Adequate response

The RBI policy review will need central assistance to effectively fight inflation

After months of waiting and watching, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has decided to act to try to rein in rising inflation. Its decision to raise interest rates by 25 bps seemed increasingly inevitable. The RBI now projects retail inflation at 4.9% in Q2, higher than its August projection of 4.7%. This is set to rise in Q3 to 6% before easing marginally to 5.7% in Q4. Global oil prices have again crossed $100 a barrel following a brief reprieve. India's oil marketing companies, likely following government instructions, have held off on passing most of this increase on to consumers. However, they cannot withstand such fiscal pressures forever. The impact of higher crude prices has been bad enough, but higher petrol and diesel prices will likely send inflation spiralling. Simultaneously, a deficient monsoon is pushing up food prices and will continue to do so for the rest of the year. When supply-side factors are the primary drivers of inflation, an interest rate hike can only have second-order and largely marginal effects on inflation. In such a scenario, the signal sent by the MPC becomes as important as the actual action. The MPC has used this latest policy review to attempt to dampen inflation expectations, an important area of action. The expectation of high inflation in the near future can often become a self-fulfilling prophecy, independent of the factors driving prices up.

A 25 bps interest rate hike is a careful nudge rather than an inevitably ineffectual bludgeon. The fact that the MPC has changed its stance to 'calibrated tightening' from 'neutral' is the bigger signal. The question no longer is whether the RBI will hike rates in its next meeting in December, but by how much. The message from this stance change is that the central bank will use all the tools at its disposal to keep inflation in check. The RBI also clearly thinks that the economy can withstand such tightening. It has revised upwards its GDP growth forecast for 2026-27 to 7.1% from the 6.7% projected in August. That said, all economic agencies have, even before interest rates were hiked, been predicting a slowdown in the second-half of the year. The growth-inflation trade-off will again test the RBI's deftness. Higher interest rates may also pause the ongoing exodus of Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs), giving the RBI some exchange rate-related breathing room. The central bank has done what it can on inflation so far. The onus is now on the government. It has several tools to control food inflation, such as strategic buffers, import and export controls, anti-hoarding measures, and open market operations. Those need to be used more effectively.

Chance, happenstance

Bias is more than human sociology; life makes choices with definite preferences

Only in imagination, the mathematical imagination, does perfect equality exist. A fair coin has an equal probability of heads and tails, so across many tosses, the expectation is for the proportions to approach 50:50. Laborious demonstrations have shown that this is rarely the case; bias is preloaded into life. Only about 10% of humans are naturally left handed; a species that is a minority can overwhelm a resident population within a few generations. Economists refer to the 'Matthew effect' of the rich getting richer and the Pareto principle, and small accretive effects compounding. This is not just human sociology at work. It has been known since the work of the French chemist Louis Pasteur in 1848 that lifeless molecules can have mirror-image forms, like a left-handed glove and a right-handed glove. Chirality is the term chemists use for this molecular "handedness": a left-handed glove fits the left hand better than the right, even though the two may look like mirror images of one another. Chemists call the resulting predominance of one molecular handedness homochirality, from the Greek words for "same" and "hand". As with hands, almost all amino acids – the building blocks of proteins – exist as two mirrored variants, but only one of them, the 'L' or left-handed version, is found in the proteins in the cells. In the case of sugar molecules, it is the right-handed, or 'D', that are part of human DNA. Despite the various available options, life likes to choose one. In their labs, chemists have been able to create equal numbers of left- and right-handed variants of these mirrored molecules but it turns out that for making pharmaceuticals, it greatly matters which version of a mirrored molecule one uses. The thalidomide drug exists in two mirror-image forms, and their different three-dimensional shapes affect how they interact with biological molecules. Between 1957 and 1961, thalidomide resulted in more than 10,000 babies across the world being born with severe congenital abnormalities.

Henri Kagan and Kenso Soai have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for explaining how such homo-chirality may have emerged and devising a reliable method for ensuring that a desired variant of a molecule be synthesised. Kagan's insight has an intriguing parallel with evolutionary biology: small initial differences need not produce proportionately small outcomes. Soai showed that a tiny initial excess of one molecular form can, under the right conditions, be amplified: the product of his reaction catalyses the formation of more products with the same handedness. Other than laying forth a model of how Matthew effects may underlie evolution, their work underlines how the quest to explain natural phenomena, driven by curiosity alone, can yield insights with practical applications to improve lives and also blaze trails for the future.

Flawed by design, exclusionary in impact



Srinivasan Ramani



Pon Vasanth B.A.

For more than 75 years, the defining preoccupation of the Election Commission of India (ECI) has been "inclusion". The first general election of 1951-52 had to enrol an electorate of around 17 crore from scratch, many of whom were illiterate. Successive Commissioners treated universal adult franchise as a promise to be fulfilled rather than just a principle to be stated on paper. India could genuinely be proud of being an electoral democracy where voter turnout among the poor is higher than that among the rich, unlike in many western democracies.

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls launched by the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India, Gyanesh Kumar, has reversed this progressive direction. It was termed an exercise to "purify" the electoral rolls, but in practice, it is riddled with methodological flaws and *ad hoc* rule changes, resulting in the deletion of a large number of genuine voters.

The names of 13.37 crore people were struck off during the draft stage across 30 States and Union Territories in the three phases of the SIR. The figure includes 65 lakh in Bihar, 6.57 crore in the 12 States and Union Territories covered in Phase 2, and 6.15 crore in Phase 3, whose final rolls are yet to be published. The deletion rate doubled as SIR progressed – from 8.3% in Bihar to 12.9% in Phase 2 and 17% in Phase 3 (it was 32.8% in Delhi and 21.7% in Telangana). In Phases 1 and 2, even after names were added back, net deletions were about 6.2 crore.

In Delhi, the draft roll has only 97.54 lakh electors, barely above the 94.95 lakh who voted in the February 2025 Assembly election. In 24 of Delhi's 70 constituencies, the draft roll now has fewer electors than the number who voted in the election. The ECI has in effect conceded the point about disenfranchisement. It has now directed officials to run a "special drive" to enrol anyone "whose name has got left out" – an implicit admission that its rolls are missing eligible voters.

Flaws by design

First, enumeration. The ECI's Manual on Electoral Rolls (2023) describes an intensive revision as a "denovo process without reference to the earlier existing roll" (paragraph 9.3.1); enumerators visit every house and record the particulars of each eligible resident. If a particular elector's citizenship is in doubt, the Manual requires officials to give "probative value" (paragraph 7.4.2) to their presence on the preceding roll, and places the onus on the objector and not the elector.

The SIR inverts this procedure. It shifts enumeration on to electors and presumes that they are ineligible until they can trace themselves or a parent to the last intensive revision conducted more than two decades ago, or produce documents to establish their eligibility in what resembles a citizenship test.

Electors who could not be found, did not receive or return the form, or were unable to fill it – due to illiteracy, for example – were dropped from the draft roll, even if they had voted in the last election. All this was done at breakneck speed, on the eve of elections in several States.

Second, re-entry. A deleted voter cannot be easily restored, even if he or she has merely shifted address within the constituency. They must apply through Form 6 – the application for new voters – as though they had never been on the rolls. Since newly eligible 18-year-olds also use Form 6, the ECI has made it impossible to distinguish new voters from returning voters in the published figures, preventing a proper audit.

Third, "logical discrepancies". Software matched electors against two-decade-old rolls and flagged mismatches for scrutiny. These included spelling differences, more than six voters linked to one ancestor, and parent-child age gaps outside 15 to 45 years, among other arbitrary criteria.

This was first fully applied in West Bengal, where 60 lakh names were flagged and judicial officers deployed by the Supreme Court of India struck off 27 lakh names. Appellate tribunals appointed since then have restored electors in 93% of the cases, bringing back about one lakh names onto the rolls. But by early September – months after the Assembly election – they had disposed of only 1.22 lakh of more than 38 lakh appeals, or 3.2%. Moreover, 16.1 lakh appeals were filed to remove electors whom judicial officers had found eligible. Who authorised this on the ECI's behalf remains unanswered. Meanwhile, another 19.33 lakh electors on Delhi's draft rolls have been flagged for "logical discrepancies".

Fourth, centralisation. Changes to the rolls increasingly flow through the Electoral Roll Officers' Network (ERONet) database, overriding Electoral Registration Officers, who are the statutory authorities on eligibility. State election officials have complained that they cannot see centrally made changes to the rolls in their own constituencies.

