naked beside knight clad in silver (5)
- Flower girl regularly seen in Tyneside (4)
- Attack Great Britain about importing Ritz-like crackers (10)
- Strange clue about queen's cavalryman (7,6)
- City worked up energy for game (8)
- Portuguese saint riddled with 55 shots (5)
- Start of terrible hullabaloo in newspaper business (7)
- Parasites manipulated feelings about religion (10)
- Meerkat ran her ragged, to be more precise (6,3,4)
- Surprising fact about Victor and Joy (10)
- Show fellow setter heartless editorials in newspaper (8)
- Circular part of drill used in test (7)
- Fool English soldier, concealing a weapon (7)
- Use a mask, we are told (5)
- Beat fellow with lump of wood (4)

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

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



# Opinion

## I played Putin in a war game. He could invade again.

NATO countries need to get their act together.

Alexander Gabuev

**BERLIN** It was a bitter victory. After occupying a chunk of NATO territory in the Baltics, my team successfully converted the land grab into a diplomatic coup, winning major concessions from the United States that would refashion Europe's security architecture in Russia's favor. I was President Vladimir Putin, and I had just secured a big win for my project of Russian aggrandizement.

Thankfully, this was not reality. It was a war game organized by the German newspaper Die Welt and the German armed forces, designed to test Berlin's readiness for a security crisis brought about by Russian aggression and American indifference. I'd been invited to represent my home country of Russia; there was a certain piquancy in playing the man whose invasion of Ukraine pushed me, as well as many of my friends and colleagues, into exile.

The results were chilling. The game, which took place last December, made plain how plausible a new Russian attack is — and how vulnerable NATO would be to one. The war in Iran, handing Russia a fresh advantage and fracturing the West further, has only worsened the situation. The exercise made me worry that unless NATO countries get their act together, another invasion could be coming.

The game was set up like this. In October 2026, Russia — deprived of its maximalist war aims in a May ceasefire with Ukraine that nonetheless left the leadership confident — is seeking retribution for Europe's help to Kyiv. Under the cover of a large military exercise, the Kremlin places 15,000 elite troops in Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, separated by a mere 40-mile-long strip that runs through Lithuania.

My team seized this strip of land, under the guise of establishing a "humanitarian corridor" to supply food to Kaliningrad. We used drones to gain control of the area, remotely mined the border between Poland and Lithuania to make it harder for Warsaw to intervene and, finally, invaded with troops and tanks. We also brought in Russian doctors and journalists, to increase the number of civilian casualties if NATO hit back.

Then we opened a dialogue with the White House, insisting that Russian soldiers would be immediately withdrawn once the Europeans accommodated our demands. Chief among them were a rollback of NATO military infrastructure in Europe and nonexpansion of the alliance — pretty much what Mr. Putin demanded before invading Ukraine. Our position was simple: Give us what we want, or prepare for another war that could go nuclear.

With the midterms just a week away, the White House chose to engage in talks. They wanted to avoid American military involvement and instead present preventing World War III to the American people as President Trump's accomplishment. Without Captain America leading the way, Germany chose not to use the military tools at its disposal — like giving combat orders to a German brigade in Lithuania — to confront the aggressor.

Once the U.S. president stood down, NATO was effectively deactivated:



PATRICK LEGER

Absent America's buy-in, allies couldn't use the organization's collective defense plans or command-and-control system. They could do little other than watch as Mr. Trump agreed to high-level talks with the Kremlin. Through a combination of military boldness, diplomatic cunning and brinkmanship, we discredited Article 5, NATO's founding principle of collective defense, and fortified Russia's position as a key power in Europe.

Some policymakers in NATO capitals are skeptical that Russia could pull this off, and not without reason. In truth, the Russians are unlikely to have the element of surprise on their side. NATO intelligence agencies carefully monitor the movement of Russian troops: Any attempt to mass soldiers would be immediately known to Western generals. But there are reasons to believe that the Kremlin, under certain conditions, would contemplate an

armed attack on NATO territory.

First, there is motive. Throughout his quarter-century in the Kremlin, Mr. Putin has spoken in blunt terms of NATO being a major threat to Russia's security — and never more so than now. By invading Ukraine, ironically, Mr. Putin has turned NATO into a much bigger danger. The Kremlin ruler has repeatedly told Russians that the real war is not against Ukraine but against all of NATO. He has said it so

often that he must believe it himself.

Then there is the strength of Russia's military. Despite its failure to crush Ukraine, Russia now has a bigger land force and produces more tanks, shells and missiles than before the invasion. What's more, in contrast to potential NATO adversaries, it knows how to fight modern drone warfare. In our game, the army's ability to establish fire control over a strip

GABUEV, PAGE 15

## How Iran might have become an 'everything war'

America may find that it won't be so easy to extract itself from this conflict.

David Wallace-Wells

At this point in the Iraq war, President George W. Bush had already unfurled his "Mission Accomplished" banner. In this, the third gulf war, we have now passed through the end of a two-week cease-fire and into an ambiguous period in which neither military has re-engaged in earnest but the Strait of Hormuz is functionally closed, with few ships passing through and months of minesweeping required.

What will happen next? Probably not a return to the open warfare of March and April, given that eight weeks of war already put the global economy in a vise, given the way that Iran quickly established an asymmetric advantage, and given the fact that those weeks of fighting left some critical American munitions stockpiles drained by more than half. Certainly not a forever war like those the United States fought in the 2000s and 2010s: without a shocking strategic reversal, there will be no boots on the ground this time, let alone an open-ended occupation.

But President Trump is now preparing for an extended blockade, and already the fallout from America's misbegotten military adventure seems to be visible everywhere you look, with consequences both intended and unintended playing out well beyond the Persian Gulf, where so much of the world's supply chains lie, leaving no part of the global economy untouched

and few people on the planet unaffected. Call it an everything war. Even a peace agreement probably won't bring it to an end.

You most likely know the broad strokes of the story about energy. Perhaps a billion barrels of oil have been sucked out of the market, and some of the world's largest fossil fuel production and export facilities have been damaged or taken offline. The futures price for oil is about 50 percent higher than it was before the war, and out in the real world, actual barrels jumped in price by even more. Countries across Asia, Africa and Europe have instituted emergency responses — Covid-style work-from-home policies and four-day work weeks, for instance, factories curbing production and gas stations limiting the amount of fuel dispensed to customers. Americans have spent almost \$15 billion extra on gas — \$114 per household — since the war began.

Demand for American oil has exploded, and profit expectations for fossil fuel companies along with it. In Europe, the cost of importing fossil fuels has grown more than \$30 billion over two months. The continent has "maybe six weeks or so" of jet fuel left, the International Energy Agency warned a couple of weeks ago; Lufthansa just cut 20,000 flights to save fuel; and, in the United States, low-cost airlines are staring down the possibility of bankruptcy. "Global energy markets are on the verge of a disaster," The Economist declared last week, with near-term scenarios ranging "from bad to awful." The fate of food may prove grimmer.



IBRAHIM RAYINTAKATHI

Much of the world's fertilizer flows through the Strait of Hormuz alongside oil and gas, and because the war began just as planting season began in the Northern Hemisphere, it has also given us what The Financial Times has called

"the coming global food crisis." The price of fertilizer has jumped about 20 percent since the war began, and in the United States, 70 percent of farmers say they can't afford enough of it. In total, input costs for food producers

jumped 7.9 percent in April, and though it takes time for those prices to hit consumers, in Britain, they're warning about 10 percent food inflation this year. With hunger, dire warnings are sometimes followed by only muted suffering, after markets recalibrate and philanthropy steps in. But last year, for the first time this century, the World Food Program declared two simultaneous famines, in Gaza and Sudan. Last month, it projected that the Iran war could push 45 million more people into what it calls "acute hunger." The risk of famine has soared, especially in war-torn South Sudan.

Other downstream consequences are a bit less obvious, but so much stuff passes through the Strait of Hormuz that an extended closure pinches in many unexpected places. The world's top condom maker is raising prices by 30 percent in response to shocks to the supply of synthetic rubber and silicone oil, for instance. There is already a shortage of Diet Coke in India, because aluminum price spikes have meant the country cannot manufacture cans for it. There may also be a carbonation shock, which is why Britain has announced an emergency \$134 million restart of a mothballed industrial plant to produce CO<sub>2</sub>. The rising cost of helium means it is more expensive to run M.R.I. machines, which are cooled by the gas, which is also critical to the manufacturing of semiconductors, which is one reason The Financial Times has warned the war could derail

WALLACE-WELLS, PAGE 15

# The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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## How ‘rich face’ became the new status symbol

Amy Odell

If you spend enough time around the very rich these days, it's clear. People didn't look like this before because people naturally can't look like this.

Models in a Paris Fashion Week show for the luxury brand Matières Fécales in March caricatured the 1 percent by wearing prosthetics that resembled post-op faces, including grotesque under-eye bulges, skin pulled up from their temples and lips that appeared unnaturally inflated and stitched at the edges. “South Park” depicted Kristi Noem with a face so Botoxed, it melts off and scurries away. From the Met Gala to the Oscars and every red carpet in between, these rich faces are everywhere.

A “rich face” is stretched taut, often incapable of varied expressions and plumped with filler or implants or a person's own grafted fat. Once, this face belonged to a villainous class of elites in sci-fi depictions of a dystopian future. In “The Hunger Games,” residents of the capital city who revel in luxury and excess at the expense of other impoverished districts often wear sculpted,

altered faces. In “Doctor Who,” a wealthy socialite from the distant future has gone through so many face-lifts that she becomes little more than a stretched face on a thin sheet of skin mounted on a frame, maintained with constant moisturizer. The ultrawealthy seem less and less

concerned with hiding their excesses. They're richer than ever, and figures like Lauren Sánchez Bezos and President Trump give them permission to flaunt their neo-Gilded Age spoils. After all, the unspoken appeal of cosmetic work is that it's not just about looking “better” or “fixing” something or trying to remain competitive in ageist workplaces. It's about indulging in a particular kind of experiential self-care that is infinitely customizable and accessible to only a select group. It signifies extreme wealth and belonging to an elite, all-powerful clique that gets to operate under a different set of societal norms and rules.

Status signaling used to be the purview of the \$18,000 cocktail dress or the \$50,000 designer bag. Now, the small number of Very Important Clients who account for 40 percent of luxury sales seem to be shifting more of their highly desired dollars to their faces. Today's cleverly marketed aesthetic treatments include “global facial micro-optimization,” which involves numerous procedures to tweak everything from eye tilt to the way light reflects off the jaw, and costs between \$150,000 and \$300,000. There are also “forever 35,” “Diamond mini” and “weekend” face-lifts. Plastic surgeons in Washington are navigating a surge in requests for “Mar-a-Lago face.”

The masses want in. Millennials who say they cannot afford homes are spending on their faces instead. Magazines such as Vogue and Allure are no longer just advising readers on nail polish colors and designer sandals for spring, but also when — not if — they should get

face-lifts. Rhinoplasties, face-lifts and blepharoplasties (eyelid surgeries) were the three most popular facial procedures of 2025, and the number of facial procedures overall increased by around 19 percent. The luxury sector, meanwhile, contracted by 2 percent last year.

Designer fashion seems to be viewed as more cringe than cosmetic procedures — a feeling that the journalist Sujata Assomull calls the “luxury ick.” Many designer brands raised prices significantly in recent years, at around twice the rate of inflation, without any apparent improvement in quality. (A Chanel flap bag can now cost upward of \$11,000 — almost double what it did in 2016.) And some have been caught up in sweatshop scandals. The Row's sample sale in New York City inspired a slew of viral parody videos. The thriving market for secondhand goods, dupes and counterfeiters dim the glamour of it all. And when brands like Celine and Chloé are reissuing old handbag designs, why bother shopping for something new?

In earlier decades, the roles were reversed: Plastic surgery was a punchline. “I've had so much plastic surgery, when I die they will donate my body to Tupperware,” Joan Rivers once joked. Now Ms. Rivers seems ahead of her time. Procedures are a sign of making it in the most Kardashian-coded way — get rich, then buy a face. Stars such as Kris Jenner go viral for their cosmetic work. Asked if she'd had “the seemingly ubiquitous new style of face-lift,” Jennifer Lawrence told The New Yorker, “No. But, believe me, I'm gonna!”

Social media has turbocharged the normalization of cosmetic work. One plastic surgeon said that his Gen Z patients take selfies at their appointments “as if it's a concert or a ‘get ready with me’ video. They want everyone to know.” Like haul vlogs, it's a way to say, “Look what I just bought.”

Of course, rich face has regional variations. Bravo's “Real Housewives” from the Upper East Side and the Hamptons have a subtler look than their counterparts on Netflix's “Members Only: Palm Beach,” who dream of access to Mar-a-Lago. Whether stars admit to their work or not, endless internet speculation provides valuable P.R. to both them and the surgeons who treat them. Many of these doctors — such as Steven Levine, who lifted Ms. Jenner's face — are celebrities themselves. All of this media hooks viewers by inviting them to wonder when lips were last injected and if jawlines look more “snatched” than they did the previous week.

Sometimes, of course, procedures can go wrong. Sharon Osbourne once called a face-lift “the worst thing that I ever did,” and said that she “looked like Cydops.” Khloe Kardashian has said that filler made her look “crazy.”

Designer bags may be silly, overpriced and quite often unethically made. But at least there's little to no chance they will disfigure you. Perhaps the risk of a grisly outcome is part of the appeal for the ultrawealthy, who have the ability to pay for the best care, along with more treatments if things go wrong. The luxury of viewing your face-lift less as a major, potentially ruinous surgery and more as a routine to-do list item is the ultimate status symbol.

AMY ODELL is the author of the Back Row newsletter and “Anna: The Biography.”

## The Iran war might have become an ‘everything war’

WALLACE-WELLS, FROM PAGE 14 the global A.I. boom. Minerals stalled on tankers in the region are a problem for the manufacturing of jet engines, microprocessors and drones. Global pharmaceutical supply has been pinched, too, with the price of some drugs surging 20 or 30 percent abroad. And though the logic of fossil fuel shortages means that the war is accelerating the world's green transition, other aspects of the war are working in the other direction, with inputs for batteries and wind turbines and solar panels all trapped — at least for now.

The war has already pushed U.S. inflation near a two-year high, and some analysis suggests it has a lot higher to go. Interest-rate cuts that were expected this year, by a new Trump toady installed as chair of the Federal Reserve, appear to be much less likely. Economic forecasts for the United States and the world have chopped 20 or 30 basis points off G.D.P. growth for 2026. In Bangladesh, the banks are already “practically bankrupt,” the finance minister says, and the U.A.E. is begging the United States for a financial lifeline. Elsewhere in the Gulf, exports have fallen as much as 90 percent and economies are projected to contract as much as 9 percent.

**From a certain vantage, the illegal and counter-productive war is a sign of the end of American pre-eminence.**

Farther afield, few emerging markets look especially safe, and there are signs of possible economic crisis in Egypt, in Pakistan, in Sri Lanka.

And then are the geopolitics. In Europe, they are talking about a NATO without America. In the United States, it seems considerably harder to believe that the American military might be capable of defending Taiwan against a Chinese invasion, given how much damage Iran managed to do to American bases and planes. The war has scrambled regional alliances around the gulf, with many countries less sure that the United States represents a reassuring military umbrella than an unreliable chaos agent — and now the U.A.E. quitting OPEC, illustrating a longstanding fault line between the Emirates and the Saudis.

The sovereign wealth funds that have backstopped so much of American venture capital for years appear to be



NATALIE NACCACHE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

No one knows what the future holds for cities like Dubai, which sold themselves as safe havens for millions of immigrants and holograms of a gleaming modern future, and as soon as the war began, there were analysts forecasting the end of the “petrodollar.”

growing more cautious with their money, imperiling a lot of Silicon Valley financing and some vanity spending, too (the Saudi government's backing out of a deal that would have supported the Met Opera, for instance). The Houthis are willing to weaponize the Red Sea and have staked claims to the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the world's dizzying network of supply chains now seems full of many more strategically vulnerable choke points. No one knows what the future holds for cities like Dubai, which sold themselves as regional safe havens and holograms of a gleaming modern future, and as soon as the war began, there were analysts forecasting the end of the “petrodollar” — as the economist Mona Ali did, in a memorable essay in the magazine Equator that also identified the Iran war as marking the end of American hegemony.

From a certain vantage, the illegal and counterproductive war is a sign of the end of American pre-eminence. The American military has been humbled,

the Pentagon planning committees humiliated, the global reputation of the United States tattered and the prospects for a reboot of global leadership, of the kind achieved by Barack Obama and to a lesser extent Joe Biden, are now considerably dimmer.

But from another vantage, however much damage U.S. primacy appears to have sustained, the war looks — at least for now — like a perverse confirmation of American power. After all, it was the United States that made all this mess — without real cause and without generating all that much pushback of substance on the world stage. You can't call the campaign a strategic success, given how poorly articulated the goals were at the outset, how little the United States has gained from its hostility, and how much needless turmoil and suffering it has imposed on the world as a whole. But it is also the kind of mess only a global superpower could make — if one lashing out in response to its own perceptions of decline.

The state of play calls to mind all the

talk of polycrisis and permacrisis and multipolarity toward the end of the pandemic emergency a few years back. But if the polycrisis is a sticky global spiderweb, the United States is still the biggest spider. The entire world is now being held hostage by American aggression, burdened by cascading economic turmoil that most Americans are, by global standards, insulated from — by geography, by energy independence, by wealth. A few weeks ago, the former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev described Iran's Hormuz “weapon” as the equivalent of a nuclear arsenal. But by and large those suffering around the world don't blame the new ayatollah or the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps for their plight. They still see America as the author of this brutal and chaotic chapter in world history — and they are right.

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS, a writer for Opinion and a columnist for The New York Times Magazine, is the author of “The Uninhabitable Earth.”

## A game of chicken in the Strait of Hormuz

KRISTOF, FROM PAGE 1

“No credible experts believe that Iran's oil sector is about to collapse,” Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, an Iran watcher who is chief executive of a London-based research organization, told me. “Trump's commitment to the blockade and his repeated statements that Iran is on the verge of collapse suggest that someone outside of government is feeding him unrealistic and politically motivated assessments of the situation in an attempt to undermine diplomacy.”