Fifth, lack of a baseline. Without the latest Census – which has been delayed by the Centre – there is no firm population baseline to check the rolls. The ECI also dismisses projected population figures as mere estimates. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the final roll of 5.67 crore is about 33 lakh short of the projected 6.02 crore.

The impact of these flaws was drastic but varied across States. In Bihar, where migration for work is overwhelmingly male, more women than men were struck off the rolls, particularly those aged 18-29 years and recorded as "permanently shifted". The gender ratio in the final SIR rolls fell to 892 from 907 in the 2024 Lok Sabha rolls.

In West Bengal, statistical analyses by the Kolkata-based SABAR Institute, a public policy and research organisation, estimated that 65% of those deleted after adjudication for "logical discrepancies" were Muslims, despite Muslims accounting for roughly 27% of the State's population.

A deferential Court

For months, the Court confined itself to managerial interventions on the SIR. It ruled only on May 27, after Phase 2 had ended and Phase 3 was notified, upholding the SIR.

Legal scholars have raised three broad substantive objections to the judgment. First, Section 21(3) permits a special revision "for any constituency or part of a constituency" – an exceptional and targeted power. Yet, the Court allowed the ECI to use it for a State-wide exercise, freeing it from the Registration of Electors Rules governing ordinary revisions.

Second, rather than asking whether a less harmful method, such as door-to-door verification and enrolment, could achieve the same objective, the Court asked only whether the SIR was "manifestly excessive".

Third, the Court sidestepped its own three-judge ruling in *Lal Babu Hussein* (1995), which struck down a "sweeping" revision that demanded citizenship documents from nearly 18,000 residents of Delhi's Matia Mahal. The ruling, also incorporated into the ECI's Manual, held that a name on the electoral roll is presumed valid and can be removed only after notice and a hearing.

Essentially, the Court found that disenfranchisement was not "widespread or systemic" enough to warrant intervention, without specifying what would matter instead. The judgment emboldened the ECI to proceed with the flawed SIR in Phase 3, where deletions have risen sharply.

Dissent from within

Reports revealed that Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi recorded at least 14 objections between October 2025 and August 2026. One concerned Form 6 being altered, without amending the rules, requiring applicants to state whether they or their parents or grandparents appeared on the "last SIR" roll. The ECI's response to the revelations was mere window-dressing with some administrative changes. As the two Commissioners constituted a majority, they should have used it to stop these decisions, but did not.

The Court is now hearing petitions concerning West Bengal and Delhi, as well as pleas seeking the CEC's suspension over the ECI's conduct. It should use these proceedings to revisit its judgment on review or before a Constitution Bench. It should halt the SIR and order an audit of rolls finalised so far before any further deletions. Enumeration should return to door-to-door verification by Booth Level Officers, while States going to the polls soon should use their pre-SIR rolls, updated with fresh enrolments.

Anything less would endorse a process that professes time and again that no eligible elector will be left out while patently doing the opposite. It has removed more than a lakh genuine voters for certain, and possibly crores. The ECI, built to widen India's adult franchise, has instead spent more than a year narrowing it.

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The Gyanesh Kumar-led Election Commission of India, emboldened by a deferential Supreme Court judgment, has already disenfranchised lakhs of genuine electors through its Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls and risks excluding many more

Calibrating India's inbound investment framework



Bharat Joshi

Director, ACTL, a logistics company, and the CEO of J Curve Ventures, an advisory firm

Following the successful 18th BRICS Summit, in New Delhi in September, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's planned December visits to Canada and Brussels, where formal free trade agreements (FTAs) are expected to be signed, signal consistency in institutionalising India's global economic footprint. The trade push, alongside domestic structural reforms and a new FTA strategy, has changed India's investment trajectory. Reserve Bank of India data show gross inward foreign direct investment (FDI) reached a record $94.8 billion in FY26. UNCTAD's World Investment Report 2026 notes India as 11th among the world's top FDI destinations, following a 44% rise in inflows.

India follows global trend

However, the report reveals that globally, international project finance remains roughly a quarter below its 2021 peak, a trend India reflects. In greenfield data centre investments (a focal sector across economic partnerships), India attracted approximately $7 billion during the first three quarters of 2025. While this placed India within the top 10, it trailed Thailand and Spain, and sat substantially behind South Korea's $21 billion, the United States's $29 billion, and France's $69 billion. What creates this lag between committed investment and its actual deployment in greenfield projects, particularly in India?

Investors believe incremental reform can ease the challenges behind this lag. In some ways, the remaining 'negotiations' will be internal – between the Centre and States, between the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) and line Ministries, or between central rules and State notifications needed to enforce policy. Crucially, resolving these operational bottlenecks would benefit domestic enterprises as much as foreign investors. Commercial dispute resolution is faster than before, but India's courts still had nearly 48 million pending cases as of April, including about six million in High Courts. Reforms such as the Commercial Courts Act, 2015 and the Mediation Act, 2023 have helped, with institutional arbitration increasingly becoming the corporate default. Smaller enterprises, however, still rely on courts. Better staffing of commercial benches and mediation centres remains essential to reducing resolution times.

On the labour codes

This fragmentation is also mirrored in the rollout of the landmark labour codes. Parliament's consolidation of 29 central labour laws into four codes was a legislative milestone, with the Central Rules notified in May 2026. But since labour is on the Concurrent List, implementation depends on State notifications. Gujarat moved swiftly to notify rules under all four codes, while other industrial States are finalising theirs. For enterprises designing national human resource frameworks, this necessitates managing a messy transitional phase of varied State timelines.

On tax certainty, the Taxation Laws (Amendment) Act, 2021 effectively ended the ghost of retrospective tax disputes by withdrawing outstanding demands against entities such as Vodafone and Cairn Energy. The relaunch of the Vivad se Vishwas scheme has also helped reduce the broader direct-tax litigation backlog.

Compliance, however, has required recalibration. Mandatory BIS certification under Quality Control Orders (QCOs) was designed to safeguard consumers, but the framework expanded extensively. The Gauba Committee found QCOs had grown from fewer than 70 to nearly 790, covering raw materials and intermediate goods. For imported components, compliance costs rose to ₹20 lakh, with six- to eight-month certification timelines disrupting domestic MSME supply chains. In response, the government withdrew QCOs on critical intermediate goods, including PVC, aluminium and zinc, providing relief to manufacturers.

India's modern trade pacts now introduce binding investment targets. The EFTA agreement sets a historic $100-billion target, but investor-protection mechanisms remain a work in progress. As the India-EFTA TEPA lacks an independent bilateral investment dispute mechanism, Switzerland is separately negotiating a bilateral investment treaty. This could inform negotiations with the EU and the U.K.

Further, speeds remain uneven. The DPIIT is the nodal agency but not the decision-maker on approvals. A revised SOP issued in May 2026 sets a 12-week deadline, but compliance remains uneven. However, large-scale projects such as Tata Electronics' semiconductor facility in Dholera, Gujarat, demonstrate how effective administrative coordination can accelerate capital deployment.

Reform lessons from successes

India's reform agenda can draw lessons from past successes. Singapore's CECA has facilitated over $195 billion in cumulative FDI since 2000, including $19.8 billion last year. Its non-discrimination and investor-protection frameworks are a useful blueprint for treaty negotiations. Domestically, the mobile-phone industry shows the potential of coordinated policy: production has grown 33-fold since FY15, from ₹180 billion to ₹6.27 trillion, while exports reached ₹2.59 trillion. India is now the world's second-largest mobile-phone manufacturer by volume and meets 99.2% of domestic demand through local production.

India's rise to the 11th-largest FDI destination and the world's second-largest mobile-phone manufacturer reflects its resolve in addressing internal governance bottlenecks. These achievements underscore the long-term benefits of sustained institutional reform and free trade.

Turning investment commitments into projects requires tackling State-level administrative bottlenecks

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Due process for the voter

The debate over SIR should focus more on the eligible voter whose name has been deleted. With more than 13 crore names reportedly absent from the draft rolls, the fundamental democratic question is can an eligible citizen lose the right to vote because he cannot establish a decades-old electoral linkage, including where his parents voted? Electoral rolls must exclude ineligible persons, but protecting every eligible voter from wrongful exclusion is equally essential. The constitutional test is not merely whether the ECI has the power to revise the rolls, but whether every voter receives adequate notice, a fair opportunity to respond and a simple, timely mechanism to restore a wrongly deleted name.

A. Mariafrancis,
Chennai

Nana Patekar

The passing of veteran actor Nana Patekar marks the end of a remarkable chapter in cinema. At a time when celebrity culture often rewards glamour, he demonstrated that an actor could command respect through talent, simplicity and conviction.

Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri,
New Delhi

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

Are legal guarantees insufficient in abolishing untouchability?

PARLEY



Valerian Rodrigues

Former Professor at Mangalore University and Jawaharlal Nehru University and currently Professor Emeritus, St Aloysius (Deemed to be) University, Mangalore



Disha Wadekar

Supreme Court litigator with over 10 years of experience in constitutional, criminal and civil law. A Fulbright Scholar and LL.M. graduate of Columbia Law School

In August this year, the performance of a "purification" ritual by certain Hindu groups in Uttarakhand, at the location where Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, who belongs to a Dalit community, addressed a public rally, led to a national conversation on the practice of untouchability. This discourse was shaped as Opposition Congress leaders accused the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dispensation of practising caste discrimination. The Uttarakhand BJP chief defended the ritual saying that it was meant to "cleanse" the area of the ideas that Mr. Kharge was espousing at the rally. After a sustained campaign from Opposition leaders and civil society actors, an FIR was registered in the matter. So, are legal guarantees insufficient in abolishing untouchability? Valerian Rodrigues and Disha Wadekar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Abhinay Lakshman**. Edited excerpts:

Is the law sufficient to address caste-crimes such as untouchability or practices that uphold the purity-pollution paradigm?

Valerian Rodrigues: I feel that legal guarantees are necessary, but not adequate. Two dimensions to untouchability have emerged over time – one is that of Baba Saheb Ambedkar's, that it is necessary to abolish untouchable practices; and the other is the one argued by Mahatma Gandhi, that social conscience needs to change. After Independence, the legal regime has come but the social conscience in India remains frozen.

Disha Wadekar: Approaching this a little differently, the answer lies in understanding the nature of law itself – what it can and cannot do. Starting with whether the law is sufficient assumes that formal law is some embodiment of perfection meant to rectify an imperfect society. But that is not the case. Social laws have been in place for thousands of years. We should start by asking ourselves about the law of caste and how it has been in operation for thousands of years. There is this concept of legal consciousness, which is shaped by the everyday experience of the law. Law is also very contextual, and so is its experience. It can be individualistic; it can be social. I think we need to first bring the law down from that pedestal that we have given it, and see its social interaction with the structures of caste, patriarchy, and Brahmanism. It is important to note that this does not mean that modern law is not important. The only break to the law of caste has been that of the formal rule of law. When the British brought that to us, from an anti-caste perspective, for Dalits, this rule of law regime was emancipatory. It is extremely important. But is it sufficient to annihilate caste? That is probably the question that we should be asking ourselves.



Uttarakhand Pradesh Congress leaders organise a sit-in protest at the CM's residence, demanding action against those responsible for the 'purification' ritual conducted at Ramlila Maidan, in Dehradun on September 7. ANI

Clearly, India has, from its inception, tried to wield the Constitution and the law to deal with these social behaviours. What have these laws achieved thus far?

VR: We need to extend the regime of law beyond what is formally stated in the legislation and in the Constitution. But I would still make that distinction between social practices to which I would not ascribe the legal norms as strongly as to the formal legal regime. The legal regime in India against untouchability has done two things. One, it has checkmated, to a great extent, much wider and obvious practices of untouchability. Secondly, it has provided instruments to conscious sections of Dalits and non-Dalits to fight against practices of untouchability, even though the resources are extremely limited and the odds they confront are huge. The legal regime in India stands by the rights of Dalit communities as compared to, let's say 100 years ago, from the time of the Poona Pact. You will find that certain obvious practices of untouchability such as preventing people from taking the water of wells in public places, access to public places, access to public institutions, and the kind of violence that was let loose on Dalit workers in the countryside –that has declined a lot. We do not know what would have taken place if this was not the case.

Even though this progress is visible, how does one look at the ways in which discrimination itself has evolved since the legal regime came into being?

DW: Over the years, the evolution of discriminatory practices can be categorised into two sections. One is the more traditional forms of atrocities which Mr. Rodrigues was referring to earlier. The other, in my opinion, would be a reactionary form of atrocity. And that is where social mobility has to be considered. The Dalits' social mobility has increased after the Constitution came into force, and that mobility has led to discontent amongst oppressor communities. One instance of that can be seen in the *Reservation Hatao Andolan* that has come up. And then there are newer forms of atrocities that are happening which come from a sentiment of "how dare you sit next to me?" or "how dare you share the same privilege as me?" or "how dare you socially mobilise?"

> Practices of untouchability in India are not merely social practices; they are embedded strongly in our social norms. Dr. Ambedkar somewhere calls it "notions in the mind". This is a notion that is instilled in the mind of both Dalits and non-Dalits
>
> VALERIAN RODRIGUES

So then, how does one analyse this interplay between the law being emancipatory but also its use becoming the trigger for such reactionary atrocities?

VR: Practices of untouchability in India are not merely social practices; they are embedded strongly in our social norms. Dr. Ambedkar somewhere calls it "notions in the mind". This is a notion that is instilled in the mind both in Dalits and non-Dalits. How do you get out of it? I feel that we have not embraced practices which I think were tried out from 1939 to 1949, to some extent, of reopening Indian society and making this an internal value. Now, how do you convert these values into social practices? In a country like India, it is an extremely complex question. We should have adopted institutions and practices which do not allow such notions to take root in children at all. There is very little, even in urban spaces, mixture and intermingling across castes. Practices such as inter-dining and inter-marriages have disappeared from public spaces in India. We need to intervene with very different instrumentalities, and this is a task the state needs to encourage, but it is also beyond the state. Non-state actors need to be made alive to this particular problem. And the setting in India today is not conducive to that kind of social reopening.

DW: There is an argument to be made that the answer is outside of the uniform carceral potential of the law. But before we even go there, I believe there also needs to be a reimagining of what we can do within the law. There is a lot of scholarly material that shows that using criminal law for stricter punishments, whether in cases of gender crimes, caste crimes, or other social crimes, does not have the result that one would presume. The reason is that the people adjudicating these cases are not just judicial actors but also social actors. The criminal law regime, which was superimposed, does not change the mindset of the judges. So, it has actually become counterproductive. And we are going to have to deal with these real questions. Not to say that all of this needs to be changed. But increasingly we are seeing across the world that marginalised communities are not relying on carceral regimes. The argument here is that there is an inherent requirement in criminal law, that if something needs to be punished, it must be proved beyond a reasonable doubt. This is needed, of course; we shouldn't try to undo that. And even though such criminal law provisions have a huge deterrence value as we have seen, is it 100% going to eliminate atrocities? It's not. Is it going to eliminate some form of atrocities? In some instances, probably yes. But beyond criminal law, can we look at civil law and civil remedies?

There is this entire arena of civil law, civil regime and civil punishments that we have not explored, where the burden is not that high to prove a form of discrimination whether it's caste-based discrimination or gender-based discrimination. The POSH Act has done it. And we need to look at really localised forms of dispute resolution mechanisms, examples of which can be seen in certain types of Sharia *adalats* (courts), which Muslim women have felt empowered to approach when they felt they couldn't go to court, or in the ways in which Gram Sabhas have become centres for dispute resolution at the local levels.

How do we move towards making Indian society more conducive for the kind of social reopening that you spoke of?

VR: In the way India has dealt with this, we forgot that there is something called the "common" that we need to reinforce. There are institutions that can do this but we have not explored those. For instance, our textbooks, can be changed a great deal, our teacher training at the lowest level can be changed, and this concept of the "common" can be established in urban planning as well, where we tend to see that often Dalits are made to congregate into certain spaces.

This normalcy of 'Dalits should have their own Anganwadis, or their own water taps, etc', has to be broken, if we are ever going to make an assault on untouchable practices.

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

When Jeffrey Archer lay on the floor

Recollecting an interview with the bestselling author that turned into an argument – not about books, but cricket

Srinivasa Ramanujam

There are a dozen ways in which an interviewee can react when you provoke them a little. Lying sprawled across the floor is not one of them.

But that is exactly what happened when I went to meet author Jeffrey Archer in 2013, as part of a regular workday at another media organisation.

It was a sunny morning when I sauntered into the Taj Coromandel in Chennai to meet the writer of *Best Kept Secret*, the third book in 'The Clifton Chronicles' series. Growing up, Archer's work occupied prime space on my bookshelves, jostling for space with the works of Sidney Sheldon, Michael Crichton, and John Grisham. So meeting him was going to be extra special.