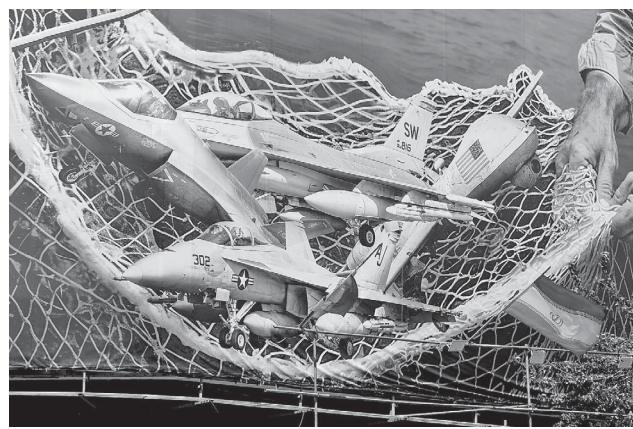
Danny Citrinowicz, formerly a long-time Iran analyst for Israel's military intelligence agency, told me: “Contrary to the administration's belief, especially the president's, that a naval blockade would bring Iran to its knees, Tehran is unlikely to yield on its core strategic demands. Even under severe economic pressure, the regime is more likely to dig in, extending the deadlock, while the global economic fallout from disrupted maritime routes and potential strait closures steadily escalates.”

I fear that's right. Trump has a record of extraordinary over-optimism about the Iran war. “We've already won,” he said on March 7. Two days later, he asserted that the war would be over “very soon.” On March 11, he announced, “We've won.” On March 20, he said the United States was considering “winding down.” Six days later, he said Iran was “begging to make a deal.” By April 16, the war “should be ending pretty soon.” The next day, he added that peace talks were going so well that “most of the points are already negotiated and agreed to.” And so on and so on.

What does this mean? “The Americans clearly have no strategy,” Chancellor Friedrich Merz of Germany said Monday. Speaking of the United States, he added, “An entire nation is being humiliated.”

The basic problem seems to be that each side believes it has the other over a barrel. And each side sees something real: The other is hurting. My take is that each side would like an off-ramp but believes that time is on its own side and that the other will have to give in soon.

That's a classic problem with authoritarian personalities, whether in Tehran or Washington: They surround themselves with flatterers who tell them that everything is going swimmingly. My own bet is that Iran may be able to suffer longer, partly because Iran's dictators don't face midterms. But it's also true that like Trump, Iranian leaders seem cocky and overconfident and have repeatedly miscalculated.



ATTA KENAR/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

A billboard in Tehran depicting an Iranian net catching American military planes.

They overreached in 1979 when they embraced the student seizure of the United States Embassy and held American hostages for 444 days, a foolish move that led to sanctions and isolation. They made things worse for themselves again when they continued to fight the Iran-Iraq war for six point-less years even after they recovered their territory, at enormous human and economic cost. And then their role in

**A classic problem with authoritarian personalities, whether in Tehran or Washington: They surround themselves with flatterers who tell them that everything is going swimmingly.**

wary of appearing weak at home, each believing that time is on its own side, each perceiving the other as something of a paper tiger. That's not a promising recipe for negotiating a peace deal; indeed, The Wall Street Journal reports that Trump has told aides to prepare for an extended blockade. That could hit the global economy by causing prolonged worldwide shortages of oil and gas and rising prices for

everything from medicines to fertilizer, helium to condoms.

Iran has suggested an initial deal to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, setting aside for later questions such as the nuclear program. The United States for now is dissatisfied with that offer. To its credit, Pakistan is working hard to help bring the sides closer to a deal, and Trump should send representatives to try to engage in serious negotiations even if only on reopening the strait. Iran might emerge with some kind of unpalatable arrangement that lets it profit from ships passing through its territorial waters while mines linger in the main part of the strait, but that would be better than keeping the blockade going for months.

If that initial deal can be worked out, Trump must ensure that he preserves what leverage he has — in the form of sanctions relief — to push for curbs on Iran's nuclear program. That is not so urgent but it is paramount: Trump was not much overstating things when he said that “the only point that really mattered” was a new nuclear agreement.

The paradox is that Trump's initial threats of war appeared to have prompted Iran to offer a quite favorable nuclear deal in February. But two months into the war, Iran and the United States each seems to feel it is in the stronger position. Faced with the prospect of making concessions to the other side, each may prefer to delay or escalate, with the world economy held hostage.

What could possibly go wrong?

## Putin could invade again

GABUEV, FROM PAGE 14 of NATO land without leaving its position was a crucial element in our success.

There is also Mr. Putin's information environment. Pandemic-induced isolation was one of the precursors to the invasion of Ukraine: Surrounded by a small circle of sycophants, the Russian president lost touch with reality. The war has made Mr. Putin only more isolated and people around him more afraid to speak the truth. With the elites and broader society cowed by repression, what is there to stop Mr. Putin from making another disastrous decision?

Mr. Putin's perception of the adversary matters, too. Back in 2022, he clearly thought the West was weak and disunited. Now, he finds a Europe that is unsure of itself as it takes the first steps in a costly and politically controversial rearmament process. Until this effort is turned into equipment and capabilities sufficient to deter Russia, there is a window of opportunity in which Russia, though fundamentally weaker than NATO, may have an upper hand militarily.

Last but not least, there is Mr. Trump. No American president has put the credibility of NATO more in doubt or created more rifts with European allies. During the war in Iran, Mr. Trump's disregard for the alliance has gone through the roof. Watching the trans-Atlantic bond implode, Mr. Putin may believe he can combine appeals to Mr. Trump's vanity with nuclear intimidation to persuade America not to defend Europe — just as we did in the game.

The good news is that Europe can effectively deter the Kremlin, with or without America. In the scenario we played, for example, there were cheap and quick solutions that would make a Russian invasion far less likely, such as placing World War I-era minefields and fortifications along NATO's border with Russia and Belarus. These could be combined with 21st-century instruments like the much-discussed drone wall on NATO's eastern flank and perhaps the most potent weapon of all, resolve.

That is all feasible. But time is of the essence: The most dangerous period, as I vividly learned playing Mr. Putin, may soon be upon us.

ALEXANDER GABUEV is the director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin.



LOLA DUPRE

فَقَدَّ الصَّبْرَ أَكْبَرُ مَصَائِبِ الدَّهْرِ  
(من القوال العرب)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Losing the ability to be patient is the worst affliction.  
An Arab maxim

# Opinion

## Beyond the blackout, who really runs Iran now?

HASSAN AL-MUSTAFA



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When Ali Khamenei was killed on Feb. 28, the war the US and Israel were waging on Iran took out not just a supreme leader but a generation of Tehran's political and military elite alongside him. The hole at the top of the regime was patched briefly by a Provisional Leadership Council under President Masoud Pezeshkian. Then, on March 8, the Assembly of Experts named Mojtaba Ali Khamenei the third Supreme Leader of the Revolution, as the successor to his father.

The new leader has not appeared in public. Not a single photograph, video or even audio recording has emerged to confirm his presence at the helm. The silence has fed a cottage industry of speculation, with competing claims circulating inside and outside Iran: that he is dead, gravely ill, or has been wounded.

Having followed the war in the Gulf, day by day, and after consulting sources inside and outside Iran, my own assessment — credible, if not final — is this: Mojtaba Khamenei is alive. He was injured, but is recovering. And he is still running the

country through a tight circle of confidants and behind a wall of extraordinary security. So why the blackout? Three reasons.

The first is straightforward: Keep him alive. Tehran has no intention of giving US or Israeli intelligence the kind of opening that led to his father's death. Losing a second supreme leader in months would be catastrophic, and the Assembly of Experts would struggle to coalesce around a third.

The second is about the picture itself. When a new leader does step into view, especially in wartime, he cannot look weak. He cannot look broken. In a conflict where optics is a weapon, a frail or scarred supreme leader would be a gift to the enemy. Tehran has calculated that showing a visibly wounded supreme leader would serve its enemies more than its own people.

Reports corroborated by multiple sources say Mojtaba Khamenei was hit in the leg, was left with a facial scar, and at one point could not walk. If true, the silence is in itself a message: Do not demoralize the public at home, and do not hand Washington and Tel Aviv leverage at the negotiating table.

The third is by design. Strategic ambiguity has long been a tool of Iranian statecraft. The

blurrier the picture inside the regime, the more room Tehran has to maneuver, and the harder it is for foreign analysts to chart the new chain of command. The fog is a feature, not a bug, for it invites speculation, most of it untethered from accurate inside information.

A narrative has solidified coming from prominent Western think tanks, newspapers, and magazines: Mojtaba Khamenei is dead or incapacitated, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has seized the wheel, a brutal succession fight is underway. However, these theories do not describe the Iran that exists; they describe the Iran their authors expected after the elder Khamenei was killed, a projection dressed up as rigorous analysis.

To read the new leadership clearly, you have to read it on its own terms, not through affection or contempt. Emotion, when it drives the analysis, ruins the analysis.

The IRGC is more powerful than it was before the war. That much is true. But it does not hold a monopoly on decision-making. Power is distributed across an interlocking set of institutions, all sitting under the supreme leader's office. They answer to the supreme jurist. Whatever turf disputes exist among them are mediated

by directives from Mojtaba Khamenei, who is, according to the constitution, both commander-in-chief and the chief architect of the country's foreign policy.

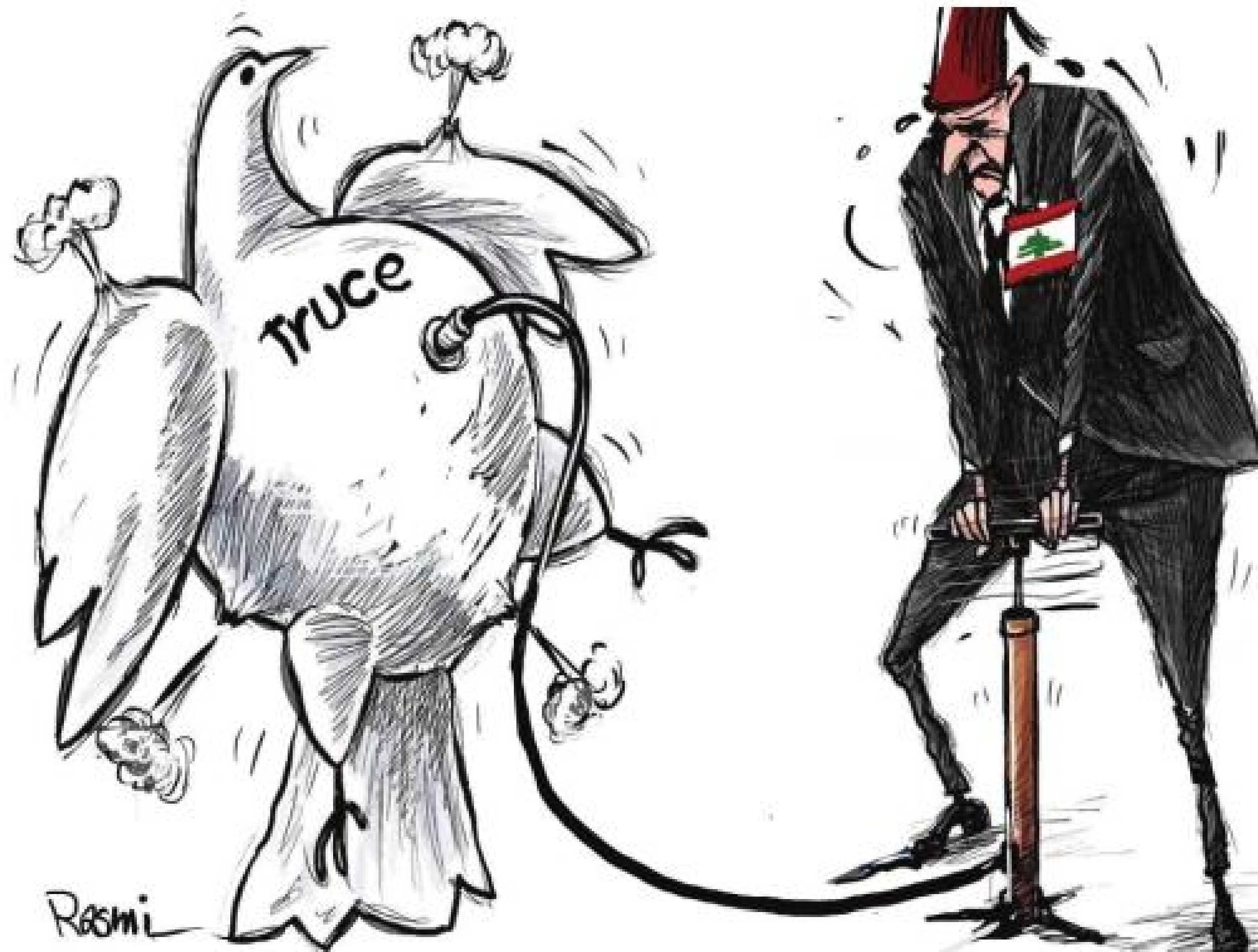
The key players right now are the IRGC, the Supreme National Security Council, the Foreign Ministry, the Expediency Discernment Council, and Speaker of Parliament Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf, whose standing rests on the support of former military figures such as Ahmad Vahidi and Mohammed Bagher Zolghadr, and ultimately on the trust of the supreme leader.

Pezeshkian is in the room, but the presidency is no longer where decisions are made. Its writ runs to domestic administration. On the war and foreign policy, the Supreme National Security Council is the body that matters, with the IRGC and the intelligence services represented at the table. Decisions flow upward and the supreme leader signs off, vetoes, or amends them.

The New York Times has reported that Mojtaba Khamenei's health is improving and his mind is sharp. The orders are still his, passed down a long chain of trusted couriers, by deliberately old-fashioned low-tech means, to keep him alive.

**The IRGC is more powerful than it was before the war. But it does not hold a monopoly on decision-making**

COURTESY: AMALIO ROSMINI/SHIROU AL-HAWAT



**As Israel moves, at least in practice, if not officially, into an election period, the likelihood of the government making any significant concessions diminishes further**

## Amid a fragile truce, has the world forgotten Gaza?

YOSSI MEKELBERG



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The ceasefire agreement in Gaza between Israel and Hamas last October was widely welcomed. Yet almost immediately it was met with a mixture of suspicion and fear that it would not extend beyond mere de-escalation, leaving the enclave devastated, partly occupied by Israel and partly controlled by Hamas, and far from progressing toward the subsequent phases as outlined in the Trump peace plan.

Admittedly, the worst-case scenario, the resumption of full-scale war, has not materialized. However, the second-worst outcome persists: an intolerable status quo of low-intensity conflict that continues to claim Palestinian lives, restrict humanitarian aid to this densely populated territory, and offer no meaningful political horizon for a lasting solution — one that will need to address the end of Israeli occupation, the cessation of Hamas rule, and allow the National Committee for the

Administration of Gaza to begin its reconstruction work in earnest.

There remains a stark and painful discrepancy between what the people of Gaza urgently need and the slow, often hesitant timeline followed by the negotiating sides while the international community appears to be losing interest. Conditions in the enclave may have improved since the US-brokered ceasefire, but the baseline of comparison is catastrophically low. It is also difficult to meaningfully describe the current situation as a ceasefire when, during this period alone, 786 people have reportedly been killed and 2,217 injured, with the numbers continuing to rise.

A joint UN-EU report titled "Gaza Strip: Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment," published last month, highlights the scale of the catastrophe. It notes that the events during the war, and their continuing aftermath, have set back human development in the territory by an estimated 77 years as a result of around 1.9 million people being

displaced, often multiple times, and more than 60 percent of the population having lost their homes. As the report underscores, in such conflicts, it is "women, children, persons with disabilities, and those with preexisting vulnerabilities (who) bear the greatest burden." These cannot be treated merely as statistics: They represent a society struggling to survive under extraordinary pressure.

As Israel moves, at least in practice, if not officially, into an election period, the likelihood of the government making any significant concessions diminishes further. Without a strong and coordinated effort by the US and other international actors, the political incentive for Israel's leadership to pursue compromise remains minimal. At the same time, global attention, particularly in Washington, has shifted elsewhere since the ceasefire agreement. The mandate of international mediators remains unclear, and the prospects for progressing to subsequent phases of the ceasefire, including the potential establishment of an International

Stabilization Force, are uncertain.

Meanwhile, the people of Gaza cannot afford these delays. They cannot afford to be forgotten. Each day without progress exacts a human cost, not only from military operations but also from the collapse of essential services. According to the UN, no hospital in Gaza is currently fully operational, and only about half are partially functioning. Primary healthcare services are severely limited. Although Israel permits a small number of medical evacuations, more than 18,000 people are reportedly waiting for authorization to leave Gaza for urgent treatment, many of them requiring lifesaving care. Food availability has improved somewhat, yet malnutrition remains a serious concern.

In the immediate term, the suffering of millions of civilians is morally unacceptable. In the longer term, the failure to resolve the current impasse risks reigniting widespread violence and radicalization, potentially extending beyond Gaza into the West Bank and further afield.

## Opinion

## Rising debt, rising distress leave Africa adrift

HAFED AL-GHWELL

In early 2026, a single rating action exposed the brittle fault lines of global finance. Fitch downgraded the African Export-Import Bank, or Afreximbank, to junk status. It then withdrew its ratings entirely after Afreximbank severed the relationship. What looked like a technical skirmish between a lender and an agency quickly became a diplomatic grenade rolling across the continent's balance sheets.

This was never just about one bank.

Afreximbank was created almost 40 years ago precisely to keep trade credit flowing when commercial markets slammed their doors on Africa. Now, for doing exactly that job — lending to Ghana during its debt restructuring — the bank was penalized for losing its preferred creditor status.

The irony is brutal: Fulfill your development mandate, and the rating agencies will call you risky.

Afreximbank's move to terminate the rating before the downgrade went public showed rare defiance. But defiance or an act of institutional self-assertion does not pay down debt or reopen trade credit lines. After all, crossing from a BBB- rating to BB+ can widen borrowing spreads by more than 100 basis points in emerging markets. For a

bank running over \$40 billion in assets and financing much of that through external debt, every extra basis point translates directly into higher costs for trade finance throughout the continent.

Africa still pays a staggering premium simply because of how risk is perceived rather than how it performs. Infrastructure default rates on the continent run at just 2.6 percent, among the lowest in the world. But credit ratings often miss this reality.

A UN agency calculated that 16 African

countries collectively overpay more than \$74 billion in debt servicing costs because their ratings sit lower than their actual economic fundamentals warrant.

Moreover, only three of the 34 rated African countries hold investment-grade status. The remaining 38 percent of the continent is entirely unrated, which translates to a punitive guessing-game premium. Meanwhile, every non-investment-grade borrower pays a substantial markup that is not a reflection of true default probability. Instead, it is a structural tax imposed by a system that lacks enough data points on Africa and, therefore, defaults to negative assumptions.

Even more troubling, credit ratings in Africa function less like neutral opinions and more like assessments, a distinction



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the International Organization of Securities Commissions recognized back in 2015. That means the consequences are heavier. A downgrade actively creates risk by raising borrowing costs, triggering forced selling from institutional investors, and shrinking fiscal space for essential spending.

Worse yet, a new geopolitical wound opened early this year. The US-Iran war effectively closed or severely restricted both the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab Al-Mandab, creating a double maritime chokehold. For Egypt, the impact has been catastrophic. Suez Canal revenues have dropped by roughly 40-60 percent, representing an annual loss approaching \$10 billion. Egypt is a major Afreximbank shareholder, and its financial distress directly feeds back into the bank's risk profile.

For the continent's other economies, the rerouting of ships around the Cape of Good Hope adds 10-15 days to transit times. Fuel, fertilizer, and food imports have all surged in cost. Inflationary pressures that were finally cooling are heating up again. And because Afreximbank now faces higher borrowing costs itself, the trade finance facilities that could soften these shocks are becoming more expensive just when they are needed most.

And, unlike the previous two decades,

when the continent would simply "look East" when the West retreated, the era of Beijing functioning as Africa's lender of last resort is over. Between 2020 and 2024, the continent experienced a net outflow of roughly \$22 billion to China, meaning repayments on existing loans exceeded new disbursements. Beijing has quietly but decisively shifted from building mega-infrastructure to demanding repayment. New loans are smaller, more targeted, and increasingly denominated in renminbi

rather than dollars.

And the timing could not be worse. Africa is still reeling from a "fiscal long COVID." Governments everywhere postponed hard choices during the pre-pandemic era of ultra-low interest

rates. However, that era ended abruptly, and now global public debt is on track to breach 100 percent by 2028 — peacetime levels never seen before. For low-income countries, interest payments now consume 21 percent of tax revenues on average, and in emerging markets, the picture is only marginally better.

For now, the ships are still moving around the cape; the bonds are still trading, and the banks are still lending. But the cost of everything is rising, the margin for error is shrinking, and the clock is running.

**The ships are still moving around the cape; the bonds are still trading, and the banks are still lending**

**The cost of everything is, however, rising, the margin for error is shrinking, and the clock is running**

## Landmark UK royal visit soothes Trump tensions

ANDREW HAMMOND

Much pomp and pageantry accompanied the four-day visit by UK King Charles and Queen Camilla to the US. However, beneath all the gloss, the tour may have been one of the most important undertaken by any British monarch since at least the 1950s Suez crisis.

As much as the 250th anniversary of US independence from Britain shaped the

narrative for the trip, it is another date — almost 70 years ago in 1957 — that Charles will have been keenly aware of as he visited US President Donald Trump and addressed Congress on Monday and Tuesday. Then, as now, US-UK relations had significantly deteriorated when Queen Elizabeth II made her own first US state visit to meet President Dwight Eisenhower.

The successful October 1957 tour saw Eisenhower assert that "the respect we have for Britain is epitomized in the affection we have for the royal family, who have honored us so much by making this visit to our shores." Unquestionably, Elizabeth helped stabilize relations between the two countries after Eisenhower's significant disagreements with Anthony Eden, who

resigned as UK prime minister in January 1957 following the Suez debacle, to be replaced by Harold Macmillan.

Fast forward 70 years and a new Middle Eastern conflict, this time in Iran, is again the backdrop for challenging relations between the two governments. Trump has frequently scolded Prime Minister Keir Starmer over his refusal to join this latest war, saying the UK leader is "no Winston Churchill," and has made disparaging comments over UK military capabilities and its performance in recent wars, including Afghanistan. Another thorny security issue is the proposed Starmer deal on the future governance of the Chagos Islands, site of a key US-UK base on Diego Garcia.

The Starmer government is also on the political back foot amid the turbulent aftermath of last year's sacking of Peter Mandelson, the UK ambassador to Washington, over his links to child sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, a former contact of Trump in New York before Trump ran for the presidency.

However, politics is not the only area in which the two nations are at loggerheads. On economic issues, too, tensions are high. Some UK politicians are concerned



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that the deterioration in Trump-Starmer ties could unravel some of the deals announced last year during the US president's state visit to the UK. That saw Trump, when his relationship with Starmer was in a better place, saying "we're forever joined and we are forever friends and we will always be friends."

During that visit, the two leaders signed what was billed as a landmark tech partnership aimed at strengthening cooperation in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and nuclear energy. The UK prime minister called it "the biggest investment package of its kind in British history" and "ground breaking," not least given that it would bring thousands of new jobs to the UK.

The pledges mainly from US tech giants and financial groups amounted to investment of about \$205 billion over several years. Trump also hyped up the agreement, saying: "We have also just signed a historic technology prosperity deal, one of a kind, to ensure our countries lead the next great technological revolution side by side."

Given the growing tensions between Trump and Starmer, Charles pitched for UK business, including encouraging post-Brexit deeper trade ties with the US.

Already, the UK has signed multiple trade agreements with US states, including North Carolina, South Carolina, and Indiana, and it is trying to secure targeted federal-level deals on key UK exports.

As head of the Commonwealth, Charles also made a broader charm offensive during his trip for the nations in the club, including South Africa. These countries are all affected by tariffs and wider Trump agendas, including the president's decision not to invite South Africa to US-hosted G20

meetings this year.

So the visit was not only aimed at smoothing troubled waters between governments. It was also a reminder that wider ties between the two nations are deeper than individual politicians. This generally highly constructive and successful bilateral longer-term relationship has long been built on traditional links founded on demographics, religion, culture, law, economics, politics, defense, and security.

Taken together, amid the multiple challenges in the US, UK, and wider Commonwealth relationships, the royal visit helped renew wide-ranging collaboration. This will provide some protection for ties if key UK political leaders fail to get on with Trump.

**Charles pitched for deeper trade links with the US**

**The Iran conflict is the backdrop for strained relations**

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## OPINION

COLUMNIST | MICHELLE GOLDBERG

# Don't Underestimate the Fury of Democratic Voters

One lesson of the Democratic Senate primary race in Maine is that no one should underestimate the white-hot fury of the party's voters.

In October, Graham Platner's insurgent campaign appeared doomed. Janet Mills, Maine's Democratic governor, had just entered the Senate primary race, reportedly at the urging of Senator Chuck Schumer, the minority leader. Then a barrage of devastating opposition research against Platner dropped.

Journalists reported on old Reddit posts where he wrote that all cops are bastards, spoke about fighting fascism with guns and seemed to blame rape victims for their own assaults. His political director resigned. Hoping to get ahead of an even more damaging story, Platner revealed that a skull tattoo he'd gotten while he was in the Marines, when he was drunk with his friends on leave in Croatia, looked like a Nazi Totenkopf symbol. His public image abruptly transformed from working-class hero to guy with a Nazi tattoo. Many declared his candidacy dead.

But Maine Democrats, many of whom saw Platner in person as he tirelessly barnstormed across the state, seemed ready to look past the negative stories. On Thursday, Mike Hurlley, the former mayor of Belfast, told me he "loves" Mills, but had been backing Platner because he wanted a brawler.

While Republicans are playing "hardball," he said, Democrats in Washington seem as if they're playing "T-ball." Hurlley was impressed, he said, by how Platner soldiered on after his disastrous October: "A lot of people would crumble under the kind of pressure he's been under, and he's not crumbling." He felt as though he understood him. "Platner is a very recognizable kind of person in small towns," said Hurlley. "He's a thoughtful loudmouth."

On Thursday, Mills, trailing significantly in the polls, announced she was dropping out of the race, saying that she didn't have the "financial resources" to continue. That clears the field for Platner to run against Maine's longtime Republican senator, Susan Collins, in a race that's crucial to Democratic hopes of flipping the Senate. Washington Democrats both underestimated Platner and misread the mood of the primary electorate, which has been radicalized by revulsion toward Donald Trump.

Though a newcomer to politics, Platner turned out to be a natural on the stump. In October, at a low point in his campaign, I went to Maine to interview him and attend one of his town halls. Watching him address hundreds of people crammed into a small-town school auditorium, I could feel the charge in the air — that rare alchemy born when a politician is able to pull a crowd into a shared vision of the future. One attendee likened it to seeing Barack Obama when he first ran for president.

Platner spoke about the struggles of working people for whom a decent life seemed out of reach, about the disastrous wars he'd fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, and about the need for a Democratic Party with New Deal-scale ambitions. And he spoke to people's feelings of being abandoned to Trump's deprecations by a weak and fumbling Democrat-



MARK PETERSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ic Party. "Nobody is coming to save us," he said, positioning himself as a leader who could help people save themselves.

Since then, Platner has used his campaign to organize for causes besides his own election. He rallied against a ballot initiative that would have required voter ID and restricted absentee voting. (It lost.) When ICE arrived in Lewiston, a town with a significant Somali population, he urged people to resist the agency the way that the citizens of Minneapolis had, celebrating those who, as he said in a fiery speech, "do real things to impede ICE's operations and physically protect our communities." He collects donations for food pantries at his events. His campaign feels, to many of his impassioned supporters, like a movement.

"I don't think I've ever seen a Maine candidate — and I don't care who they are, Angus King, Susan Collins or Olympia Snowe — nobody has ever had this kind of response or support," said Hurlley.

Plenty of Democrats, particularly outside of Maine, worry about Platner's electability. Primary voters were poised to forgive his tattoo and his hotheaded Reddit posts, but a general electorate might not be so understanding. And while Platner is leading Collins in the polls, Collins has beaten expectations before. In 2020, most polls showed her trailing the Democrat Sara Gideon, who outspent Collins by millions, but Collins ended up winning by nine points.

For many Maine progressives, though, Gideon's defeat only emphasizes the peril of

## The dynamics fueling Graham Platner's popularity aren't confined to Maine.

playing it safe. "The Sara Gideon campaign was a disaster, I think, because they made her follow a script, and she came off as totally fake because of it," said Andy O'Brien, a former Maine legislator who now works at the A.F.L.-C.I.O. By "they," he means Democrats from Washington.

Now, he said, Maine Democrats have lost all faith in the ability of the party's establishment to pick winners. "They sold us these candidates like Hillary Clinton and Kamala as the most electable candidates, and they weren't," he said.

Of course, the dynamics propelling Platner's rise aren't confined to Maine. Democrats all over the country regard their party's leaders as feckless in the face of Trump's blustering authoritarianism. They are desperate to break up the power of the oligarchs arrayed around the president and believe Democrats have been too timid in pushing for sweeping reforms. A Democratic version of the Tea Party is emerging as voters seek to upend a system that they believe has failed them.

In New Jersey in February, Analilia Mejia, a veteran of Bernie Sanders's 2020 presiden-

tial campaign, won a special election primary in an affluent suburban district with little history of radicalism. The progressive epidemiologist Abdul El-Sayed, who has recently been campaigning with the left-wing Twitch streamer Hasan Piker, is competitive in Michigan's Senate primary. The democratic socialist Francesca Hong has become a leading candidate in the Democratic primary for governor in Wisconsin.

"Voters have a different theory of what is electable right now," said Rebecca Katz, a founding partner of Fight Agency and a media consultant to both Platner and El-Sayed. "Someone who knows what they believe and is willing to fight for it."

These voters could be wrong; candidates can still benefit from the perception of moderation. But there's a widespread hunger in the country for populists and outsiders, and ordinary people don't always think in the same ideological terms as pundits. As America slips deeper into social and economic crisis — likely to be exacerbated by the job-killing effects of artificial intelligence — the electorate might gravitate toward leaders offering far-reaching solutions.

"Things are going to get worse," Platner told me in October. "Republican policies are not going to be improving people's lives. And as things get worse, we need to have the apparatus built to bring people in, help them, connect them with their neighbors and give them an answer about who is truly at fault."

The primary was an early test of this theory. At least there, it looks as if it worked.

# Who Will Stand Up to the Justices?

Nikolas Bowie and Daphna Renan

Law professors at Harvard and the authors of the forthcoming book "Supremacy: How Rule by the Court Replaced Government by the People."

WITH its decision last week in *Louisiana v. Callais*, the Supreme Court gutted a core part of the Voting Rights Act, Congress's landmark prohibition on voting rules that have the effect of excluding people of color from the political process. In doing so, the court has, not for the first time, claimed an authority to reject laws passed by Congress in service of equal justice and a free society.

And it has effectively killed the Second Reconstruction, the mid-20th-century civil rights revolution. In the face of this decision, Congress must once again defend democracy from a hostile court. A plan of action already exists.

When the Supreme Court challenged the first Reconstruction 150 years ago, abolitionists and Republicans in Congress debated measures ranging from declaring certain federal laws beyond judicial reach to changing the number of justices. The partial measures they enacted saved Reconstruction — for a time. But more relevant for us today are the comprehensive reforms they proposed but never fully enacted. These reforms offer us and our representatives in Congress the tools we need now.

In the era surrounding the Civil War, opponents of slavery confronted a Supreme Court that was threatening their life's work. In *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, in 1857, the court declared unconstitutional the Missouri Compromise — a congressional statute banning the spread of slavery in federal territory. A decade later, the court similarly menaced the Reconstruction laws that Congress was enacting to begin the project of multiracial democracy amid the wreckage of the former Confederacy.

But Congress did not submit to this judicial rule. Members of an ascendant Republican Party declared a court "inflated with supremacy" and declared that whenever a decision is, "in the judgment of Congress, subversive of the rights and liberties of the people," it is the "solemn duty of Congress" to override it. In 1862, Congress and President Abraham Lincoln enacted legislation that banned slavery in places the *Dred Scott* decision had protected it. Congress also drafted the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, all of which advanced Congress's goals of free-

dom and political equality while empowering Congress to enforce its terms by "appropriate legislation."

When the postwar court appeared likely to challenge legislation Congress considered "appropriate" to enforce these amendments, Congress changed the size of the court. The House of Representatives then passed a bill that prohibited the court from invalidating any federal law without the concurrence of two-thirds of the justices. Representative John Bingham of Ohio, the primary author of the 14th Amendment, insisted that such a requirement was necessary to prevent a second *Dred Scott* decision. Some members agreed but pushed for a unanimity rule (concurrence among all the justices) instead.

In the Senate, the author of the 13th Amendment, Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, proposed that Congress declare its Reconstruction Acts "political in their character, the propriety or validity of which no judicial tribunal is competent to question." As the threat from one pending Supreme Court case became urgent, Congress enacted a narrower but decisive measure stripping the court of appellate jurisdiction over the particular challenge before it.

That strategy worked. Disciplined by Congress, the court declined to interfere with its abolition or Reconstruction Acts. As federal prosecutors and lower courts enforced these statutes, over 750,000 Black Americans voted for the first time. Black men even took seats in Congress, where they helped draft and pass the nation's first national voting rights laws.

But Congress — distracted by postwar problems and a fiendish president, Andrew Johnson — did not take up the more enduring court reform proposals that were then before it. In the 1870s, the court re-emerged to finish what it had started. Seizing for itself the power to decide the meaning of the amendments Congress had just drafted, the court announced that it was not "appropriate" for Congress to ban lynching, racial discrimination by businesses or widespread disenfranchisement. A century-long era of Jim Crow emerged.

As Frederick Douglass lamented at a mass meeting of Black voters in 1883, by claiming the power to invalidate acts of Congress and then using that power to undermine federal civil rights laws, the court had become "the autocratic point in our National Government."

But the civil rights movement proved that the supremacy of the court was not perma-



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ALEKSEY KONDRATYEV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

nent. On the urging of organizers like John Lewis, Congress repudiated the court's narrow vision of its legislative power. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 interpreted the Reconstruction amendments differently from the court, enforcing them to ban literacy tests and establish a preclearance regime to prevent states from cycling through one suppression mechanism after another.

The Voting Rights Act helped unleash a Second Reconstruction with a surge of Black voter registration and representation. But in the years that followed, the court regressed. In a 1980 decision called *City of Mobile v. Bolden*, the court read the Voting Rights Act to require proof of discriminatory intent — collapsing the statute back into the court's stingier understanding of the Constitution. Congress responded in 1982 because, as Congress understood, in a world where architects of suppression keep their motives off the record, an intent requirement guarantees im-

## Ruling by ruling, the Supreme Court is undoing the civil rights movement.

punity. Instead, Congress amended the Voting Rights Act to overrule *Bolden* and set an effects test — something that could be detected and fixed — instead.

One person who objected to Congress's response was Justice William Rehnquist, who spent his career arguing that Congress lacked authority to enforce the Reconstruction amendments beyond the court's own cramped readings. His former law clerk, a young lawyer named John Roberts, carried that project into the Reagan administration by unsuccessfully urging the administration to block the 1982 legislation.

Mr. Roberts eventually replaced Justice Rehnquist on the Supreme Court and followed his mentor in seeking to restore a premise Congress had long repudiated: that the best meaning of the Reconstruction amendments is found not in the statutes Congress enacts to fulfill their promise, but in the late-19th-century court opinions that defied Congress's first efforts. In *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013, the Roberts court dismantled the Voting Rights Act's preclearance mechanism. Last week's ruling finishes the job.

If Congress does not respond, we know how this story will end. But we can draw upon the tools past Congresses have offered for how to build a more democratic constitutionalism. In that version, constitutional meaning is determined not by unelected judges but by we the people and our representatives through federal lawmaking.

Rejecting the court's supremacy, Congress should re-enact its own interpretation of the Reconstruction amendments. To protect its interpretation from the court, it should then enact the measures like those suggested by its predecessors.

As the founding generation of Republicans understood, the Constitution explicitly empowers Congress to regulate the court. By contrast, the document says nothing about the court's claimed authority to regulate Congress. Instead, the court's alleged authority to defy and second-guess acts of Congress has been sustained only because the American public has so far been willing to tolerate this judicial rule — a choice that can be unmade.

Lincoln understood the stakes of this choice when he warned at his inauguration in 1860 that if "vital questions affecting the whole people" are to be "irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court," then "the people will have ceased to be their own rulers."

We must not cease to govern ourselves.