Nervous, I arrived well in advance for the meeting. While waiting in the lobby and scrolling through the day's newspapers, which carried detailed reports about the India-Australia cricket match being played in Mohali, a thought struck me: Archer was an ardent cricket fan.

I remember reading somewhere about his passion for English county cricket. He had played the game in some capacity in his younger days. He also admired players from the sub-continent, such as Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid. I was determined to use that as my ice-breaker.

When my turn came, I was ushered into his room by an eager PR professional. I introduced myself and, looking at the television in his room, which was showing highlights of the previous day's play, remarked how good India had been on the cricket field in recent times.

Archer looked me straight in the eye and got up. Without batting an eyelid, he lay on the floor and started to brush the carpet. "This," he thundered, while I stared at him helplessly, "is how you wipe your cricket grounds."

Wielding an imaginary towel and mop, Archer continued the act till he reached my legs. I sat transfixed, my trepidation about the interview growing.

"Rubbish," he continued in a thick English accent, "Mops and buckets...rubbish." He was referring to how Indian groundsmen sweep and sponge off rainwater from the playing arena, taking off from that first day of the rain-hit Test match at Mohali.

The Indian cricket fan in me was growing annoyed, even a little angry. I gently reminded him that India had already won a couple of matches in that series, only for him to retort in a booming voice: "But you lost against England at home – so don't get me started on that!"

There was pin-drop silence. The PR professional, who had parked himself in the corner of the room, froze. I had just had an unnecessary argument with a globally famous personality on a topic that had absolutely nothing to do with the book he had written.

I sat at the edge of my seat, my hands shivering. The photographer who had accompanied me had his finger on the shutter button, but wasn't clicking, lest the noise upset the author.

All this while, Archer remained on the floor. He was looking up at me in anticipation. Those few seconds inside the large, lavish suite at Taj Coromandel felt like an eternity.

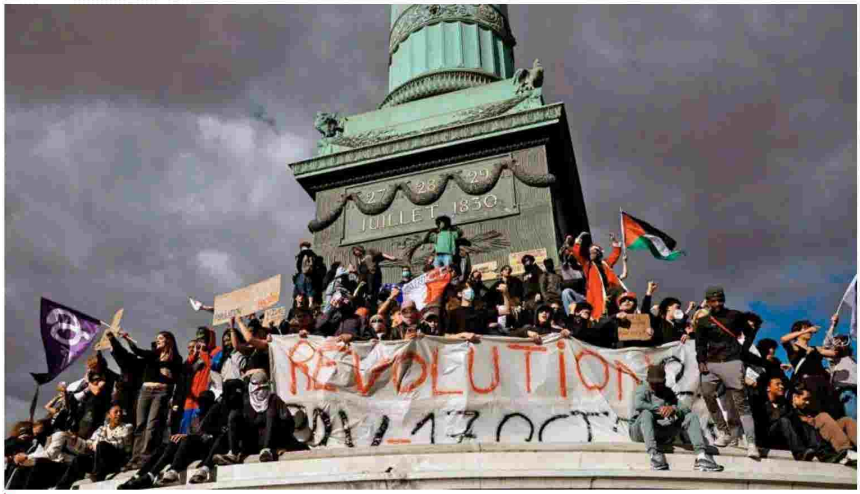
Archer realised that the tension in the room was building up. He quickly rose, and patted my shoulder in reassurance. I let out a sigh of relief. My conversation with the legendary author would not turn out to be so bad after all.

I finally let out a weak smile when he said: "Shall we begin the interview?"

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Students at the Bastille



A reawakening of history: Protesters hold a banner at the base of Bastille square's monument during a demonstration, part of a nationwide day of action, called by high school students in France who have been demanding better learning conditions through protests that have been punctuated by violent confrontations, in Paris on October 8. AFP

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 9, 1976

India to regulate entry of Britons

New Delhi, October 8: India will soon introduce the system of entry permits for visitors from such of those Commonwealth countries as have similar restrictions in regard to Indian citizens.

Visas are not required to be taken out by citizens of Commonwealth countries for visits from one country to another but, in some cases, the permit system had been introduced to regulate entry. For instance, Indians going to the U.K. were required to take out permits, while there was no such restriction on British nationals or British passport-holders coming to India. It is now proposed to have entry permits on a reciprocal basis in regard to those countries of the Commonwealth which have been regulating the entry of Indians.

This proposal is "under active consideration" said Mr. Om Mehta, Minister of State for Home Affairs, who has just returned from the U.K.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 9, 1926

Is cancer hereditary?

The first conclusions reached as a result of the expedition made by Dr. Louis Sambon, during the spring, summer and autumn of 1925 to study cancer from the epidemiological standpoint have now been published in the Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. Among his conclusions is the striking one that "cancer houses" and "cancer areas," though they may be misnomers, definitely exist.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Aid provided for each damaged house in West Bengal floods

1.8 in ₹ lakh. West Bengal Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari on Thursday said his government will provide ₹1.8 lakh aid each to families whose houses were fully damaged in the floods in Malda district, and ₹90,000 for partially affected homes. He announced ₹242 crore as compensation for 24,595 affected families in Manikchak, Ratua and English Bazar areas of Malda. PTI

Number of terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan

25 Pakistan Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi on Thursday told UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that 25 terrorist organisations were operating in Afghanistan and called for international cooperation to tackle the threat, according to a government statement. His remarks came amid heightened tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. PTI

Year-on-year rise in cost of home-cooked meals in September

10 in per cent. The cost of a home-cooked vegetarian thali rose 10% year-on-year in September, driven by higher prices of onion, vegetable oil, rice and LPG, according to a report released on Thursday. Non-vegetarian thali increased 6% as broiler prices increased more slowly, according to Crisil's monthly Roti Rice Rate report. PTI

Syrian nationals missing after drone sinks Black Sea ship

9 Nine Syrian sailors are missing following a drone strike that sank a commercial ship off the coast of Bulgaria, a Syrian official said on Thursday, after rescuers called off search operations. Bulgarian authorities said no survivors had been found from the ship after drones hit two commercial vessels early on Tuesday in the Black Sea, the latest fallout from the Ukraine-Russia war in recent months. AFP

Number of people killed in Russia's strike on buses in Ukraine

30 Ukraine on Thursday accused Russia of deliberately targeting civilians after 30 people were killed when two buses were blown up in the frontline city of Kramatorsk, in one of the deadliest single attacks in weeks. Photos posted by local authorities showed the burnt-out metal shells of the vehicles. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Why stubble fires keep coming back

Stubble burning is the result of a combination of legal, technological and economic factors, including the paddy-wheat cycle, assured procurement and a narrow window between crops; a lasting solution needs stronger incentives for diversification, better residue management and more reliable measurement of burning

FULL CONTEXT

C.S.C.Sekhar

It is that time of the year when air pollution in North India, and in Delhi in particular, takes centre stage in public discourse. One oft-cited reason for the worsening air quality index (AQI) is stubble burning by farmers.

Why farmers burn stubble

Stubble burning is the practice of setting fire to crop residue, consisting of the lower parts of plants left after harvesting. This practice is prevalent from the beginning of October to the end of November across northwest India, especially in Punjab, Haryana, and parts of Uttar Pradesh. Stubble burning is mainly associated with the burning of paddy straw in Punjab and Haryana, which together produce around 29 million metric tons of paddy straw. Stubble burning releases large amounts of particulate matter, carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and other carcinogenic substances, which together form a thick smog that can harm human health. It also leads to a loss of soil fertility by depleting nitrogen, sulphur, potash, phosphorus, and other micronutrients. The heat generated by stubble burning results in a loss of soil moisture and organic content, which, in turn, leads to increased use of fertilizers in the next crop cycle.

Stubble burning is not a new phenomenon. It has been practised in Punjab since the late 1970s and early 1980s, largely following the introduction of combine harvesters, which leave a portion of the plant in the soil after harvesting. What has changed is its timing, which now coincides with the winter months in North India. This shift in timing followed the enactment of the Punjab Preservation of Sub-Soil Water Act, 2009 (PPSSWA 2009).