## OPINION

# When Their Neighbors Disappeared

Megan K. Stack

A contributing Opinion writer who has been a correspondent in China, Russia, Egypt, Israel, Afghanistan and the U.S.-Mexico border area.

CHICAGO

IT WAS the quiet that most troubled Mara Lynne. Her street usually bustles and thrums, but when armed, masked agents grabbed a passing man and stuffed him into an S.U.V., she was the lone witness.

"There was nobody around, just me," she said. "It was silent. That's the part that freaks me out the most."

Witnessing what she called an "abduction" unnerved Ms. Lynne. It's one thing to know that such things are happening; it's another to see it unfold before your eyes, right outside your house. Quietly.

The arrest was part of Operation Midway Blitz, the huge federal immigration surge that swept through Chicago this past fall. It was a season of madness. Helicopters chewed the skies. Federal agents sped through the streets and launched tear gas, pepper balls and rubber bullets. At least two people were shot by immigration agents; one of them was killed. Thousands of people were rounded up, even when officials had no warrants, leading to a tangle of court cases. U.S. citizens, legal residents and even City Council staff members were detained. The Trump administration claims to target violent criminals, but as of December, only 3 percent of Chicago's detainees had convictions for violent crimes.

These past months have seen Mr. Trump's grandiose plans for mass deportation bogging down in litigation and scandal. The masking of agents, their preying on people at courthouses, the targeting of student protesters, the use of information plundered from government databases — none of that has sat well with the public or the courts.

The intense, often physical animosity between immigration agents and ordinary people in Minneapolis last winter, with agents fatally shooting two American citizens whom officials quickly smeared as domestic terror-

ists, helped lead to the dismissal of the homeland security secretary, Kristi Noem, and a freeze in funding for the department.

But before Minneapolis, there was Chicago. It was here, in a city that has long thrived on immigration, that a federal agent first shot a U.S. citizen who was protesting, with the Department of Homeland Security calling her a "domestic terrorist" and officials later dropping charges against her. It was here that Immigration and Customs Enforcement unveiled militarized tactics it later transferred to Minneapolis. I visited Chicago to find out what kind of mark ICE had left on Ms. Lynne's community, Rogers Park.

The reactions I heard were unambiguous: Residents recoiled at federal agents swarming their neighborhood and hauling people off the street. If agents had been running down hardened criminals, that might have been different. But landscapers, cooks, churchgoers, kids, people washing their clothes at the laundromat? People couldn't accept that.

The raids felt more like military occupation than law enforcement, and they triggered the same, distinctly American revulsion against overwhelming federal power and militarized abuse that threads through the Constitution. Many people here told me that the agents supposedly sent to vanquish criminal usurpers were themselves the criminal usurpers.

Ms. Lynne was one of the residents whose political ideas sharpened as she watched the mayhem. A former model and an impassioned advocate for disability rights, she hadn't given immigration much attention, she told me, before Mr. Trump announced his mass deportation. "Never," she said. "I had no clue. I knew nothing." But the arrival of the agents brought Mr. Trump's crackdowns crashing into daily life, making residents witnesses to a national project that seemed designed to prey on vulnerable people.

"I think it just opened people's eyes to what's been happening," she said. "We just never saw it in real life. Then we had to learn. It's in your face."

Ms. Lynne attended training sessions where leaders of a local community watch organization taught people how to legally respond to immigration agents. She started carrying a whistle. She knew what to do.

And then she saw the agents through her window. "I was like, 'Oh,'" she said. "Like I was in a movie. It wasn't real, but it was real."

A Latino, perhaps in his early 40s, had come walking down the street, dressed casually in dark jeans and a jacket. He struck Ms. Lynne as wholly unremarkable.

Suddenly two masked men in brown uniforms, bulked up with gear, approached the man. Ms. Lynne picked up her phone and whistle and rushed out.

"Leave him alone!" she shouted at the

masked agents. "He lives here!" The agents called her "ma'am" and told her not to worry about it. They pulled the man's wrists together and cuffed them in the front.

"He was looking at me like he was a 2-year-old," Ms. Lynne said of the man taken into custody. "It was terrible."

His name was Emilio Bahena. He is from Mexico. He worked two jobs to support his children, both of whom are U.S. citizens. After his arrest, his daughter started a fund-raising campaign, explaining that the family was struggling to cover housing costs.

The government never accused Mr. Bahena of any crime except slipping over the border, where he built a new life. Nevertheless, he was locked up for two months until his family managed to get a lawyer, who in January got him released on bond while his deportation case makes its way through court.

When agents were forcing Mr. Bahena into an S.U.V., Ms. Lynne saw other men inside. One, she said, had blood on his face. As the agents prepared to drive off, she asked for a name or a badge number.

"Have a good day," one of the agents replied in a singsong, Ms. Lynne told me. "Like he was getting off on it."

Later that day, Ms. Lynne sat for hours, arms wrapped around her knees, mind racing. "My neighbor just got kidnapped," she thought. Even friends who listened sympathetically, she said, couldn't grasp the severity of what she'd witnessed. She believes it's the worst thing she's ever seen.

I asked her: What was the feeling? She didn't hesitate: "I was enraged."

BY THE time federal agents surged into Rogers Park, Mr. Trump's deportation campaign was already hampered by severe public backlash and weakened by the mission's fundamental incoherence.

The president framed the ICE campaign as, simultaneously, a targeted exercise to track down violent criminals and a "mass deportation" that would empty the country of undocumented immigrants. The pairing of these goals never made sense; there weren't nearly enough dangerous immigrants to result in anything resembling an en masse purge. On the contrary, immigrants (no matter their legal status) commit violent crimes at a lower rate than native-born U.S. citizens.

Pushed by their bosses to arrest as many people as fast as they could, and emboldened by the courts to use race as a "relevant factor" in arrests, Department of Homeland Security agents swept buildings where immigrants were rumored to live, and grabbed people who happened to cross paths with agents. Immigration experts warned that the rush to meet quotas interfered with the more careful, time-consuming work of nabbing criminals. Undeterred, the department went big and

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# The War You Can Scroll On By

Nick Mafi

An Iranian American writer.

ON THE first Saturday morning in April I sat on my sofa in Brooklyn, drinking coffee, and watched the B1 bridge outside Tehran partly collapse on my phone. It was meant to connect Tehran to Karaj, a city where I have relatives and that I visited as a child. The bridge had yet to open to the public. An American bomb cut it in half while families nearby were celebrating Sizdah Bedar, the Persian holiday known as Nature Day. Reports say that at least eight people were killed. An engineer at the site told a French reporter that the bridge had been like a child to him.

Below that video, Instagram showed me an ad for a Dr. Dennis Gross anti-aging face mask. Below that, an old college classmate arranging tulips on her kitchen island. Below that, a nurse at a hospital in Tehran carrying newborns through the debris. Below that, a video of nachos and lobster rolls and everything else someone ordered at Yankee Stadium on opening day.

I kept scrolling. I do not remember making a decision to keep scrolling. My thumb just moved, the way it always moves, down and down, and the war and the face mask and the tulips and the nachos slid past in a single unbroken current, each one dissolving into the next before I could fix my attention on any of

them. This was my Instagram feed. Yours would have shown you something else entirely. For me, the food video lasted 30 seconds. The bridge, 11. I obliged.

I called my mother later that morning. The person she asks about most is my cousin in Tehran. On the Persian New Year, on March 20, my cousin and I managed to use FaceTime for three minutes before the signal cut out. He told me I looked sharp in my suit. We told each other what we always do. That we love each other, that we miss each other, that we hope to see each other soon. Then the screen went black.

There is a word in Persian, "ghorbat," that describes the particular ache of exile. It is not homesickness, exactly. It is more structural than that, more permanent. It is the condition of being separated from a place by a distance that you understand, somewhere deep in your body, you may never close.

My parents have lived inside that word for more than 40 years. Their parents died in America, still calling Iran home. Ghorbat runs through Persian poetry the way longing runs through blues music, not as a subject that appears now and then but as the key in which everything is written. Centuries of invasion and exile carved the word into the language. The poetry evolved to hold the things displaced people could not take with them.

Something has changed about that word in the last decade, and it took this war for me to understand what. My family's ghorbat was

the house I was raised in. I had lived in it my whole life without calling it mourning. Then the bombs started falling. To live inside ghorbat once meant you could not see what was happening back home. You mourned from a distance that at least had the mercy of being total. I do not have that mercy. I can watch a neighborhood in Isfahan get flattened in real time, in high definition, on a device I carry with me, from a coffee shop on Franklin Avenue in Brooklyn.

But there is another Iran in my memory. It's the sound of my grandmothers laughing in rooms I will never sit in again. Through the phone in my pocket, I am closer to the country's destruction than any Iranian exile in history has ever been. And I have never felt further from it. Because the images come and they come and they come, and the device that delivers them also buries them, instantly, under the next image, which is a slow-motion video of monarch butterflies beginning their migration north, which is a sunset over the Hudson River, which is an ad for running shoes. The closeness is an illusion.

What is real is the velocity. And the machine that drives it, which knows what I like but not what matters to me, draws no line between a bridge falling and a face mask ad. The velocity makes everything, the bridge and the face mask and the dead, weigh the same. Which is to say: nothing.

Then came the cease-fire. I watched my feed absorb that, too. Many Americans will

## OPINION

sloppy, snatching up legal residents and U.S. citizens in a deportation frenzy that has, since October, resulted in more than 4,400 judicial rulings against the agency.

At the same time, residents of targeted communities were alienated, enraged and increasingly eager to interfere. The broader public was also disgusted: By March, half the country, according to one poll, wanted to see ICE not just reformed but abolished. Many said the lawlessness and highhanded disregard for human rights ran all the way down to the roots of the agency, which was created in the swirl of nationalistic panic, expanded surveillance and diminished civil liberties that followed the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Rogers Park, a comfortably scruffy area in the city's far north, was never likely to embrace Mr. Trump's anti-immigration push. With its jumble of mom-and-pop hair braiding salons, panaderias and hole-in-the-wall restaurants, the neighborhood has long been a magnet for migrants and refugees. It has been described as the neighborhood whose racial demographics most closely reflect Chicago overall, although its median annual household income of \$63,293 is lower than the city average.

At least 47 people have been detained in the area since Operation Midway Blitz kicked off, said community volunteers who have tracked the arrests. They included a school employee, people washing their clothes in a laundromat and parents whose children were left behind.

Kristin Jackson, a pastor who's lived in Rogers Park for more than three decades, told me the immigration crackdown caused a disillusionment so profound that her understanding of the country had changed.

"I'm just realizing," she told me, "this is not the Statue of Liberty land of the free that I thought it was."

Ms. Jackson now feels obliged to venture out to help protect people from the excesses of the federal government rather than privately teach and pray in her congregation, many of whom were also upset by the raids.

One day, Ms. Jackson joined other local clergy members to pray outside the detention center in Broadview, near Chicago. Denial of spiritual counsel was one of many complaints about the facility. While she and other religious leaders prayed, armored vehicles thundered near the crowd.

"It's so eroding," Ms. Jackson said. "People's lives have been turned upside down by something that just feels lawless."

**T**HE raids started in Chicago on a Saturday in September, Torrence Gardner recalled, and "that's the first time I would've said it felt like living in a military zone." Helicopters hovered overhead during breakfast, he said, and by the time he headed out to go to the gym, he felt the area was being overrun.

"Helicopters, cars, chaos," he recalled. "I just remember the helicopter sounds. The whole day changed on a dime."

Mr. Gardner is one of the founding members of Protect Rogers Park, a volunteer group created during the first Trump administration in response to its prohibiting people from some Muslim countries from entering the United States. As ICE and the Border Patrol poured into the city last fall, the organization's volunteer base swelled into the hundreds, attracting people who'd never been particularly political but felt compelled to help. School and bike patrols monitored the movements of federal agents. Community care teams tried to keep an eye out for immigrants who might need help during what felt like a lockdown.

The group has also been working to place markers on sites where people were taken into custody. The idea was partly inspired by Amsterdam's Stolpersteine, small brass plates embedded in the sidewalks to mark the last known residences of people exterminated by the Nazis. The Chicago markers are flimsier and more ephemeral — bright ropes braided from scrap fabric and laminated orange construction paper printed with butterflies and a message in English and Spanish: "A neighbor was taken from this spot on \_\_\_\_."

It's a kind of groundswell from residents reluctant to let the streets swallow these events into obscurity. They wish to record that their neighbors have been disappeared.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONATHAN MICHAEL CASTILLO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

It's a term I associate with other places — the "dirty war" in Argentina, the civil war in Sri Lanka, the Assad regime in Syria, places where human beings vanished into the maw of a state — and never wished to apply to my own country. And yet it's true: People are disappearing.

Their cars are found abandoned, they suddenly don't show up at work, and nobody knows where they are at first and sometimes for a long time afterward. These people are not being executed, but they disappear, and many of them will never be back in their communities again.

**K**I LEE knew the Hispanic woman whom immigration agents dragged from her car just outside his laundromat. A regular customer, she'd been waiting for her clothes and had stepped outside for a bite to eat. Mr. Lee watched helplessly while three men he calls "soldiers" jumped from an S.U.V. and surrounded her car, pulling his customer out and shoving her into their vehicle.

The agents returned an hour later, just as another customer, a Latino, was carrying his dried clothes out to his car. The man dashed back into the store. But the "soldiers," Mr. Lee said, chased the man inside, handcuffed him and took him away.

"I was very shocked," Mr. Lee told me soberly. "I couldn't sleep for several days. They were regular customers. They were very good people."

After that, he said, the laundry grew eerily quiet. The day I dropped in, he and a few family members were sipping tea and trading gossip. Many of the laundromat's longtime customers had gone to ground. One day a customer panicked and became too frightened to walk home on the streets. Mr. Lee felt sorry for her. He drove her home in his car.

I heard more stories of damaged business and lingering anxiety when I went to a town hall with Mike Simmons, the state senator for Rogers Park and the surrounding area.

The son of an immigrant who escaped Ethiopia's Red Terror by crossing several African countries on foot, Mr. Simmons talked briefly about SNAP benefits and Medicaid before turning to what he called "the elephant in the room": ICE. He was optimistic about new state laws he'd helped pass in the last session, allowing Illinois residents to sue immigration agents for violating their constitutional rights and barring federal agents from arresting people within 1,000 feet of a courthouse.

Next Mr. Simmons said he'd push for \$50 million to shore up local businesses hurt by decimated foot traffic and frightened workers ghosting their shifts. He also wants to incorporate community watch groups like Protect Rogers Park into the government.

A resident with a dirty-blond bob asked him whether lawmakers in Springfield could create a fund for families whose breadwinners had been detained or people who couldn't get to work. Mr. Simmons agreed: It was a good idea.

Then a middle-aged man with a crew cut stood up. He wore glasses, a fading polo shirt and thick, sensible shoes. Would he be the meeting's contrarian, berating Mr. Simmons and extolling the virtues of immigration enforcement? But then the man said aloud the names of the people shot by immigration officers in Chicago — Silverio Villegas Gonzáles and Marimar Martínez.

"Obviously, there hasn't been any accountability for those shootings," he said coldly. Mr. Simmons, he continued, should join in efforts to push the state's attorney to prosecute the agents who opened fire.

The man was a lawyer named Ben Meyer. Despite the complications of the Constitution's supremacy clause, which sets federal law above state law and has hamstringed local officials in trying to curb ICE abuses, he told me, he believed there were mechanisms for the state to prosecute federal agents.

"It should not be the case," he said plainly, "that we have immigration officers running around killing people."

## How ICE transformed a Chicago neighborhood.

**P**EOPLE in Rogers Park are still making sense of their experience — and wondering if another surge will come.

After immigration agents fatally shot the two U.S. citizens in Minneapolis, condemnation exploded. Suddenly the administration seemed eager to distance itself from the whole mess. Officials stopped emphasizing "mass deportations." Even some of the politicians who had ardently favored deportation began complaining that the administration had lost support because of poor strategy. Mr. Trump, ever poll-conscious, briefly auditioned a jarringly gentler tone toward immigrants in late January.

"We have a lot of heart for people," he said. "They came in illegally, but they're good people, and they're working now on farms, and they're working in luncheonettes and hotels and all. And we're not looking at — we're looking to get the criminals out right now."

With the Iran war bedeviling Washington and midterm elections drawing ever closer, a scandal-ridden ICE retreated into the background. But will the agency stay there? Money suggests not. ICE (created in 2003 with a relatively modest budget of about \$3.3 billion) received an extra \$75 billion from Congress last year, part of Mr. Trump's \$190 billion allocation for the Department of Homeland Security. If U.S. immigration enforcement were an army, it would be the world's third richest, outspent only by the militaries of the United States and China.

With all those contradictory signals swirling, residents of Rogers Park didn't know what to expect. And then, right in their neighborhood, a terrible thing happened.

Sheridan Gorman, a freshman at Loyola University Chicago, was shot dead in Rogers Park. She'd been strolling with friends when a man who had been lurking nearby shot her in the back.

The police soon arrested a suspect: José Medina, a 25-year-old immigrant from Venezuela. Mr. Medina, who lived in Rogers Park, seems very much like the dangerous immigrants Mr. Trump is forever invoking. Mr. Medina has been charged with first-degree murder and illegally carrying a gun. He had highly contagious tuberculosis. He crossed the border into Texas in 2023 — during the Biden administration — and turned himself in to Department of Homeland Security agents, who detained him briefly and then released him. He then boarded a bus headed to Chicago, where he was soon arrested, accused of shoplifting from Macy's. When he didn't turn up for court, a judicial warrant was issued for his arrest.

Ms. Gorman's death was sucked into the vortex of political debate. A few members of a pro-Trump group called Chicago Flips Red, which voiced support for ICE and denounced local officials for spending too much money on immigrants, trekked to Rogers Park to protest. A handful of local residents turned out in counterprotest, and the two groups shouted back and forth.

Gov. JB Pritzker of Illinois said Ms. Gorman's death illustrated "failure to have comprehensive immigration reform. Failure of the president to follow his own edict to go after the worst of the worst."

The eagerness with which people seized on a slain woman to score points felt cheap.

And somehow, despite Mr. Medina's shoplifting charge and judicial warrant, immigration agents upended life in Rogers Park, but left untouched a man who, if the charges against him stand up in court, was among "the worst of the worst."

After reading about Ms. Gorman's death, I spoke with Ms. Jackson, the pastor. She sounded, most of all, exhausted.

"It's heartbreaking that this shocking act of violence would happen in our neighborhood," she said simply. "It's a tragedy."

But she was worried, too, about how Ms. Gorman's killing would work its way into local politics. Like most people I met in Rogers Park, Ms. Jackson is worried that the federal agents will return.

"I feel just sick about it," she said. "We know what the narrative is going to be. And it's the wrong narrative."

But there is no correct narrative to be spun from all of this. Ms. Gorman's death, a terrible coda to the turmoil and heartbreak in Rogers Park, left a community counting the costs of whatever it was the federal government tried to do here.

Opposite page, far left, Mara Lynne, a resident of the Rogers Park area of Chicago, attended sessions to learn how to protect her community against ICE raids; near left, Torrence Gardner, a founding member of Protect Rogers Park, a volunteer group. Above left, a sign offers support resources for immigrants.

## The feed makes everything — nachos, bombs — weigh the same: nothing.

not remember a single image from this war. They will not remember forgetting it. The forgetting will be the memory.

There is no modern vocabulary for what the scroll does to grief. The closest I have found is an entry in the diary of Leo Tolstoy, written late in his life. Tolstoy describes cleaning his study one day. He reaches the sofa and cannot remember whether he has already dusted it. The motion was so habitual, so emptied of conscious thought, that it passed through him without leaving any trace. If the act was performed unconsciously, he writes, then it was the same as if it had never been performed at all. And he goes further: If an entire life were lived this way, without awareness, it would be as if that life had never been lived.

More than 20 years ago, Susan Sontag argued that the problem with war on television was never that viewers stopped caring. It was that the medium was organized to keep attention moving, to make every image replaceable by the next. She was describing a screen that sat on a table in a liv-

ing room. Everyone who tuned in saw the same images of the same war.

Mine fits in my pocket. The war it delivers is personal, shaped by an algorithm that tracks my grief as engagement. Sontag believed that a photograph could still stop time, that a single image could freeze a moment long enough to become memory. Vietnam's napalm girl. Sept. 11's falling man. There is no such image from this war. Not because the images don't exist. They do, by the thousands. But the feed that delivered them to me did not deliver them to you. There can be no napalm girl when there is no nightly news most everybody watches together. The images flash by too fast to scar, buried under the next video, the next photo, the next thing your thumb finds before your mind catches up.

In March, in a Fox News segment filmed on a Florida beach, college students on spring break were asked what issues in America were most important to them. One said, "What bikini I'm going to wear next." Others could not name the ayatollah. Several did not know the United States was at war.

I was served this clip on my Instagram feed, reposted by an account I follow. But watching it as an Iranian American whose family is scattered across a country my own government is at war with, I did not feel outrage at those students. I felt recognition. The algorithm that fed me a collapsing



ILLUSTRATION BY SHOSHANA SCHULTZ/THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH VIA GETTY IMAGES

bridge fed them which bikini to wear. We scrolled through Gaza. We scrolled through Ukraine. But in those wars, Americans were spectators. In this one, we dropped the bombs.

On the scroll, the ayatollah and my cousin look like the same person. That confusion is older than the algorithm, but the scroll perfected it. The scroll cannot tell a complicated story, only move you past it.

Tolstoy assumed that awareness would change behavior. You would dust the sofa with intention, or not dust it at all. But the feed has proved something different: You can know that the scroll is erasing the war from your consciousness in real time and keep scrolling anyway. I watched what happened in Isfahan and understood that those were real buildings and real people and that my country is responsible for their destruction. And then I kept scrolling. Because stopping, truly stopping, would mean sitting with a grief and a complicity so enormous that the body resists it the way it resists pain, by going numb, by looking away, by swiping to the next thing.

I pick up my phone a hundred times a day. One night recently I picked it up and, for once, put it back down. It sat there, dark, quiet, the size of my hand. The bridge. The nachos. The dead. The tulips. The war. I left it all on the table. It was the most conscious act I had performed in weeks.

## OPINION

# You'll Never Survive a Disaster on Your Own

**Kit Dillon**

A senior staff writer for Wirecutter.

At 4:30 A.M., our dog howled. He heard the emergency sirens before we did. Through the window, my wife spotted cars pulling into the parking lot of the high school across the street — our town's evacuation site.

Texts from friends warned that a nearby stream had surged over 30 feet, and that the 120-year-old dam seven miles uphill from our home on the North Shore of the Hawaiian island of Oahu was in imminent danger of failure. Overnight on March 20, the local weather station had recorded nearly 20 inches of rain. We got up, and made a plan to get to higher ground. This was not my first evacuation.

I was 10 when I ran from my first disaster, a fire that burned my island summer camp in Belgrade, Maine, to the ground. After escaping by boat, we spent the rest of that summer in Goodwill clothes, rebuilding the camp we'd lost. Since then I've been trapped on a subway in the 2003 New York City blackout, have sheltered through four hurricanes in four states and have driven through the Thomas fire in 2017 as it surrounded my home in Ojai, Calif.

In a rapidly warming world, my bad luck is increasingly ordinary. The number of federally declared disasters per year has roughly doubled in the past two decades, affecting more Americans than ever before. By 2050, experts predict, approximately 118 million Americans may face one or more extreme weather events annually.

You might think that after all of this I'd have a go bag always ready, especially since I review bags for a living as a reporter for Wirecutter. But I don't. What I've learned, from every one of these close calls and near misses, is that what keeps us safe isn't the stuff we pack or stockpile; it's the community we build before calamity strikes. At a time when Americans are increasingly isolated from one another, we must see our ties with our neighbors as essential preparation for the future ahead.

Much of America's mainstream doomsday-readiness culture assumes that preparation begins (and ends) with the individual or the single family. On YouTube, channels such as Corporals Corner, City Prepping and American Outlaw share tips for surviving extreme situations, often alone. Go down these rabbit holes and you'll find a jargon-heavy community whose insiders speak in abbreviations that paint vivid pictures of the civilizational collapse they seem to expect. You can find instructions to build and maintain a bug-out vehicle, or BOV, to escape a world without the rule of law, or W.R.O.L. INCH means "I'm never coming home."

The most commonly known manifestation of this is the bug-out bag, or BOB., that assemblage of carefully curated survival equipment that we're told to keep near us at



WALKER TATE

## What you won't learn from doomsday preppers.

all times, ready for the moment we have to run. A typical kit might include a compass, ready-to-eat meals, a bivouac sack, a tourniquet and radio or satellite communications. It may also include a firearm, or another self-defense device, because one of the tenets of this mode of preparation is that in any emergency, other people are a threat.

I've tried to build a bug-out bag. But I found it overwhelming to plan that carefully for every possible contingency. And then at some point I realized I'd never once needed

one. The bug-out bag prepares us for a world we can abandon, a disaster we can survive on our own. Time and again, I've experienced neither.

What I have witnessed, instead, remains stubbornly consistent. Official announcements, whether they are push notifications from the county or emergency email alerts, are often unreliable, incomplete and occasionally flat-out wrong. That's assuming cell networks are even functioning.

When the water is rising or the wildfire is

spreading, you will need to make crucial decisions with rapidly changing information. Every decision you make in a disaster comes down to two questions: Is it safe where we are now? Will we be safe if we try to evacuate?

More often than not, answering those questions means relying on the people around you.

When the flood hit my town, Waialua, more than 230 people were rescued, predominantly by other residents. Neighbors drove farm equipment deep into floodwaters to carry people out of their homes in excavator buckets. Through it all there were no fatalities reported. By the afternoon, local organizations, such as the Lahui Foundation, had established aid collection and systems for volunteer and recovery efforts.

The effectiveness of this response did not emerge from nothing. The foundation had already built networks, protocols and, most important, community trust in earlier relief efforts, such as the Lahaina fires on Maui. The reason the response in Waialua was so effective was that the people and the organizations were ready to act.

None of this means individual preparation is useless. Water, medication, important documents, a few days of food are all important. But true preparation isn't something you can buy off Amazon or stuff in a bag, and it certainly won't be found on YouTube. It's built by people and our commitments to one another.

Chris Ellis, a military veteran who spent years studying the prepper community for his book "Resilient Citizens," writes about how there's a fine line in prepping between developing resiliency through self-sufficiency and making a hobby out of isolation. True preparedness, he writes, requires you to: "Expand your home beyond just the four walls. Learn what others have to offer and recognize what brings us together and what we hold in common. What we truly need is community involvement."

As the environment becomes more treacherous, we can't rest in the false comfort that more stuff is enough to keep us safe. It's the people around us who matter most to our survival.

You don't need to wait for the crisis to come to build this community yourself. In fact, it's critical that you don't, because it's more and more likely that you, too, will face the devastation of an extreme weather event. Building these networks now allows us to address concerns such as aging infrastructure, community needs and the readiness of our towns and cities before the disaster hits, rather than dealing with the fallout of these failures later. This communal effort is the bulwark we have against what's to come.

Tomorrow there will be no climate havens. The sirens will sound again. Pack a bag if you want. But the real preparation begins when you knock on your neighbors' door and invite them over.

# 'Rich Face' Is the New Birkin Bag

**Amy Odell**

The author of the Back Row newsletter and "Anna: The Biography."

IF YOU spend enough time around the very rich these days, it's clear. People didn't use to look like this because people naturally can't look like this.

Models in a Paris Fashion Week show for the luxury brand Matières Fécales in March caricatured the 1 percent by wearing prosthetics that resembled post-op faces, including grotesque under-eye bulges, skin pulled up from their temples and lips that appeared unnaturally inflated and stitched at the edges. "South Park" depicted Kristi Noem with a face so Botoxed it melts off and scurries away. From the Met Gala to the Oscars and every red carpet in between, these rich faces are everywhere.

A "rich face" is stretched taut, often incapable of varied expressions and plumped with filler or implants or a person's own grafted fat. Once, this face belonged to a villainous class of elites in sci-fi depictions of a dystopian future. In "The Hunger Games," residents of the capital city who revel in luxury and excess at the expense of other impoverished districts often wear sculpted, altered faces. In "Doctor Who," a wealthy socialite from the distant future has gone through so many face-lifts that she becomes little more than a stretched face on a thin sheet of skin mounted on a frame, maintained with constant moisturizer.

The ultrawealthy seem less and less concerned with hiding their excesses. They're richer than ever, and figures like Lauren Sánchez Bezos and President Trump give them permission to flaunt their neo-Gilded Age spoils. After all, the unspoken appeal of cosmetic work is that it's not just about looking "better" or "fixing" something or trying to remain competitive in ageist workplaces. It's about indulging in a particular kind of experiential self-care that is infinitely customizable and accessible to only a select group. It signifies extreme wealth and belonging to an elite, all-powerful clique that gets to operate under a different set of societal norms and rules.

Status signaling used to be the purview of the \$18,000 cocktail dress or the \$50,000 designer bag. Now, the small number of Very Important Clients who account for 40 percent of luxury sales seems to be shifting more of their highly desired dollars to their faces. Today's cleverly marketed aesthetic treatments include "global facial micro-optimization," which involves numerous procedures to tweak everything from eye tilt to the way

light reflects off the jaw, and costs between \$150,000 and \$300,000. There are also "forever-35," "Diamond mini" or "weekend" face-lifts. Plastic surgeons in Washington are navigating a surge in requests for "Mar-a-Lago face."

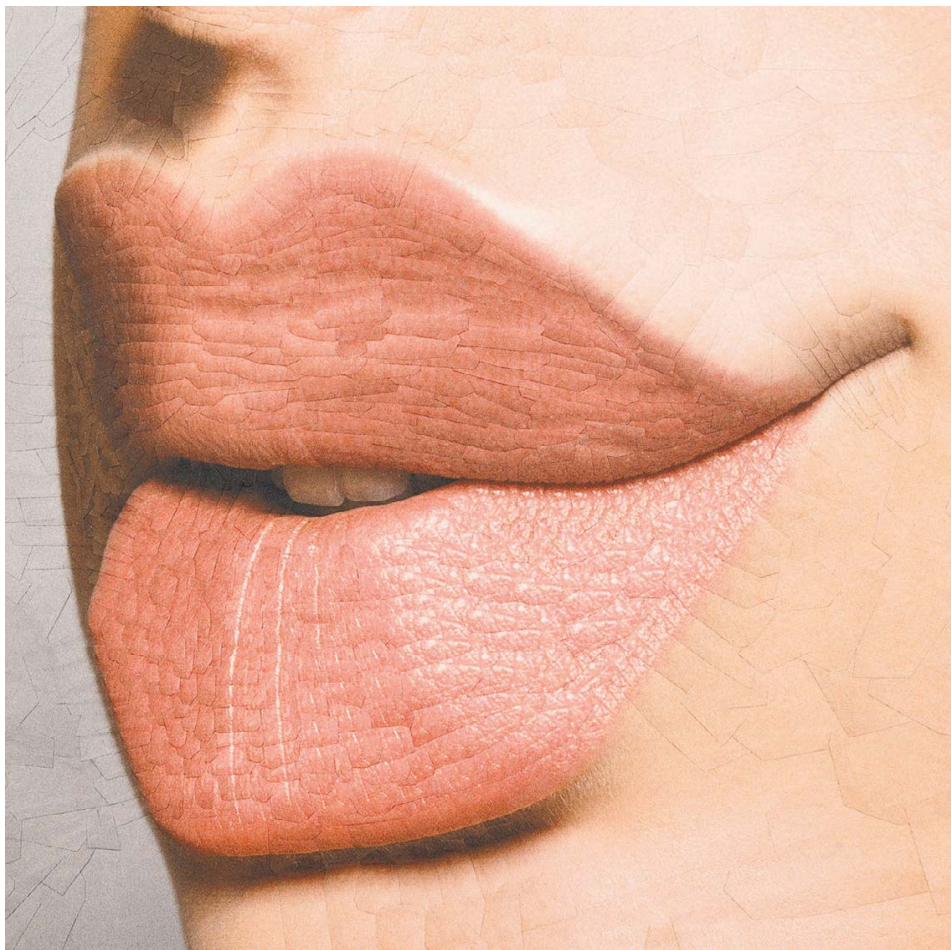
The masses want in. Millennials who say they cannot afford homes are spending on their faces instead. Magazines such as Vogue and Allure are no longer just advising readers on nail polish colors and designer sandals for spring, but also when — not if — they should get face-lifts. Rhinoplasties, face-lifts and blepharoplasties (eyelid surgeries) were the three most popular facial procedures of 2025, and the number of facial procedures overall increased by around 19 percent. The luxury sector, meanwhile, contracted by 2 percent last year.

Designer fashion seems to be viewed as more cringe than cosmetic procedures — a feeling that the journalist Sujata Assomull calls the "luxury ick." Many designer brands raised prices significantly in recent years, at around twice the rate of inflation, without any apparent improvement to quality. (A Chanel flap bag can now cost upward of \$11,000 — almost double what it did in 2016.) And some have been caught up in sweatshop scandals. The Row's sample sale in New York City inspired a slew of viral parody videos. The thriving market for secondhand goods, dupes and counterfeits dim the glamour of it all. And when brands like Celine and Chloé are reissuing old handbag designs, why bother shopping for something new?

In earlier decades, the roles were reversed: Plastic surgery was a punchline. "I've had so much plastic surgery, when I die they will donate my body to Tupperware," Joan Rivers once joked. Now Ms. Rivers seems ahead of her time. Procedures are a sign of making it in the most Kardashian-coded way — get rich, then buy a face. Stars such as Kris Jenner go viral for their cosmetic work. Asked if she'd had "the seemingly ubiquitous new style of face-lift," Jennifer Lawrence told The New Yorker: "No. But, believe me, I'm gonna!"

Social media has turbocharged the normalization of cosmetic work. One plastic surgeon said that his Gen Z patients take selfies at their appointments "as if it's a concert or a 'get ready with me' video. They want everyone to know." Like haul vlogs, it's a way to say, "Look what I just bought."

Of course, rich face has regional variations. Bravo's "Real Housewives" from the Upper East Side and the Hamptons have a subtler look than their counterparts on Netflix's "Members Only: Palm Beach," who



LOLA DUPRE

dream of access to Mar-a-Lago. Whether stars admit to their work or not, endless internet speculation provides valuable P.R. to both them and the surgeons who treat them. Many of these doctors — such as Steven Levine, who lifted Ms. Jenner's face — are celebrities themselves. All of this media hooks viewers by inviting them to wonder when lips were last injected and if jawlines look more "snatched" than the previous week.

Sometimes, of course, procedures can go wrong. Sharon Osbourne once called a face-lift "the worst thing that I ever did," and said

## Status signals used to be worn, not achieved with needles and scalpels.

that she "looked like Cyclops." Khloe Kardashian has said filler made her look "crazy." Designer bags may be silly, overpriced and quite often unethically made. But at least there's little to no chance they will disfigure you. Perhaps the risk of a grisly outcome is part of the appeal for the ultrawealthy, who have the ability to pay for the best care, along with more treatments if things go wrong.

The luxury of viewing your face-lift less as a major, potentially ruinous surgery and more as a routine to-do list item is the ultimate status symbol.

## OPINION



## LETTERS

## What Is Higher Education For?

Readers respond to Bret Stephens's column about the recent Yale report on reforming academia.

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "How to Save Academia," by Bret Stephens (column, April 22):

Mr. Stephens notes that the Yale-commissioned report on trust in academia found that "registered Democrats outnumber Republicans 36 to 1 across the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Law School and the School of Management" at Yale. I expect these numbers would be roughly the same at Columbia University, where I have worked for four decades.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, though, there were many conservatives and Republicans in the earth sciences institute where I work. They are hard to find now. What happened was the shift of the conservative movement and the Republican Party away from evidence-based policy, scientific inquiry and following the facts.

Republicans once acted decisively on matters of science in the public interest. In 1970 President Richard Nixon signed into law the Clean Air Act. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan ushered in the Montreal Protocol, a multinational treaty that saved the planet from the dire consequences of ozone depletion. Since then, beginning with President George W. Bush, who withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, the Republican Party and conservatives have become ever more hostile to scientific facts, evidence-based policy and the research that underpins them.

Now we have a Republican president who lies regularly, supported by an administration that has no respect for even the most basic facts, all rubber-stamped by a supine Republican Congress. Republicans have used this power to conduct an assault on scientific research in both universities and the federal government that has disrupted or ended countless important studies. They continue to aggressively set and promote dangerous environmental and health policies.