In 2012, nearly 73% of the cropped area in Punjab was irrigated using groundwater resources. There was a deficit of 14.31 billion cubic metres, which was met through excessive withdrawal of groundwater. Groundwater levels in Punjab declined at an alarming rate of 0.36 metres annually between 1999 and 2009, driven by intense over-exploitation for agriculture. A landmark NASA GRACE satellite study in 2009 showed that the region comprising Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan lost 109 cubic kilometres of groundwater between 2002 and 2008 alone, which was considered the largest instance of groundwater depletion in the world at the time.

Water crisis

The PPSSWA 2009 was a result of this alarming situation. The main goal of the Act was to prevent rapid groundwater depletion by prohibiting early paddy nursery sowing and transplantation before the arrival of the monsoon rains. The Act prohibited farmers from sowing paddy before May 10 and transplanting it before June 10, thus delaying paddy transplantation to align with the monsoon season. To ensure compliance, the Act prescribed stringent punishments. Implementing officers were authorised to destroy paddy sown in contravention of the Act and impose a penalty of ₹10,000 per hectare for every month of contravention. These actions by officials were also exempt from legal scrutiny

These sowing restrictions under PPSSWA 2009 pushed the paddy harvest to late October and early November, leaving farmers a narrow 10-15-day window to prepare their fields for the next wheat crop and reducing the time available for sowing. The PUSA-44 variety, which produces higher yields but takes 150-160 days to harvest, further narrowed the window between paddy harvesting and wheat sowing. Combine harvesters, which leave about a foot of stubble behind, put heavy pressure on farmers to clear the crop residue in a very short time. Manual clearing is time-consuming and expensive. Together, these factors made stubble burning almost a necessity for farmers.



A farmer burns paddy stubble in a field on the outskirts of Amritsar, in Punjab. FILE PHOTO

The moot point is why farmers continue to grow paddy and wheat despite a stringent legal framework and depleting groundwater levels. The answer lies in the incentive structure built for these two crops. The present minimum support price and procurement framework heavily favours rice and wheat procurement in Punjab and Haryana. Between 2012 and 2024, average paddy procurement in India was about 37% of production. The corresponding figures for Punjab and Haryana were 87% and 74%, respectively, more than double the national average. The pattern is similar for wheat, with procurement accounting for 30% of production nationally, compared with 70% in Punjab and 63% in Haryana. It needs to be noted that the computation of national averages includes Punjab and Haryana, and if these two States are excluded, the differences could be even higher. Such a system provides assured incomes to producers of these two crops in these two States, discouraging them from diversifying into other crops. In addition, power is free for farmers in Punjab and almost free in Haryana. This further encourages farmers to grow water-intensive crops like paddy and wheat through groundwater extraction.

Incentive problem

The technical solutions to stubble burning fall broadly into two categories: *in-situ* measures that include the use of crop residue management (CRM) machines such as Happy Seeders, Super Seeders and Rotavators; short-duration rice varieties; and direct seeding of rice; and *ex-situ* measures that involve using crop residue for alternative energy production, such as bio-ethanol and compressed biogas. However, both approaches face formidable problems. Happy Seeders and Super Seeders require an expensive 60-horsepower (HP) tractor, which remains unused for most of the year. Even hiring one typically costs a farmer ₹10,000 and involves a long waiting period. *Ex-situ* measures cost ₹1,500-₹2,500 per acre, a significant expense for many farmers.

The economic approach to address stubble burning involves building an incentive structure for farmers to diversify from paddy to other crops. The National Green Tribunal ruled in 2018 that farmers who burn stubble could be excluded from the purview of the minimum support price (MSP) policy. The Supreme Court upheld this view in 2023. During the stubble burning season of 2025, 31 flying squads by CPCB were deployed in 18 districts of Punjab and 13 districts of Haryana, involving 10,500 field functionaries in Punjab and 10,000 in Haryana.

Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has directed that complaints be filed before the judiciary against the officials responsible for the lack of effective monitoring. The Parliamentary Committee on air quality, however, advocated that penalising farmers should be the last resort. The Committee recommended setting a minimum price covering all the costs for selling stubble for *ex-situ* measures, which can ensure farmers' guaranteed income.

The government of Punjab mostly adopted *in-situ* CRM-based measures and limited *ex-situ* initiatives. CAQM observed in 2025 that a lot is required to be done in Punjab in terms of timely availability of CRM machinery, necessary support for CBG plants and other industries utilizing paddy straw, and better enforcement. On the other hand, Haryana adopted an incentive-based approach, along the lines of the Parliamentary Panel's recommendations, in addition to *in-situ* and *ex-situ* measures. A financial incentive of ₹1,000/acre for CRM use; ₹4,000/acre for direct seeding of rice; ₹7,000/acre for diversification to alternate crops; and incentives to panchayats for better performance have been put in place.

Punjab and Haryana are reported to have collectively achieved a 90% reduction in stubble burning incidents during paddy harvesting in 2025 in comparison to the same period in 2022 (Lok Sabha starred question No. 18, 1.12.2025). However, this assessment needs to be interpreted with caution, given some issues in measurement.

Measurement problem

Presently, the CREAMS (Consortium for Research on Agroecosystem Monitoring and Modeling from Space) protocol used for measuring stubble burning is built on NASA's MODIS and VIIRS satellites. These are polar satellites that orbit the earth's poles and observe India only at fixed times of the day, from 10:30 am to 1:30 pm. Their sensors are able to capture only active fires and are unable to compute the actual number of fires over a 24-hour period. According to a report by the *International Forum for Environment, Sustainability and Technology* in 2025, when data from multiple satellites was used to compute the actual land area affected by fire, the reduction was more gradual, at around 30%. A *Current Science* study in November 2025, led by scientists from ISRO using geostationary satellite observations, showed that farmers have shifted to stubble burning in the evening hours to avoid polar satellites. This study suggested using both polar and geostationary satellite data for an accurate picture of stubble burning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, stubble burning is a complex phenomenon driven by technological, economic and legal factors. The solution should be a judicious mix of the short-term *in-situ* and *ex-situ* measures with the medium/long term crop diversification (away from paddy). There needs to be an improvement in the methodology of measurement. Penal provisions are unlikely to be useful as there can be perverse incentives for collusion between farmers and officials, which may lead to 'showing' a reduction, rather than an actual reduction.

(C.S.C.Sekhar is professor of economics, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University)

THE GIST

- The Punjab Preservation of Sub-Soil Water Act, 2009 delayed paddy cultivation, pushing harvesting into late October and leaving farmers little time to prepare fields for wheat sowing, making stubble burning an easier option
- The strong procurement of paddy and wheat, along with free or cheap power, has discouraged crop diversification and encouraged continued cultivation of water-intensive crops despite falling groundwater levels
- While Punjab has largely relied on crop-residue management, Haryana has adopted financial incentives for residue management and crop diversification; however, satellite-based estimates of declining stubble burning need closer scrutiny

FULL CONTEXT



GETTY IMAGES

Understanding Gandhi's re-emergence in India's oppositional politics

Gandhi's return to the centre of opposition politics shows a wider churn in India, with protests, citizen action and new political movements seeking greater accountability and systemic change; despite efforts to diminish his legacy, his emphasis on bottom-up political change remains relevant

Atul Mishra

Mahatma Gandhi is back at the centre of India's oppositional politics and public imagination. On the evening of 8 October, MPs from the INDIA bloc, including Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi, started a sit-in protest against India's Chief Election Commissioner at Raj Ghat, the Mahatma's memorial in New Delhi. At protests in Mumbai on the same issue on October 2, the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) founder Abhijeet Dipke called Gandhi "the soul of India". Protestors dressed as Gandhi have emerged across the country.

Citizen activists, such as the Uttarakhand resident "Mohammad" Deepak, who have defended members of the minority community against violent communal elements, claim to be inspired by Gandhi. And Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraaj party, having opened its legislative account in Bihar and expanding to Delhi, uses Gandhi as its central inspiration alongside B.R. Ambedkar.

These are significant examples. The protests the country has seen in recent months are the strongest and potentially the most consequential in years. Mr. Rahul Gandhi and the INDIA bloc MPs appear to be effectively mobilising against the establishment. And Jan Suraaj's focus on education and accountability is refreshing in a region where social justice has descended into cynical politics based on caste, religion, and patronage. The world's largest democracy is experiencing a churn – as illustrated by cross-regional protests, mobilisation of Opposition lawmakers, courageous citizen action, and the emergence of a new party with a strategy to break the mould of regional politics in the Gangetic region. That Gandhi is at the heart of this churn speaks to his utility to those wishing to inject civility and decency into India's public life, mobilise the masses for systemic change, and redefine electoral issues.

Gandhi has come back despite concerted efforts to diminish him. These efforts have come from the political right, and the purveyors of identity politics who dominate the progressive intellectual space in Indian universities, media, and public forums.

On the right, the ruling establishment recast Gandhi as the symbol of cleanliness of physical spaces – streets, offices, transport, and hospitals. The Swachh Bharat campaign put Gandhi on government letterheads. It made Gandhi visible but changed what he came to mean in the public imagination: not modern India's tallest political leader and a source of political renewal, but a symbol for the country's quest to cure itself of being at ease with its own filth. This was an attempt to depoliticise Gandhi, to erase the fact that he possesses ideas for radical political change.

A battle over legacy

The right wanted to replace Gandhi with V.D. Savarkar, the Hindutva ideologue, in the national public imagination. The establishment sought to elevate Savarkar's status by diminishing Gandhi's stature, mainly by projecting him as a weak figure who emasculated Hindu society and appeased Muslims, causing India's partition, the loss of territory, and geopolitical disadvantage. In contrast, Savarkar was positioned as the champion of Hindu strength and uncompromising nationalism. A former Information Commissioner of India, Uday Mahurkar, has dubbed him the "father of national security", claiming in 2021 that India had entered the "Savarkar era".

Identity politics intellectuals and activists have trained their guns on Gandhi because of his views on race, caste, and women. Early Gandhi bought into the imperial notion of the hierarchy of humanity based on skin colour, placing the Black people below Brown Indians. On caste, while Gandhi opposed untouchability, he was unwilling to disown the varna system, which necessarily produced untouchability. And early Gandhi's views on women, alongside his experiments in sexual restraint in old age, became associated with misogyny. To identity politics intellectuals, Gandhi is the most regressive public figure one can imagine: racist, misogynist, conservative upholder of caste, and hypocritical. His non-violence is held as a cover that sustains the 'structural violence' of racism, casteism, and patriarchy.

While both groups have wanted to diminish Gandhi's global standing, the right in India has not succeeded, given that the establishment finds him useful in projecting India as a state that rejects war and promotes sustainable development internationally. They have also had to accommodate Gandhi's appeal amongst foreign governments.

However, partisans of identity politics have successfully lessened Gandhi's stature in academic and intellectual circles in India and abroad by placing him within intersectional politics. The claim is that European colonialism has produced a global structure of subjugation called the caste-race nexus, which Gandhi embodies most fully. Just as in the West there have been calls to dislodge statues and monuments of racist figures, like campus activism around 'Rhodes Must Fall', these critics have welcomed Gandhi's fall. While the right has sought to replace Gandhi with Savarkar, for identity politics intellectuals and activists, that figure is Ambedkar. And yet Gandhi has made a comeback.

The case for relevance

India's citizens need not deify Gandhi; they must assess him for things he said and did in his time, some of which are offensive in our changed context. But Gandhi is more than his problematic views. He had a public career of five decades. He remained relevant for that long not because of his views but because of his basic insight that to change politics, we must work on its foundations: society, community, and the individual. This is what the right in India has done vigorously, capitalising on the fact that Gandhi's successors abandoned that space after independence. Forces that want decency and civility in public life, and accountability in politics, have discovered that they must start by changing what society should expect from politics, and that individuals should think of themselves as citizens with the right to demand accountability rather than subjects who must do as told. It is little surprise that they have found Gandhi useful. He is helping them develop those ideas and, most crucially, giving legitimacy to non-violent protest. It is proof that Gandhi survives in India's collective consciousness. He remains relevant to any social force that seeks bottom-up political change, for which India's neighbours too have shown a keen desire.

(The writer teaches international affairs at Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR)

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

The Nobel Prize in Literature for this year has been awarded to Canadian writer and poet Anne Carson. A quiz on the Prize and other literary laureates

Joan Sony Cherian

QUESTION 1
In 2018, no Nobel Prize in Literature was announced. It was postponed and awarded along with the 2019 Nobel. Why? Who won the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature?

QUESTION 2
Which singer-songwriter won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016?

QUESTION 3
This Nobel laureate's work includes *Sula*, *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Jazz*, etc. She was the first Black woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Name her.

QUESTION 4
An upcoming dystopian science fiction film directed by Taika Waititi is based on a book by a Nobel laureate. Name the book and the author.

QUESTION 5
This philosopher, political activist, and writer was the only awardee to decline the Nobel Prize in Literature. Name him.



Visual Question:
The image above shows this poet and novelist receiving the news that he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. However, he later rejected the award under pressure from his country. Name the author. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Ernesto Guevara was born on 14 June 1928 in which Argentine city on the Paraná river? **Ans: Rosario**

2. Where does the nickname "Che" come from? **Ans: It is an Argentine interjection meaning roughly "hey" or "mate." He used it so often that his Cuban comrades started calling him by it**

3. He was nicknamed "Fúser." What was it short for? **Ans: El Furibundo Serna ("the furious Serna")**

4. What was the nickname of the 1939 Norton 500 motorcycle on which he and Alberto Granado made their journey across South America? **Ans: La Poderosa II ("The Mighty One")**

5. In 1954, in which country did he watch a CIA-backed coup topple President Jacobo Árbenz? **Ans: Guatemala**

6. In 2007, it emerged that Mario Terán, the soldier who shot Che, had received what from Cuban doctors? **Ans: Free cataract surgery under Cuba's Operación Milagro (Operation Miracle). Terán had used a false name, and the story came out when his son placed a thank-you notice in a local newspaper**

Visual: Identify the photographer who captured this famous image of Che Guevara. **Ans: Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez, better known as Alberto Korda**

Early Birds: Aryansh Raj Saxena | Prem Raj P. | Saniya Shekh | Aman Kumar | Erfanally Oosmany



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of "vibes"? (P. Shivaji, Nidamangalam)
Well, first of all, "vibes" is the short form of "vibrations". When you talk about "vibes", you are referring to the good or bad feelings that you sometimes get when you meet a new person or when you walk into a strange place. You can't always explain why you like a certain person the moment you meet him/her; you just feel comfortable in the person's presence. Similarly, there are times when you walk into a strange place and you immediately feel at home. It's a question of chemistry. The good/bad feelings that you get are something that you sense intuitively. The word "vibes" is generally used in informal contexts.

Whenever I see Venkat, I get really bad vibes.

What is the meaning and origin of "talk nineteen to the dozen"? (G. Govind, Hyderabad)
When you say that someone is talking nineteen to the dozen, it means that the individual is speaking very fast. He/she is talking non-stop and very quickly. When we run into such a person, we usually end up with a headache.

Vijay and Madhavan went off together, talking nineteen to the dozen.

While the English tend to use this expression, the Americans on the other hand, say "talk a blue streak". It means the same thing as "talk nineteen to the dozen".

Alok didn't talk till he was six, and then he started talking a blue streak.

When you place an order for a dozen pastries, you usually expect to find twelve pieces. But if by some luck you find nineteen instead of twelve, how would you feel? You'd probably feel that you are very lucky. You know that you have got more than you paid for, an excessive amount. Similarly, when you talk nineteen to the dozen, what you are doing is talking excessively; you are talking too fast.

How do you pronounce the word "ubiquitous"? What does it mean? (B. Narayan, Chennai)
The first "u" is pronounced like the word "you", while the "i" in the second syllable is like the "i" in "bit", "pit," and "hit". The following "q..u..i..t" sounds like the word "quit", and the final "ous" is pronounced like the "ous" in "famous", "dangerous", and "courageous". The main stress is on the second syllable. When you say that something is "ubiquitous," what you are implying is that it is present everywhere. The word is generally used in formal contexts.

What is the origin of the word "villain"? (E. Sundar, Bangalore)
The word "villain" these days has a negative connotation. When it first began to be used, it was a neutral term. A "villain" was actually a poor person who lived on a farm; he lived in a "villa". When the word was borrowed into English as "villain," it was used to refer to any low-born rustic. The conditions in which these people lived were so bad that they often had to resort to crime to make ends meet. As time went on, anyone who lived in a "villa" was viewed suspiciously; he was considered to be a criminal. Soon the word "villain" began to be used with people with antisocial tendencies. It no longer mattered whether the individual lived in a villa or not. The class distinction was lost. Democracy at work, I guess. Nowadays the rich can be villains too.