I know that many of my colleagues in academia have views of social and economic policy that do not align easily with the Democratic Party. If the Republican Party were to once again embrace science, research and facts, then I am sure some of my colleagues would drift back to them. Until then, scientists in academia will overwhelmingly lean Democratic.

RICHARD SEAGER  
NEW YORK

The writer is a research professor studying ocean, atmosphere and climate sciences at Columbia University.

TO THE EDITOR:

Bret Stephens simultaneously bemoans the lax academic standards of undergraduate institutions and decries "the indentured servitude of graduate-school education" as stodgy and arcane. There is an obvious contradiction here: The process of obtaining a doctoral degree is exactly what Mr. Stephens supports. It is academically rigorous and centered around the "genuine contest of ideas" that he claims is lacking.

A healthy knowledge-seeking enterprise is often boring. It sometimes produces the "unread (and frequently unreadable) dissertation" that Mr. Stephens disdains, yet in many cases it also serves as proof of a student's ability to engage in the exact intellectual enterprise he supports.

While I agree that grade inflation is a problem and that open academic debate is essential to the health of a college ecosystem, I believe that it is hypocritical to lampoon graduate education while claiming to care

about the two virtues — academic rigor and independent thought — that it mostly successfully inculcates.

GRIFFIN LIGHT  
NEW HAVEN, CONN.

TO THE EDITOR:

Having taught at a liberal arts university for 35 years, I found Bret Stephens's views on how to save academia useful but ultimately frustrating. His emphasis on the "rigor of a difficult education" anchored in sustained cross-disciplinary engagement resonated with me. Universities clearly need to do a better job of establishing rigorous standards and helping students to navigate difficult ideas and tasks.

But Mr. Stephens's lofty vision fails to recognize a particularly important role of universities and the difficulty of fulfilling this role in today's political context.

Today's university needs to help students understand the difference between facts and values, and the nature of empirical evidence, even if that evidence runs counter to their values. It is precisely through the challenge of reconciling values and evidence that students develop the capacity for the "mature independent thought" lauded by Mr. Stephens.

Unfortunately, this effort is being undermined by the Trump administration. By portraying many of those prosecuted for their involvement in the Jan. 6 Capitol assault as "mere trespassers or peaceful protesters," calling the impact of climate change on public health a scam or questioning the value and safety of childhood vaccines, the president and his party have made achieving these important goals for higher education that much harder.

RICK DONER, ATLANTA  
The writer is a professor emeritus in the department of political science at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University.

TO THE EDITOR:

Bret Stephens doubts that the Yale committee's suggestions for reform go far enough. I share his sentiment, but for a different reason.

To its credit, the committee named problems most elite universities avoid confronting. Yet it treats campus self-censorship as a symptom of a broken student culture. As a recent graduate and researcher who has spent the past few months interviewing undergraduates about campus speech, I have come to understand that silence differently.

Students are not lacking the vocabulary for disagreement. They are gripped by a shared, unspoken sense that the consequences of speaking could outweigh the value of being heard. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression counted 958 attempts to censor campus speech in 2025. Students do not need to experience these consequences firsthand; they see peers elsewhere face disciplinary action for speaking up and recalibrate accordingly.

Universities are pouring resources into teaching students how to disagree — and students keep showing up. They are also, reasonably, watching whether the institutions inviting them into the room will stand behind them once the conversation turns difficult. The silence on our campuses does not reflect a generation unable to speak. It reflects a generation watching, very carefully, what happens to those who do.

ARUSHI SAXENA  
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.



TIERNY L. CROSS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

## EDITORIAL

## WHY THE U.S. IS IN A STALEMATE WITH A SECOND-RATE POWER

### The Editorial Board

A group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

ON PAPER, the war with Iran should not be much of a contest. The United States spends around \$1 trillion a year on its military, more than 100 times as much as Iran. That money buys a vastly larger Air Force and Navy, as well as advanced weapons technologies that Iranian generals can only dream about.

In the war's early days, the mismatch played out as one might expect. American forces destroyed much of the Iranian military. Now, however, the contest looks less one-sided. Iran has taken control of the Strait of Hormuz, and its missiles and drones still threaten America's allies in the region. While President Trump seems eager for a negotiated truce, Iran's leaders do not. Somehow, the weaker nation is in the stronger negotiating position.

That reality exposes the vulnerabilities in the American way of war. Tactical success has not yielded victory. Mr. Trump's recklessness in conducting the war is one reason. But the problem is bigger than any single commander in chief. The United States has left itself unprepared for modern war.

America has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on ships and planes that are good at defeating competitors' ships and planes but ineffective against cheaper, mass-produced weapons. The American economy does not have the industrial capacity to produce enough of the weapons and equipment it does need. And the country has struggled to fix these problems because of a sclerotic government and a consolidated defense industry that resists change.

Three months before Mr. Trump attacked Iran, we warned that the United States was at risk of being overmatched in the wars of the future. The last two months have shown that alarm was justified. The war with Iran, unwise as it is, should serve as a warning about the rising threats to American security and an incentive to fix them.

**N**EVER in recorded history has a nation's military been so quickly and effectively neutralized," Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth claimed on March 26. The next day, Iran launched a drone and missile attack on an American base in Saudi Arabia that wounded more than a dozen service members, destroyed a radar surveillance plane and damaged at least two refueling tankers. The immediate debunking of Mr. Hegseth's bombast points to the reform agenda that America's military needs. There are four main priorities.

First, the United States needs to invest in counter-drone technologies, like those that Ukraine has developed in its war against Russia. The lack of such defenses is one reason that the vaunted U.S. Navy has been unable to prevent the closing of a vital waterway, the Strait of Hormuz.

Second, the United States needs more of its own cheap, disposable weapons like one-way attack drones and unmanned ships. Although much of the war in Ukraine has been fought by mass-produced drones, the Pentagon is pouring money into much more complex equipment, including pilotless "wingmen" that can fly alongside a piloted plane.

Third, the country needs larger and more flexible indus-

trial capacity. Until recently, a single factory made all of America's Tomahawk cruise missiles, and there is a constant shortage of Patriot missile interceptors. Congress should pass laws that help the private sector build up its manufacturing capacity. The Pentagon, for its part, needs to stop buying so many of its weapons from just five big weapons makers and start betting on dynamic tech companies that can quickly adapt.

Lastly, the United States needs to collaborate with other industrialized democracies. Mr. Trump's pleas for help in reopening the Strait of Hormuz from the very allies he spurned at the start of the war is just the latest proof that America can't go it alone. In the years ahead, keeping pace with Chi-

### The American military was losing its edge. After Iran, everyone knows it, including China.

na's economic and military expansion will require collaborating with like-minded democracies.

All of these steps are not merely about winning the next war. They also can help prevent it — by making our enemies believe they would lose any war they start.

Instead, the war with Iran has provided a road map for any country that wants to resist the United States in the future, including Russia and North Korea. For China, the country with the greatest potential to challenge American military might, the war validates its focus on new forms of warfare such as drones, cyberweapons and space power.

**T**HE picture for the American military is not entirely grim. The Iran war has shown that it has an astonishing ability to find and destroy enemy targets. In the conflict's first six weeks, the U.S. military hit over 13,000 military and industrial targets. American losses in the war, while tragic, have been limited, considering the scale of the attack and Iran's resources: at least 13 service members killed and more than 300 wounded.

Mr. Trump has made some positive moves toward military reform. His administration has taken several steps to break the hold of major contractors on the supply of weapons to the Pentagon and has pressured some of them to increase production of much-needed missiles. The Army secretary, Daniel P. Driscoll, has moved to cancel outdated and failing programs.

But Mr. Trump's chaotic, destructive approach to governance has undercut much of this progress. He ordered an expensive new fleet, the "Trump class" battleships, even though they are vulnerable to air attack. Mr. Hegseth has fired a cadre of reformers and is feuding with Mr. Driscoll. In April, the administration proposed a \$1.5 trillion budget that is likely to amplify our shortcomings rather than building on our strengths.

The good news is that Congress, the administration and the Pentagon can all now see our military shortcomings. The bad news is that our adversaries can see them, too. Washington can no longer just talk about reforming the military. It has to do it, or risk making the disappointments in the Iran war become a preview of far worse.



# THE SUNDAY TIMES

ESTABLISHED 1822

## However bad Labour's results, this is not the time for civil war

It is worth remembering that Labour wanted to postpone 30 of this week's English council elections. The delay, blamed on the costs of yet another expensive reorganisation of local government, was successfully challenged in court by Reform UK. Labour gave way and, like the Tories, now faces a very unpleasant set of results. The elections will not only reflect deep disillusionment with Labour, which just less than two years ago secured one of the largest parliamentary majorities in modern times. They will also expose a political landscape that is splintering before our eyes. Politicians and pundits often overestimate the importance of politics in people's lives. Most voters do not spend their evenings obsessing over ideological battles or parliamentary infighting. They want decent schools, a functioning NHS, safe streets and enough money to take their children on holiday. And they are bone-tired of the sound and fury of a political drama that never seems to improve their lot.

Apathy will keep many people at home on Thursday. The verdict of those who do make the journey to the polling station will, however, be a resounding vote of no confidence in the traditional two-party system. The Conservatives are bracing themselves for a severe beating but the harshest punishment will be meted out to Labour. Forecasts suggest the party will lose more than 1,800 seats, the worst mid-term trouncing for a governing party in three decades, mainly to the insurgent Reform UK and the Greens. Labour could suffer a wipeout in its heartlands in the Midlands and the north and in many of the neglected coastal communities. It is also expected to lose power in Wales to Plaid Cymru for the first time and to fail to unseat the scandal-hit SNP in Holyrood.

For Labour malcontents the answer to what some perceive as an existential crisis is to trigger a leadership contest. Westminster is already in febrile mood, with speculation swirling about possible successors to Sir Keir Starmer. Names such as Wes Streeting, Andy Burnham and Angela Rayner are repeatedly floated. But is panic or what one minister described as a "collective nervous breakdown" really the best response to what will be a devastating day? Surely the last thing Britain

needs now is a fresh bout of internecine warfare. Any leadership contest will quickly descend into a sanctimonious war of words between ideologies, with rival factions promising ever greater levels of spending of money the country does not have on things the public often does not want. What such a contest will not produce is a serious debate on ways to turn around our spluttering economy by encouraging private enterprise.

This prime minister has been a desperate disappointment. He has made many mistakes and gained a reputation for political indecision and parliamentary weakness when the country faces many challenges. He has shown a curious lack of passion for economics, happy to let his chancellor, Rachel Reeves, take the blame (some of it deserved) for a flatlining economy. He has shown little interest in education, save his oft-mentioned free breakfast clubs. He talks a good game on defence but the country is still waiting to see the colour of his money. Welfare reform has been shelved. He cannot even successfully appoint an ambassador to Washington.

The problem for Labour – and therefore the rest of us – is that most of its MPs, its members and the unions seem largely uninterested in a serious debate about the future of the UK. They virtue-signal about poverty, the Middle East and taxing the better off, ignoring the economic icebergs on the horizon. Thus we can only hope that when he looks at the electoral carnage, the prime minister realises he has to change and take a few risks with his parliamentary party. What does he have to lose?

MPs should also remember this. On July 4, 2024, the country voted decisively to end the political turmoil of the Tory years. Since 2016 Conservative governments had gone through nine education secretaries, seven chancellors and five prime ministers. The Tories then rightly paid the price. The idea that the country might have to endure a similar psychodrama again is too depressing for words. It takes the voters for fools and ingrains the cynicism and despair that feeds a culture of easy answers.

Yes, Starmer is unpopular. If he decides to stand down, that is his choice. But Labour MPs should look before they leap. The alternative could be far worse.

## Mandelson and Andrew: a scandal decades in the making

The investigation we publish today about the connections between Peter Mandelson and Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor should finally put to rest any comforting notions that the origins of the scandal were recent. In fact they stretched back decades. Hugo Daniel's painstaking research shows how Mandelson and Andrew met when they worked together in 1999, on a charity campaign to stamp out child abuse. Andrew said that, as a father, he could not sit back and do nothing. It is a cruel irony that at about the same time he and Mandelson – who once was a republican – were sitting in dressing gowns beside the paedophile businessman Jeffrey Epstein in a mansion off the coast of Massachusetts.

Our report then details how the pair developed a mutually advantageous friendship over many years, building an elite network that drew in other members of the royal family and prominent figures in British and American society and government. Yet the association between the

jet-setting royal and the controversial politician was rarely, if ever, questioned and casts a fascinating light on the inner workings of a system that allowed such networks to flourish.

Did Mandelson grease the Whitehall wheels that allowed Andrew to become trade envoy? Why did he have so much access to the royal family? Why did they encourage it? Why were the pair still meeting in Brussels as late as 2007? Andrew's former diary secretary says the prince was useful to Mandelson in his trade envoy role, and vice versa. Parts of the establishment still operate through private dinners, informal introductions, favours and unofficial meetings. Deference and discretion are prized over transparency. Now Mandelson and Andrew are under police investigation for misconduct in public office – both deny wrongdoing – and we are beginning to see the true scale of the insidious networks of influence that allowed Epstein to ally himself with some of Britain's best-connected figures.

## It has to stop

Many of our laws are contentious. Some, though, are so basic as to be beyond debate. Everyone agrees they are sensible and must be respected, none more so than the simple rule that vehicles stop at a red light.

Or so we thought. As we report today, the number of drivers going through red lights has leapt by 61 per cent in three years; 380 offences are reported daily. The real total is probably much higher.

The culprits may protest that many

cyclists ignore lights with near impunity. Cyclists counter that a one-ton car can cause a different level of harm from a 10kg bicycle. Both miss the point.

A civilised society rests on consensus: on the shared, unspoken assumption that there are some rules everyone abides by. Running a light doesn't just endanger lives in that moment: it corrodes the certainties we all rely on. A society that regards red lights as optional is heading for a crash. Time to hit the brakes.

# Dominic Lawson

## Rent controls are the best way to ruin a city



I thought no one would be stupid enough to suggest the policy. Wrong!

A discerning reader contacted me last Sunday, raising a point about that day's column, which had lamented how politicians are pandering to public ignorance about the dire effects, over centuries, of the state trying to fix prices in competitive markets. He asked: why didn't you mention rent controls? I replied that I would have done if any government minister had been stupid enough to suggest such a scheme. And – how prescient of that reader – the very next day The Guardian published a story headlined "Rachel Reeves considering rent freeze to limit 'Iran war fallout'". The day after that, when a Labour MP in the Commons asked the chancellor to impose a "rent cap", Reeves responded: "I will do everything in my power and use every lever we have to bear down on the cost of living, including for people in the private rented sector."

So, not a denial – which only deepened the plunge in prices of stock-market-listed property companies. But an hour later the prime minister's office attempted to squash the story ("We have no plans to implement this"). When the City AM newspaper went back to the Treasury for a comment, it received the response: "We are working on a line." I bet.

The line to take (also in the sense of being economically literate) had in fact been issued two weeks earlier by the housing minister, Matthew Pennycook. Responding to the Green Party's putting the idea of capping private sector rents at the centre of its council elections campaign, he pointed out that such a policy would make life more difficult for those wanting to rent, and that there was "sufficient international evidence" to prove this.

Quite so: after Berlin's council voted to freeze rents in 2020, the effect was what you would expect (see last week's column on food price controls) when government declares war on supply and demand: shortage. In Berlin the number of rental units advertised each week rapidly fell to about a third of what had previously been available. The same study showed an increase of over 50 per cent in the number of Berlin flats being converted from rental to owner-occupation. Then the policy was overturned by Germany's Federal Constitutional Court.

In Sweden, where a similar policy is in force, average waiting times for those seeking rental accommodation in the capital have extended to nine years. Lengthy state-imposed rent caps also have the effect of starving such properties

of investment and improvement. To use the technical term, they become shitholes. It was a Swedish economist, Assar Lindbeck (the chair of the committee awarding the Nobel prize in economic sciences, no less) who observed in 1971: "In many cases, rent control appears to be the most efficient technique presently known to destroy a city – except for bombing." His words were later echoed by a revolutionary Vietnamese leader, Nguyen Co Thach. On a visit to India in 1989 as the country's foreign minister, Thach explained how a "romantic conception of socialism" involving statutory control of private sector rents had led to disrepair and lack of supply across the capital: "The Americans couldn't destroy Hanoi, but we have destroyed our city by very low rents. We realised that it was stupid and that we must change policy."

It is the leader of the Green Party who (to put it charitably) has a "romantic conception of socialism" now seducing voters too young to know what happens under such systems. Last month Zack Polanski airily dismissed those who questioned the feasibility of his policies on price and rent freezes: "The economy was designed, and it can be redesigned." He has the sort of confidence that only profound ignorance can engender.

This self-inflating ex-hypnotherapist is now threatening to eat Labour's lunch (and breakfast and dinner). The governing party's electoral success, in recent years, has been built in our cities, most of all London. In the 2024 general election Labour won 59 of the capital's 75 parliamentary seats. In next week's local elections all of London's councils are at stake; and it is in the capital that concerns about the cost of living, as it applies to housing, are most vulnerable to Polanski's charlatanism (or charm, if you are one of his admirers).

To get a sense of how ruthlessly the Greens are basing their campaign on this factor, note what happened on BBC *Question Time* on



**In Stockholm waiting times for a flat have reached nine years**

# Hadley Freeman

## Antisemitism is all the Greens are recycling



The party of composting is full of Jew-hating candidates up for election

I think it's fair to say that, in the great history of British Jews, last week was not a stellar one. Oh sure, we've had worse than some arson on a Monday and a double stabbing on a Wednesday, both in the Jewish neighbourhood of Golders Green.

There was the summer of 1947, when anti-Jewish riots tore through the country after two British Army sergeants were murdered in Mandatory Palestine. Just two years earlier British troops had liberated Bergen-Belsen; now Jews were being beaten up and synagogues attacked, from Glasgow to Bristol, because British citizens decided Jews here needed to pay for something that happened thousands of miles away. For Jews, history is never in the past, but a series of resounding echoes.

But let's focus on the future. Well, the good news is last week is done. The bad news is, this week could be worse. It's the local elections on Thursday, and I'm old enough to remember when these were about bin collection schedules. This time, in the words of one whippersnapper, local candidates should "make Palestine non-negotiable". That aforementioned snapper was none other than Jeremy Corbyn, encouraging candidates to sign the "People's Pledge for Palestine", in which councillors promise to "ensure accountability for Israel's crimes of genocide".