Published in The Hindu on March 19, 2002

Word of the day

Pellucid:
transparently clear; easily understandable

Synonyms: lucid, comprehensible, coherent

Usage: *He has a pellucid way of explaining difficult ideas.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/pellucid

International Phonetic Alphabet: /pɪluːsɪd/

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

WEB EXCLUSIVE
US withdrawal leaves Iraq facing a new contest for power.
— *R Swaminathan*
Log on to www.indianexpress.com

WORDLY WISE
Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.
— *Marie Curie*

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RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

RBI's focus on inflation is timely

ON WEDNESDAY, with the Monetary Policy Committee of the Reserve Bank of India raising the repo rate by 25 basis points, it moved up from 5.25 per cent to 5.5 per cent. A higher repo rate is expected to make borrowing more costly for everyone and thus acts as a drag on economic activity. The decision to make the first hike of the repo rate since February 2023 was not only unanimous — all six members of the MPC voted in favour — but also widely expected. The less obvious but perhaps more consequential change was the shift in the RBI's stance from "neutral" to "calibrated tightening". The last time the RBI assumed this stance was exactly eight years ago.

The RBI's primary mandate, as Governor Sanjay Malhotra has underlined, is to ensure price stability while keeping in view economic growth. Since the last policy review in August, the situation has changed on both these counts, necessitating a change in policy. On economic growth, the Indian economy has surprised everyone by showing resilience despite a worsening global context. The 7.8 per cent growth in Gross Domestic Product during the first quarter (April, May, June) surprised on the upside when the data was released at the end of August. This has led the RBI to bump up the full-year (2026-27) forecast from 6.7 per cent, as pencilled in the August policy, to 7.1 per cent now. But notwithstanding the domestic growth momentum, the situation has become considerably more challenging from the point of view of inflation, thanks to the "sudden re-escalation of the West Asia conflict in September and the consequent hardening and volatility in global crude prices". Making the domestic inflation outlook worse are the deficient Southwest monsoon and El Niño conditions. Retail inflation has been going up steadily through the year, breaching the 4 per cent RBI target level. In fact, the RBI now expects it to touch 6 per cent by the end of December with full-year inflation around 5.2 per cent.

Given that growth is robust even as inflation is trending upwards and beyond the RBI target, raising the repo rate in a bid to dampen overall demand in the economy and prevent inflation becoming more broad-based is timely. What is even more welcome is the shift in the RBI's stance. It suggests that the RBI is squarely focussed on dealing with a possible spike in inflation. Simply put, interest rate cuts are off the table for the time being, and the RBI has signalled the start of a rate hike cycle, given that globally other central banks are expected to raise interest rates in the coming months.

The universe whispers through ghost particles

FOR CENTURIES, astronomy has essentially been the science of observing light. However, some of the universe's most consequential events take place in environments so dense or violent that photons cannot escape. Could the universe be observed through something other than light? In 1930, when Austrian physicist Wolfgang Pauli proposed the existence of an elusive particle to explain a mystery in radioactive decay, he was laying the foundations for a new way of exploring the cosmos. The ghost particle called the neutrino was detected two decades later, and the quest to understand it has since been rewarded with a string of Nobel Prizes. On Tuesday, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which awards the Nobel Prize in Physics, recognised another pioneer in the field — Belgian-American astrophysicist Francis Halzen. His work has used neutrinos to probe some of the universe's hitherto most inaccessible environments, helping open a new window on the cosmos.

Neutrinos have tiny masses, carry no electric charge and interact so weakly with matter that billions pass through the Earth — and our bodies — without leaving a trace. These particles can escape from the dense interiors of exploding stars and other extreme cosmic environments, carrying information about places that conventional telescopes cannot see. Halzen recognised this potential. His pioneering work led to the IceCube Observatory, an enormous neutrino detector buried deep beneath the Antarctic ice. Rather than building a conventional telescope, scientists effectively turned a cubic kilometre of natural ice at the South Pole into a detector, embedding more than 5,000 optical sensors in it. Almost every neutrino passes straight through the ice. But on the rare occasion when one sheds its shyness, the resulting flash of light can give information on the particle's travel path.

In 2013, IceCube provided evidence for a flux of high-energy neutrinos originating beyond the solar system. Halzen's work demonstrated that sometimes the way to see farther is not to build a more powerful eye, but to learn to detect what the universe is whispering through particles that pass silently through it. The next frontier is multi-messenger astronomy, in which neutrinos can be studied alongside light, gravitational waves and cosmic rays. Together, these cosmic messengers could reveal the workings of black holes, exploding stars and other extreme objects that remain invisible to any single form of observation.

She led the way to the top, that's her legacy

HARMANPREET KAUR'S contribution as captain of the women's cricket team cannot be measured only by the ODI World Cup trophy she lifted last year. It can be seen in the way the team began to carry itself on the biggest stages. When Harmanpreet took over, India had already reached two ODI World Cup finals. But there was still a sense that the team had to prove it belonged among the best. During her captaincy, the results began to follow more consistently. India reached the 2018 T20 World Cup semifinal, the 2020 T20 World Cup final and the 2023 T20 World Cup semifinal before going all the way in the 2025 ODI World Cup.

The journey was not smooth. Harmanpreet's batting became less consistent, and her decisions were often questioned. But she remained at the centre of the team through the difficult periods. Her leadership was driven by her passion for the game and a strong belief in the players around her. The World Cup win turned that belief into reality. Now, as Smriti Mandhana takes over, she inherits a team that has tasted success and knows what is expected at the highest level. Mandhana cannot and should not try to recreate Harmanpreet's leadership style. She will have to lead in her own way. But she will be expected to protect the confidence that has been built and take it further.

That is the challenge. Harmanpreet helped India believe it belonged at the top. Mandhana has to make sure that belief does not fade — and turns into a habit of winning. After back-to-back group-stage exits at the T20 World Cup, winning a title in the shortest format will be a priority.

Behind the central bank's pivot, need to safeguard price stability



DHARMAKIRTI JOSHI

THE SHIFT in stance by the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), accompanied by a rate hike in its October review, was hardly unexpected. Monetary policy is shaped principally by domestic growth and inflation dynamics, with global developments playing a secondary role. Recent developments on both fronts pointed towards a recalibration of policy. This year was marked by an unusual combination of shocks and uncertainties. Yet, despite the conflict in West Asia and unresolved tariff-related turbulence, India's economy has remained remarkably resilient. Growth has stayed robust, while inflation, particularly core inflation, has thus far been relatively contained. However, the balance of risks has begun to shift. Since the MPC's August review, upside risks to inflation have become more pronounced. Three factors stand out.

First, the conflict in West Asia, marked by repeated cycles of escalation and de-escalation, has kept commodity markets volatile. Recent developments have pushed up crude prices again, with the Indian crude basket, as estimated by the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell, returning to its April peak. Reflecting this, we now expect crude prices to average $88-93 per barrel this fiscal, compared with our earlier forecast of $82-87 per barrel. Even if geopolitical tensions ease, crude prices may remain elevated as damaged infrastructure is repaired and depleted inventories rebuilt. In such a scenario, another round of pass-through to domestic petrol and diesel prices appears likely. While higher pump prices could temper demand and ease pressure on oil marketing companies, they would also raise inflation through both direct and indirect channels.

Food inflation represents a second major vulnerability. Food prices are the most volatile component of India's inflation basket, and recent increases reflect both base effects and emerging supply concerns. To be sure, the relationship between monsoons and food inflation is not linear. Not every rainfall-deficient year has led to higher food inflation, and the government's free food programme for nearly 800 million people, alongside healthy rice buffer stocks, provides an important cushion.

Nevertheless, the 2026 monsoon has ended with rainfall 13 per cent below the long-period average and over 42 per cent of districts classified as deficient. The problem extends beyond the aggregate shortfall. The spatial distribution and timing of rainfall have been particularly unfavourable, making this one of the past decade's most disrupted monsoon seasons. The implications extend beyond the current kharif season. Weak monsoons can impair rabi production by reducing soil moisture and reservoir levels. As of October 1, reservoir storage was 12.2 per cent below normal and 20.4 per cent lower than a year earlier. Crisil's Deficient Rainfall Impact Parameter (DRIP) points to broad-based stress, with cotton, tur and bajra among the most vulnerable crops.

Intensifying El Niño conditions, combined with supply disruptions linked to the West Asia conflict, are exerting upward pressure on food prices worldwide. Of note is edible oil inflation, driven by weather-related disruptions in Southeast Asia and rising biofuel demand. According to the World Meteorological Organisation, the probability of a strong El Niño extending into early 2027 is close to certainty, raising the risk of extreme weather events and supply disruptions. Given that India imports over 55 per cent of its edible oil requirements, elevated global prices and currency weakness continue to keep domestic edible oil inflation elevated at around 20 per cent. The monsoon impact on agricultural output and food prices will remain one of the most important variables to monitor this year.