As of late February, more than 1,200 councillors had signed the pledge, although none has explained how they'll achieve it from, say, Peterborough or Peckham. But, as is always the way with open letters, the point is to show you're on the Right Side – in this case that your priority is Palestine, not potholes.

As pro-Palestine activists in the UK never tire of saying, supporting the Palestinians is not antisemitic, and, believe me, we Jews know. Yet it's weird they never pause to wonder why their cause attracts, Bat Signal-like, so many frothing antisemites. Maybe it's those voguish "Globalise the intifada" chants. Which brings me, once again, to the Green Party.

I am old enough to remember (again) when

the Greens were a gently batty lot focused on the environment. These days it's less green and more a mix of the rainbow (ultra-progressives) and the crescent (sectarian Muslims). As a result, it produces local candidates like Saiqa Ali in Streatham, who posted "Resistance is freedom" over an image of a Hamas terrorist, and Sabine Mairey in Lambeth, who insists that "ramming a synagogue isn't antisemitism, it's revenge". It's almost enough to make me miss the days when the Green Party would bang on about composting.

On Thursday, Ali and Mairey were detained – not by Green HQ but by the Metropolitan Police, on suspicion of stirring racial hatred. The party's leader, Zack Polanski, has said that vetting candidates has been "a real challenge" because the party has been attracting "an immense amount of people very quickly".

I almost admire how Polanski affects to see the number of raving, Jew-hating loons joining his party as a sign of his popularity, as opposed to proof that they see him as a useful idiot who is hosting the current home for Jew-hating loons. And as if to confirm his status as the latter, shortly after arresting the two Green candidates, Sir Mark Rowley, the Met's commissioner, publicly rebuked Polanski for retweeting an allegation that police had been too violent when arresting the man charged with stabbing the Jews in Golders Green.

"It is this kind of inaccurate and misinformed commentary ... that is contributing to rising tensions," Rowley wrote.



**Polanski can't blind Jews to what everyone can see**

Thursday, in the discussion about the threats to the Jewish community after the stabbings in Golders Green. One of the deputy leaders of the party, Rachel Millward, when asked, "Where is the racial hatred coming from?", claimed the cause of what she described as an "increase in racism" was that "we live in rip-off Britain; people are having a really tough time ... They can't afford their rent, food is so expensive ... and there's a tendency to find someone to blame." The audience were less enraged than I was – they seemed completely unbothered – by the suggestion rising prices were somehow to blame for the knife attack on Shloime Rand and Moshe Shine.

The "left" political challenge to the Labour government comes also from within: the mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, foraging for a Westminster seat to challenge Keir Starmer's leadership, has pushed the idea of state control of private rental prices. Interviewed by the BBC, just before he was blocked from standing as a Labour candidate in the Gorton & Denton by-election (won by the Green Party), Burnham said of private sector rent caps: "If you are going to get serious about tackling the cost of living crisis, this is something you have to look at."

Burnham is definitely a man with longstanding personal concerns about the cost of housing. When a cabinet minister in the last Labour government, he was involved in a protracted battle with the House of Commons fees office to reclaim £16,500 for the refurbishment of a London flat. Three times the usually emollient clerks refused Burnham's claims. On a fourth attempt the minister complained he "might be in line for a divorce" if the £16,500 was not repaid by the taxpayer, sharpish. That seemed to melt the hearts at the fees office, and they relented.

In the event that this persuasive fellow somehow did contest the Labour leadership, as a newly elected MP, he would no doubt attempt to win over the party members – who love nothing more than what they see as a true socialist – with promises to cap rents. A few months ago Burnham told the Institute for Fiscal Studies that he stood for "business-friendly socialism". That is almost a perfect oxymoron.

Any *soi-disant* socialists who believe rent caps really are the way to revive a city and the prospects of the young, rather than the truth – which is the opposite – need only consult the shade of Nguyen Co Thach. Thus educated, they could call themselves Thach-erites.

Or, as Polanski put it two weeks ago, a mere "perception" of rising tensions.

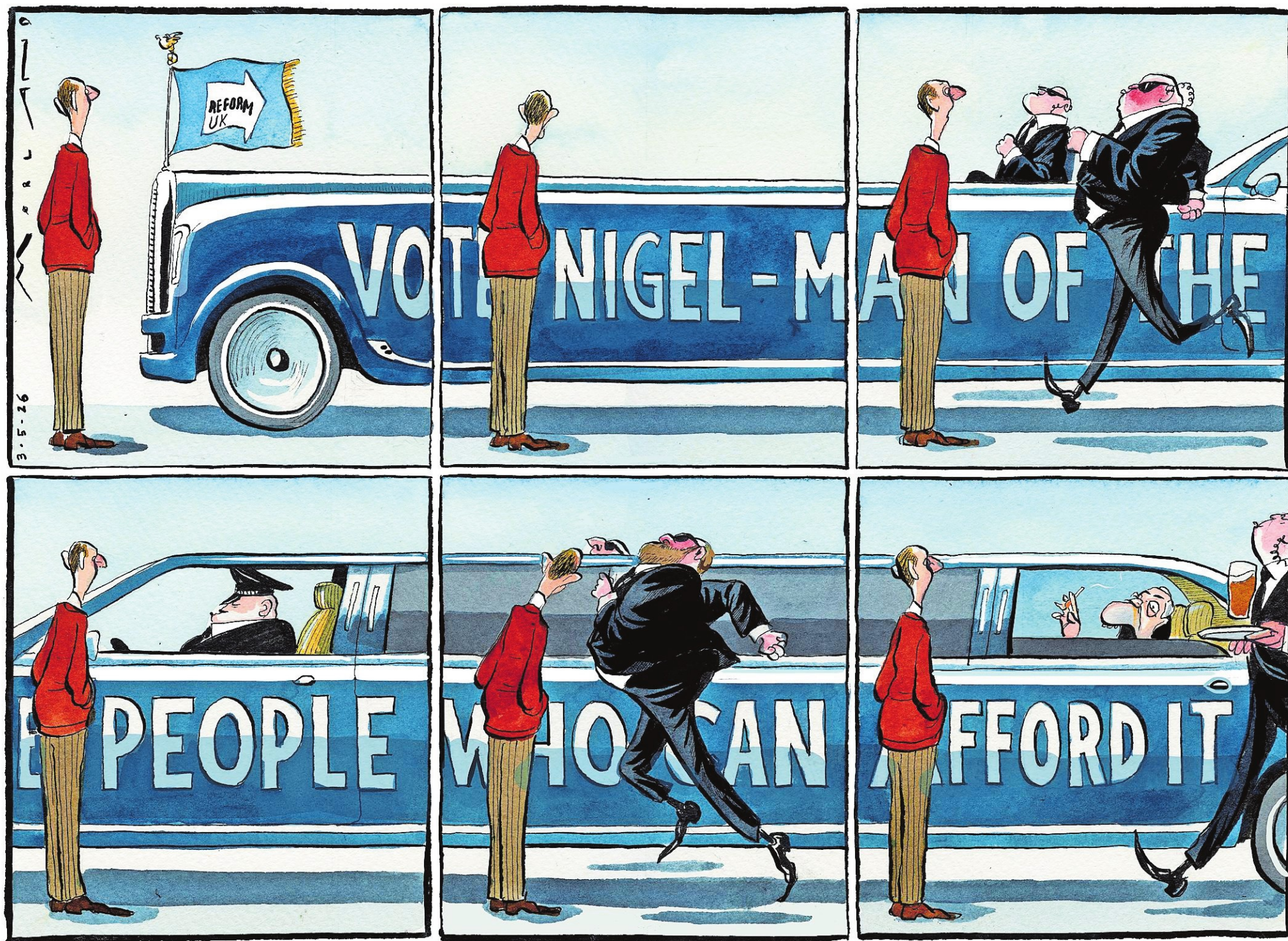
Ali and Mairey can spend this week burnishing their favourite antisemitic memes, but there are still plenty of other swivel-eyed options on the Green ballot. There's Fedda Shahin in Bournemouth, who has said that Jeffrey Epstein's private island "is a symbol of the headquarters of the Zionists who are trying to control the world". Or Philip Notley in Stevenage, filmed last week telling voters that "Israel shouldn't exist". Or Tina Ion in Blakelaw & Cowgate, who posts under the handle "thereal.anne.frank" with a photo of the murdered teenager in a keffiyeh, and has called for "killing every single Zionist". And the Green Party's reaction? They are shocked – as Captain Renault in *Casablanca* would put it – shocked to find gambling is going on in here.

And on and on. Still, Polanski can take comfort that one person believes his party is being too firm with the antisemites in its ranks. Unfortunately, it's his deputy, Mothim Ali. The Times revealed on Thursday that Ali advised candidates – including Saiqa Ali – who were rebuked or suspended by the party for antisemitism "to start with some class action".

Polanski repeatedly bleats that he is "the only Jewish leader of a major political party", as if that were a Harry Potter-like spell – expelliarmus! – that can fend off accusations his party is pandering to far left and sectarian Muslim antisemites.

It doesn't work. He can't launder his party's antisemitism with parrot-like references to his background, and he can't blind Jews to what everyone can see. We saw in Australia that years of petty antisemitic crimes were minimised by authorities, and Labor MPs there with large Muslim electorates ignored rising antisemitism – until the Bondi beach massacre happened in December. And we Jews have long seen how eagerly the mob will use political unrest abroad as an excuse to terrorise us and trash our synagogues, from Kristallnacht to the summer of 1947 to last week. This week we'll learn how much worse it will get.

COMMENT



# Matthew Syed

## Branding Starmer a 'Jew harmer' is unserious. That way lies madness



This ancient hatred must be banished but turning antisemitism into a political football is self-defeating

I was at the dry cleaner's on Tuesday morning when a woman, there with her school-age son to have his trousers taken up, turned to me and said: "I just wanted to say thank you." I must have looked puzzled, because she added: "For your support of Jewish people." I responded with gratitude, though a little awkwardly, as one does when a stranger brings moral seriousness into the choreography of everyday life. Her son stood beside her, half curious, his school trousers still pinned. Then she lowered her voice. "I have never felt so frightened for my family," she said. "An attack always feels just around the corner."

There are sentences that do not leave you. Not because they are dramatic, but because they are unbearable. A mother, in a dry cleaner's, speaking not of politics, not of history, but of the simple fear that her child might be unsafe in the country he calls home.

The next afternoon, on the Tube, I saw the news that two Jewish men had been stabbed in Golders Green. My mind went straight back to that woman and her boy; to the little pins in the cloth; to the fear that had entered and darkened their lives. To live in a free country and feel that it is becoming foreign and dangerous – not because of anything you have done but because of who you are – is one of the heaviest burdens a society can place on its own citizens. What has happened to us?

I thought, too, of an afternoon last October in Trafalgar Square, where I had gone to observe a Palestine Action protest. My first impression was almost reassuring: a largely middle-class crowd, leaflets, the familiar theatre of British

dissent. Then I asked what I thought was a fair question: to what extent is Hamas responsible for the suffering unfolding in Gaza? The mood changed. Faces morphed. A woman swore at me. A man holding a Palestinian flag began pointing menacingly. In bright sunlight, yards from police officers, in the middle of London, I felt for a few moments an echo of what many Jews in Britain experience every second of every day. That echo has never left me.

I hope every fair-minded reader can accept that the treatment of British Jews has become intolerable. Not uncomfortable. Not regrettable. Intolerable. In a country that prides itself on pluralism, decency and law, our Jewish countrymen are looking over their shoulders, hiding school blazers, avoiding parts of their own cities, wondering whether their children should wear visible signs of Jewish life. This is a tragedy.

And it demands seriousness. It demands the full force of the law when demonstrations cross from protest into intimidation. It demands more security for synagogues, Jewish schools and community centres. It demands a harder line against the antisemitism that has crept into universities and schools. It demands proscription of the IRGC. I also believe the recognition of a Palestinian state was a grave mistake, not because Palestinians do not deserve political rights but because timing and context matter. To make such a move while Hamas still holds power, and while Jewish communities here feel under siege, was bound to be read as a reward for violence.

But perhaps, after the tragic events of last week, I can say something else too. I

saw the signs proclaiming: "Keir Starmer, Jew harmer". Really? In a world of Islamist hatred, terrorism and ancient conspiracies dressed up in modern slogans, is the British prime minister – the man who took on antisemitism in his own party, who excised Jeremy Corbyn, who took political risks to root out a poison I saw at close quarters as a Labour member – to be held up as an enemy of Jews?

Is that fair? Is it reasonable? Is it wise? This matters, because tone matters. Tenor matters. The moral shape of the argument matters. We are surely not merely trying to be right; we are trying to assemble a decent majority against a very old hatred. And majorities are not built by declaring everyone outside our own faction an accomplice to evil. That way lies a kind of self-defeating madness.

There should be room in this coalition for people who disagree sharply about

Israel's government. There should be room for those who support a two-state solution and those who are sceptical of it; those who believe UNRWA – the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East – should be defunded and those who think reform is possible; those who differ on the precise remit of Prevent; those who think Britain's foreign policy has been too harsh on Israel and those who think it has not been harsh enough. There should be room for people who oppose Binyamin Netanyahu's government, fear the consequences of annexation in the West Bank and grieve for Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

None of that should be disqualifying. The test should be simpler and deeper: do you believe British Jews are equal citizens whose safety and belonging are non-negotiable? Do you reject the holding of Jews collectively responsible for the actions of Israel? Do you understand that "Zionist" is too often spat out not as a political description but as a licence for hatred? Do you accept that a synagogue is not an embassy, a Jewish school is not a military target and a Jewish child in Britain bears no responsibility for a war thousands of miles away?

If the answer is yes, then we should stand together. And here's where I glimpse hope, for this is, I believe, a majority British position. A position that unites us. That individuals should be judged by their character, not their colour, religion or gender or by the actions of a government they may not support and did not elect. That principle is not complicated. It is – if I can put it this way – the moral grammar of a civilised society.

This emphatically means not tarnishing people in the name of point-scoring; not turning antisemitism into a political football; not using Jewish fear as the latest weapon in the fatuous culture wars; not pretending this hatred belongs only to the left, or only to Islamists, or only to the far right. Antisemitism is promiscuous. It migrates. It adapts. It speaks the language of blood and soil in one decade, anti-capitalism in another, anti-imperialism in another, anti-globalism in another. It is always searching for a new mask.

And so, yes, I want to see more – much more – from Muslims who describe themselves as moderate. I want that moderation to be visible not only in private reassurance but in public courage: in pushing back against Islamists, in confronting Jew-hatred in their communities, in standing openly with Jewish neighbours when they are threatened. This is not too much to ask. It is what many Muslims themselves demand of wider society when anti-Muslim hatred rises. In fact let me be more emphatic: please step up or you will confirm the worst insinuations of the far-right populists.

But the burden cannot fall on Muslims alone. Christians must speak. Liberals must speak. Atheists must speak. We all must. Because that woman in the dry cleaner's did not ask for a policy paper. She did not ask me to settle the Middle East. She thanked me, almost apologetically, for speaking as though Jewish fear mattered. That should not be rare. It should not be brave. It should be nothing less than heartbreaking. It should unite us. And with goodwill and moral seriousness, I believe it can.

**“She thanked me, almost apologetically, for speaking as though Jewish fear mattered”**

### WHO SAID WHAT?

1

"I think the first person who put Mandelson's name forward was Mandelson"

2

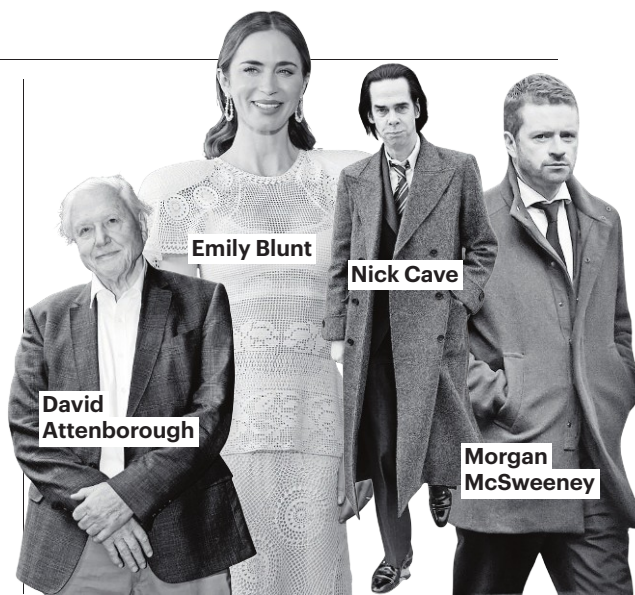
"Good for atheism"

3

"Even if you're earning no money, as long as you love it, you'll be happy"

4

"It was one of the most privileged moments of my life"



## What's Appening



Labour colleagues plot Angela Rayner's Waterloo\*

**Ed Miliband** OK, guys, welcome to the top-secret ABA group

**John Healey** I love them. Did you see the hologram show? So lifelike

**Miliband** Not ABBA, ABA.

**David Lammy** Lay all your love on me

**Miliband** Not now, David. Please focus. ABA. Anyone But Ange

**Darren Jones** Gimme gimme gimme. Money money money

**Miliband** Well, exactly. If we end up with Rayner, we'll be in trouble

**Lammy** We're already in trouble. We're going to lose a million council seats

**Miliband** Big trouble, then. Thoughts?

**Lammy** We could film her eating a bacon sandwich badly?

**Miliband** Very funny

**Jones** We could put out stories about how she's a tax dodger?

**Miliband** Everyone knows that already

**Healey** I heard she doesn't recycle and she holds her knife like a pen

**Miliband** Are you making that up?

**Healey** Well, yes, but I bet I'm right

**Jones** We could bring up her lack of qualifications. Can we really have a prime minister with no decent GCSEs?

**Miliband** That doesn't seem to bother people any more

**Lammy** Depressing. I've got three A-levels

**Miliband** Very depressing. I've got four – AAB.

**Jones** Perhaps we should settle on the anyone in Anyone But Ange? If we all united behind an alternative candidate, it might keep her out

**Healey** I'll put my hat in the ring

**Lammy** I'll put my hat in the ring

**Jones** I'll put my hat in the ring

**Miliband** If it's going to be one of us, then it should be me. Not to blow my own flugelhorn but YouGov says I'm the seventh most popular Labour politician

**Healey** Who is the most popular?

**Miliband** Andy Burnham but we've fixed that. I really think I'm the only viable candidate now that Wes has been Mandelsonned

**Lammy** I'm just going to say this, Ed. You can't stand again

**Miliband** Why not?

**Lammy** Last week alone you managed to make everyone angry about tumble dryers

**Miliband** I'm angry about tumble dryers. They're a disgrace

**Lammy** And you're weird. You just said flugelhorn

**Miliband** What's wrong with that?

**Lammy** Nobody says flugelhorn and nobody thinks tumble dryers are a disgrace

**Jones** Maybe we're better off sticking with Starmer

**Keir Starmer** Hello everyone. What's the ABA group and why have I been invited to join? Nobody invites me to join anything any more

**Miliband** I'm not sure, but welcome, prime minister. It's Abba, not ABA. For fans of the Swedish pop icons

**Healey** I still have faith in you

**Starmer** Thank you, John. That's comforting

**Healey** No, that's my favourite Abba song

**Starmer** Slipping through my fingers?

**Miliband** It has rather, hasn't it? Perhaps you should consider stepping down?

**Starmer** What? No, that's my favourite

**Miliband** Mamma mia

\*As imagined by Matt Rudd

# Robert Colvile

## This time next week much of the UK could be led by people determined to destroy it



Not to stereotype our northern compatriots, but it is rather fitting that the Scottish election campaign should culminate in a fight over whisky. Labour are hailing President Trump's decision to lift tariffs on Glenfiddich as a victory for a) the King's persuasive powers, b) the UK government's patient diplomacy and c) the Union. Meanwhile John Swinney, the first minister, has insisted that actually it was his idea, and the Donald called him personally to tell him so. So nerny nerny nerr.

If this kind of enlightened back and forth between Westminster and Holyrood makes you reach for a large dram, then I have some bad news: we're in for an awful lot more of it.

The Scottish government is pretty damn unpopular. Just 27 per cent of voters approve of its record. Luckily for the SNP, there is something even less popular – the Labour government in London, whose record is viewed positively by just 9 per cent of Scots.

Stir in the rise of Reform, which has splintered the anti-SNP vote, and the contorted nature of the Scottish electoral system, and it is overwhelmingly likely that the SNP will stay in power. The main uncertainty is whether they will

again need the support of the Greens for an outright majority.

But that's only part of the story. Over in Wales, a century of Labour dominance is coming to an end. The polls for the Senedd elections – which take place next week alongside the Scottish vote and local elections in England – show Reform and Plaid Cymru neck and neck. But under the new proportional voting system brought in by Labour, in a disastrous attempt to entrench its control, some kind of progressive government is all but a certainty, with Plaid in the box seat.

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein remains the largest party in the assembly and in control of the first minister's chair. Which means that as of next week three of the United Kingdom's four nations will probably be led by people avowedly committed to destroying it. Indeed, Swinney has said that his day one priority will be to put through legislation demanding another independence referendum.

Set against this, of course, is the rise of Reform. A lot of people who wrote off Nigel Farage as a little Englander have been surprised by how well his new party is doing in the other parts of the UK. But it is also true that Farage, even more than Boris Johnson, could have been lab-designed to raise Celtic hackles.

The other week he celebrated England's national day by sporting a genuinely spectacular flag of St George waistcoat, while lambasting Sir Keir Starmer for not even mentioning the country's name in his own videos.

Reform are, of course, a pro-Union party. But polling by Ipsos has shown that 16 per cent of Scottish unionists would be more likely to vote for independence with Farage in Downing Street, versus 4 per cent if the Tories somehow get back in. More alarmingly, more than half of those undecided on independence said a Farage premiership would tilt them towards leave.

Of course, as my colleague Alex Massie has pointed out, the dismemberment of the UK is not an imminent threat. Plaid Cymru barely mention the idea in their manifesto: their main priority is extracting more cash from English taxpayers for the Welsh NHS. And while Swinney will demand a referendum, no one in Westminster actually has to give him one, and no one is going to. Indeed, roughly a third of Reform's new voters are pro-independence, a sign that issues such as cost of living – and immigration – may be beginning to rival the constitutional question.

But the scene is still set for a scratchy, scratchy relationship between the

# “

## New Labour thought it would hold Holyrood and Cardiff in perpetuity

component parts of the UK. You do not spend years pounding the pavements for the SNP, Plaid Cymru or Sinn Fein unless you truly believe in the cause. So you will be constantly trying to find ways to further it.

The Sunday Times recently reported on how the SNP has used public funding to bring Scotland's charities sector under its ideological control. But I could also cite the way Belfast's Sinn Fein-controlled infrastructure ministry has slashed funding for sewage and water treatment while pumping cash into cross-border transport projects. And of

course if England does get a right-wing government, especially one committed to spending restraint (as it will absolutely have to be), progressives in the rest of the UK will inevitably throw up their hands at the sheer ghastliness.

This isn't only about nationalism, though. The whole dynamic of our system of devolution is that the devolved parliaments, and for that matter the elected mayors, take all of the credit but deflect all of the blame.

Accordingly, political success is ultimately defined by the amount of cash you can extract from London. And there is no mechanism to resolve the resulting disputes – not least, as Helen Thompson, the Cambridge academic, has pointed out, because the New Labour figures who set up the present system in the 1990s assumed that they would be running Westminster, Cardiff and Holyrood in perpetuity, so any disagreements could be addressed via fraternal discussions within the party.

Under Boris Johnson the Westminster government did recognise this tension, even if the solution was often to fight bribery with bribery. The team around Michael Gove brought in measures such as the UK Internal Market Act to create regulatory harmony, and reasserted Westminster's right to deal directly with

Scottish councils and quangos, not just to bypass their political enemies but to ensure that key projects such as defence investment were stamped with the Union Jack, in just the same way as the EU promoted its own in-country largesse.

Strikingly, Starmer recently circulated a memo reminding his ministers of the existence of these powers, and warning of the dangers of an “overly deferential” approach to the devolved governments.

But it is still almost certain that nationalism, separatism and internal tension will be back on the agenda after May 7. Indeed, for the SNP and Plaid Cymru the only thing more welcome than the implosion of Labour is that Reform is its most likely replacement. And as we have seen in Scotland, there is little sign that the nationalists' own failures will lead voters to abandon the cause: they will simply blame the English instead.

Whatever happens to the Union over the next few years, the only way to secure it in the long run is via a competent, effective Westminster government that delivers renewed national prosperity and stability. Which suggests that my fellow unionists might need a large supply of that tariff-free whisky after all.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the Editor should be sent to [letters@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:letters@sunday-times.co.uk)  
The Sunday Times, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

## President Trump's political 'genius'

Matthew Syed's excellent analysis of President Trump's egregious guile (“I abhor Trump but he's a genius. Who else has bent history's arc like him?”, Apr 26) overlooks one fundamental factor: Trump works in a system that does little to curb him. The US constitution, for all its elegance, is flawed. Making the president head of the executive as well as head of state not only foments agonising conflicts of allegiance among patriotic Americans; it also helps to invest a president with near-dictatorial powers. Trump has overridden the judiciary and bypassed Congress to go to war, pardoned rioters, intimidated academia and the media and issued a torrent of executive orders, all without any agency of government holding him to account. Trump's “genius” has been to recognise the pliability of the constitution and to exploit it. Syed writes about Trump undermining “constitutional norms”. A robust constitution would be invulnerable to such subversion. Perhaps after 250 years it is time for a rewrite.

**Peter Hughes**  
Sunbury-on-Thames, Surrey

There is much to commend in Matthew Syed's article on President Trump but in describing Trump as a “genius” he fails to

convince. Trump is a charismatic president who gulls the gullible, outsmarts political opponents and enriches himself in the process. True geniuses don't have to be morally upstanding but, by virtue of their rare talent, intelligence and vision, they add to the sum total of human happiness and progress. It is impossible to conclude that Trump adds anything other than distortion, division, disruption and destruction. He has brought a wrecking ball to Nato and the Middle East, and his utterances and actions have brought his own country into disrepute, reducing it to a laughing stock. Trump has no identifiable talent that could gain him entry to the pantheon of geniuses. We denigrate them by attempting to place him among their ranks.

**Alan Jones**  
Pewsey, Wilts

Matthew Syed's article brings to mind historians who claim that Napoleon Bonaparte was also a “genius”. Napoleon may have had fabulous intellect but he caused millions of deaths to satisfy his passion for power. Arguably Stalin, Hitler and perhaps Saddam and Assad, too, were of similar mind. Syed proves that President Trump owns a

certain kind of persuasive “genius” but I would insist that, given his pathological lying and glorying in violence, it is prefixed by the word “evil”.

**Bill Jones**  
Honorary professor of political studies, Liverpool Hope University

Would President Trump be such an effective politician without America's military might and economic power behind him to place himself at the centre of world events? Around the world there are dozens of leaders who are referred to as despots, dictators, autocrats, tyrants, strongmen. In many countries with such leaders, only the populace suffers. In Trump's case, almost everyone else in the world is suffering. I agree that he has bent history to his will but Trump's only beneficiaries are those around him.

**Larry Sequeira**  
Croydon

The miniature version of the executive mansion (“Honey, I shrunk the White House”, Apr 26) is beautifully crafted. It is to be hoped the bees find it a sweetly productive environment. But I'm curious to know – is there a ballroom?  
**Anne Wagner**  
Oxford

## North Sea riches

The views of Ed Miliband, the energy secretary, about North Sea oil and gas and the direction of government policies for which he has responsibility are well known (“Spurning the North Sea's gifts makes little sense for Britain”, leading article, Apr 26). However, another reason for procrastination over opening the Jackdaw and Rosebank fields is that such a decision would almost certainly be legally challenged by the activist groups that succeeded in halting the fields' approval in the first place. The government would be in an excruciating position if its consent to open the fields was quashed in court. Unless the Court of Session in Edinburgh overrules itself or the government repeals a carbon target that Miliband has said should be “binding in law”, Jackdaw and Rosebank will not open.

**David Campbell**  
Professor of law, Lancaster University

Ed Miliband's obsession with putting solar panels all over the countryside ignores the fact they only generate power in sunlight. If only we had held on to our great empire, on which the sun never set.

**John Pitts**  
Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan

## Rigging the market

Dominic Lawson is right to criticise Zohran Mamdani's city hall-subsidised supermarket plan (“The popularity of price controls is a disaster”, Apr 26). In the 1963 film *Heavens Above!* a well-meaning vicar, played by Peter Sellers, starts handing out free food paid for by Lady Despard. The scheme undermines businesses, puts people out of work and ends in a riot. Will Mamdani's scheme (admired, it seems, by the SNP and the Greens) see life imitate art yet again?

**StJohn Cox**  
Taunton, Somerset

## Spouse visa system

Completing my wife's visa extension papers prompted reflection on how the Home Office views the family lives of its citizens. I am in my seventies, have maintained homes in the UK since the early 1980s and spent much of my career working overseas while retaining deep roots here. Yet choosing a foreign spouse still seems to invite suspicion and the repeated submission of detailed proof. Many British citizens live international lives. The system should reflect that with fairness and dignity.

**Graham Kemish**  
Southampton

Letters should be sent to [letters@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:letters@sunday-times.co.uk) and should arrive by midday on Thursday. Please include a full address and phone number. We may edit letters, which must be exclusive to *The Sunday Times*

## Shoplifting epidemic

Camilla Long is exasperated by the epidemic of shoplifting and asks why no one cares (“Only the pasty fortress will deter thieves now”, Apr 26). The brazenness of thieves in shops and at the petrol pumps (letter, Apr 19) is staggering, yet it is allowed to continue. We have created a system that enables theft: a shortage of police; shop assistants told not to intervene; and members of the public afraid to become involved in case they are not supported by the law. Perpetrators, if caught, are liable to be let off with a warning. Court cases may take years to be heard and sentences are likely to be suspended as there's no room in our prisons. Our broken system impedes all attempts to achieve anything, from building houses to stopping migrants' boats.

**Alistair Gibb**  
Edinburgh

## Lib Dem hide and seek

The Lib Dems are missing their moment (“Why 1,500 seats lost will trigger ‘nervous breakdown’ for Labour”, politics, Apr 26). Where are they? At the last general election there was much rejoicing when the Lib Dems won 72 seats. Many voters had simply had enough of the Conservatives in 2024, likewise now with Labour, yet the Lib Dems are hiding in the bushes while the Greens and Reform dance in the streets ahead of the local elections. Surely the Lib Dems have an alternative leader in their midst who has presence, is younger and will cut out the antics, cardigans and comfy chairs.

**Trevor Edmond**  
Exeter

## Less weighty tomes

Nikolai Tolstoy (letter, Apr 26) prefers children to read classics rather than comics but all reading has educational value. *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, for example, gives children a chance to feel that they can read on their own. For some it will be reassuring and a gateway to encourage them to read more challenging texts. Reading is akin to weightlifting: start light and build up.

**Ben Wolfin**  
London NW7

## Restricting jury trials

Sir Stephen Mitchell is correct when he says that the restriction of jury trials will fail to cut the staggering backlog of crown court cases (“Judges are being silenced on vandalism of curbing jury trials”, Apr 26).

I sat as a judge in Southwark crown court, which is the venue for trials of long and complex fraud cases. At no time did I have reason to believe that juries were incapable of understanding the issues raised by these cases. Moreover, had the cases been tried by judge alone, the delay would have been greater, in that the judge would have to have given full written reasons for the verdict delivered. This would mean that to deliver judgment within a reasonable time, he/she would be unavailable to take new trials.

The assertion that trial by judge alone will reduce the backlog is not supported by my experience at the International Criminal Court, in which I now sit, where trials are held before a bench of judges. In my last case, it took months to produce a fully reasoned judgment.

**Joanna Korner KC**  
The Hague, Netherlands

## Safari superman

It was heartening to read your interview with the travel writer Brian Jackman on how tourism in Africa has changed (“My life in African safaris”, travel, Apr 26). I would like to add another name to the safari pioneers mentioned: Ron Beaton. He had the vision to set up Mara conservancies – after years of negotiation with Masai elders – to create a model that has been much copied. He also established the Koyaki Guiding School, which has not only produced 400 safari guides but also raised awareness of the value of conservation.

**Tricia Cameron**  
Portsmouth, Dorset

## Pop the kettle on

My grandmother's advice on the ideal number of committee members (letters, Apr 19 & 26) was: “Thee, me and she to make the tea.”

**Liza Roe**  
London SW20



## BIRTHDAYS

**Katya Adler**, BBC Europe editor, 54  
**Patti Boulaye**, singer, pictured, 72  
**Rob Brydon**, actor and comedian, 61  
**Poppy Delevingne**, model, 40  
**Peter Duncan**, TV presenter, 72  
**Ben Elton**, author and script writer, 67  
**Ken Hom**, TV chef, 77  
**Mary Hopkin**, singer, 76  
**Sir Mo Ibrahim**, founder of Celtel, 80  
**Edward Kessler**, founder-president of the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, 63  
**Michael Kiwanuka**, musician, 39  
**Joseph Kosinski**, film director, 52  
**Steve McClaren**, football coach, 65  
**Sir Alan Parker**, founder and chairman of Brunswick Group, 70  
**Sandi Toksvig**, TV presenter, 68  
**Frankie Valli**, singer, 92  
**Allan Wells**, Olympic sprinter, 74

## ANNIVERSARIES

**1494 Christopher Columbus sights Jamaica, inhabited by the Arawak tribes. He lands two days later**  
**1945 British forces under Lord Mountbatten capture the city of Rangoon in Burma from the Japanese**  
**1979 The Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher wins the general election and replaces Labour in No 10**

## CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

**ipso. Regulated**

We wrongly suggested that breaks at Gardener's Cottage, Chatsworth, came with complimentary tickets to Chatsworth House, the garden, farmyard and playground along with free parking if requested when booking (Travel, Apr 19). In fact these must be booked separately. We apologise for the error.

Email [complaints@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:complaints@sunday-times.co.uk). *Ipsos will also examine formal complaints about the editorial content of UK newspapers and magazines. Please go to our website for full details.*

# The way we were

From The Sunday Times  
May 2, 1926

## Empire Shopping Week is a chance to ask for British goods

The month in which Empire Day occurs is a peculiarly suitable one in which to hold Empire Shopping Weeks, and in various places the arrangements for these patriotic displays are in full swing. Kensington begins its Empire Shopping Week tomorrow, and the decorations and posters make gay the royal borough. My butcher, for example, has burst out into such an eruption of coloured posters that you can hardly tell which is a poster and which is a joint of English lamb.

I searched with a keen eye my grocer's window to see if perchance fruits and other commodities from foreign lands had crept into his display, either through a lamentable ignorance of geography or by oversight, but all seemed well. True, there were articles bearing labels which denoted countries other than those of the British Empire to be found within,

but he probably trusts to the good feeling of his customers not to ask for these things until the week is over. Obviously, we must expect the equivalent of bears coming out of the woods to devour us if we fail in our duty so far as to demand foods that are not from the British

# “

## You can hardly tell which is a poster and which is a joint of English lamb

Empire, either these islands or the wider spaces. And the shopping is not confined to food. Let us ask for British goods no matter what we are buying, whether refrigerators, dress materials or matches. This week brings a 79th birthday to Lord Rosebery, and it may be hoped that the event will prove more cheerful than some previous anniversaries. Replying some years ago to a friend who invited him to dinner, he wrote: “You have, alas, fixed for your dinner a day of private fasting and humiliation for me. May 7 is a domestic tragedy, the scene of which is the bosom of my family. I should never be allowed to dine out on that day. On that melancholy anniversary I scrape myself with a potsherd and decorate my few remaining hairs with ashes. Nor do I take meat or drink or repose. In short, it is my birthday.”

Sandy, London Zoo's large orangutan, has discovered that breaking windows is great fun, and he is now making a hobby of it. But this longing to smash the window above his cage cannot be gratified unless he has some sort of a tool, so Sandy sat down and thought of a plan which is proving most successful. Whenever a visitor carrying a stick or umbrella approaches him, the ape drops a piece of food out of his cage and pretends he wants it back again. The kind-hearted visitor picks up the food and offers it to Sandy but, although he makes a great effort to take it, the orangutan can never manage to reach far enough. So the visitor puts the food on the end of the stick and holds it out to Sandy. Before he has time to realise what has happened, the stick has been stolen and Sandy is busy breaking the window.