Inflation risks, however, are no longer confined to supply-side shocks. Demand-side pressures also appear stronger than previously anticipated. GDP growth in the first quarter was not only above trend but also exceeded previous expectations, and the second quarter is also doing well. Reflecting this momentum, the RBI has raised its growth forecast for this fiscal to 7.1 per cent from 6.7 per cent earlier. Crisil likewise expects growth of 7.0 per cent. The interaction between persistent supply shocks and strong demand warrants particular attention. Economic history suggests that when supply-driven price pressures coincide with robust growth, inflation often broadens beyond a narrow set of categories. Early signs of such generalisation are becoming visible in core inflation, with price pressures gradually spreading beyond food and fuel.

> Economic history suggests that when supply-driven price pressures coincide with robust growth, inflation often broadens beyond a narrow set of categories

Global developments reinforce the need for caution. Bond yields in advanced economies have risen much more sharply than in India, reflecting persistent inflation and growing concerns over fiscal sustainability. Consequently, the spread between US and Indian 10-year government bond yields has narrowed to roughly 200 basis points (bps), compared with over 400 a few years ago, reducing the relative attractiveness of Indian government securities for foreign investors. At the same time, major central banks remain in tightening mode. The US Federal Reserve raised rates by 25 bps in September, and markets continue to price in further tightening. The European Central Bank and the Bank of Japan have also maintained a tightening bias in response to persistent inflation pressures.

India's liquidity situation adds another layer of complexity. The RBI's efforts to mobilise foreign currency non-resident deposits have been highly successful, strengthening foreign exchange reserves and improving balance-of-payments resilience. But these inflows have also injected substantial liquidity into the financial system. Consequently, financial conditions eased through August, and liquidity remains abundant. This creates a degree of tension, albeit transitory, between prevailing monetary conditions and the tightening bias increasingly warranted by growth and inflation dynamics.

Taken together, these developments explain the RBI's policy shift. Inflation risks are becoming more broad-based, growth remains resilient, global monetary conditions continue to tighten, and domestic liquidity remains ample. Policymakers will need to remain highly vigilant on price developments. While future actions will remain data-dependent, the possibility of another rate hike this year can no longer be ruled out.

The writer is chief economist, Crisil

A changemaker — 25 years and counting



NRIPENDRA MISRA

OVER THE years, I had the opportunity to observe Narendra Modi closely, first as an administrator and later from within government. What struck me most was not any single policy decision, but the way he approached problems. Whether the issue was a sweeping national reform or an administrative bottleneck, his first instinct was always diagnosis. He rarely accepted a summary at face value. Instead, the questions would come quickly. What is happening on the ground? Why is it happening? What have you done so far? What is preventing a solution? The questions were designed to test assumptions. Once he understood a situation's reality, the shift from diagnosis to action was remarkably swift.

I saw this most clearly during demonetisation. The decision brought enormous logistical and economic challenges. Yet even while dealing with immediate pressures, Modi was already looking beyond the crisis itself. He saw an opportunity to accelerate digital payments across India. He did not view the challenge purely through a technological lens. He understood that ordinary citizens would not embrace digital transactions if commissions and transaction costs remained barriers. Rather than treating those costs as unavoidable, he pursued the issue directly with the Reserve Bank of India. That was characteristic of his approach: *Identify the obstacle. Understand what sustains it. Remove it.*

Modi places extraordinary value on preparation. A proposal might appear flawless on paper, but within minutes his questions would reveal whether the presenter truly understood the issue. I experienced that standard from the very beginning of my association with him. My first interaction with Modi was brief. Carrying a bouquet, I remarked that I was meeting a *yug purush*, a defining figure of our times. He laughed immediately and brushed aside the compliment, putting me at ease.

The more consequential encounter came in May 2014. The late Arun Jaitley called and asked me to report immediately to Gujarat Bhawan. True to form, Modi dispensed with formalities and asked me to examine the political structure of the Union government and recommend which ministries could be merged, streamlined or newly created to improve governance, particularly in the energy, skill and infrastructure sectors, core to India's future. Modi was looking for an answer: *Will this improve governance?* That became the lens through which every recommendation was tested. I noticed a fleeting look of disappointment at my presentation. He had expected graphics, not a stack of paper. It was an early indication of how naturally he gravitated towards technology, visualisation and contemporary tools one could touch, feel, and experience. Shortly afterwards, he conveyed to me that he intended to appoint me as his principal secretary.

Traditionally, the principal secretary accompanies the Prime Minister on official foreign visits. I suggested instead that I remain in Delhi, believing I could contribute more by overseeing matters at home while he travelled. His response surprised me. "You have lifted a heavy burden off my chest." Modi's work ethic recognises neither geography nor time zones.

He was also a keen observer. Ideas encountered abroad, whether in urban infrastructure, public spaces or museum design, often found their way into discussions about governance back home. That same instinct is visible in initiatives such as Yuge Yugeen Bharat. To Modi, a museum is not merely a repository of artefacts. It is a living institution that connects future generations with India's civilisational journey.

Looking back, it is not any single reform, programme or policy decision that best explains Modi to me. It is a habit of mind. He begins by asking what stands in the way. He refuses to accept "cannot" as an answer. He presses relentlessly until a solution emerges. I have seen that instinct applied to governance, technology, national security, foreign policy, welfare, culture and institution-building alike.

That combination of intellectual rigour, decisiveness, accountability and an unwavering focus on outcomes is what, in my view, distinguishes Narendra Modi. As a man who continues to redefine our era, PM Modi's mark will remain indelible in the annals of history.

> Looking back, it is not any single reform, programme or policy decision that best explains Modi to me. It is a habit of mind. He begins by asking what stands in the way

The writer is chairperson, Prime Ministers Museum and Library, and chairman, Temple Construction Committee, Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust. He served as principal secretary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi during 2014-2019

Where light stops, neutrinos begin



BIMAN NATH

FOR AN astronomer, light is the easy part: Hold up a lens or a mirror and starlight is yours. Neutrinos are another matter. Born in the most violent places in the cosmos, these ghost-like particles pass through most detectors almost without a trace. It took decades to turn a cubic kilometre of Antarctic ice into a telescope for these deep-space messengers. This year's Nobel Prize in Physics goes to the man who stayed with that hunt: Francis Halzen, a Belgian-born physicist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Why chase a particle so hard to catch? "You could see things in the universe you couldn't see any other way," Halzen said. Neutrinos barely interact, so they escape from deep inside their sources while light gets stuck on the way out. Think of a journalist trying to reach the one official who was in the room where a major policy was made. The press conference is easy to attend; that is astronomy with visible light. But the insider who knows what was really decided avoids reporters. Catching a neutrino is harder still.

The IceCube Neutrino Observatory in Antarctica has lowered 86 cables into the ice, the deepest reaching almost 2.5 km down. Each cable sports 60 sensitive light detectors, like beads strung on a thread. On rare occasions, a neutrino strikes a nucleus of an atom in the ice, and the collision generates high-energy particles. The particles move faster than light travels in ice, and generate a bluish flash, like a sonic boom of a supersonic jet. That glow, the signature of a far-travelling neutrino, is what the sensors pick up.

Such an instrument couldn't be built overnight. What Halzen himself once called a "cute idea" took smaller trials to hone the skill and show what a larger detector could potentially deliver. Conceived in the 1980s, the last cable in IceCube was dropped in 2010. Since then, it has been eavesdropping on far-away violent phenomena in the universe. Some strange galaxies, unlike our Milky Way, host massive black holes that churn the gas in their cores and spew spectacular jets. These accelerate high-energy particles called cosmic rays, which collide and produce neutrinos. These neutrinos point back to where cosmic rays are produced.

The discoveries at IceCube have been helping astronomers peek inside the core of these galaxies. In 2017, a single neutrino hurtled through the observatory. Its path indicated it was coming from the direction of the constellation Orion. Astronomers swiveled their telescopes in that direction and found a "blazar", a giant galaxy whose central black hole, weighing hundreds of millions of suns, spits out a jet aimed at Earth. The discovery gave a major boost to "multi-messenger" astronomy, where scientists use visible light, neutrinos, and gravitational waves to study the same cosmic event, pulling together the clues from "all the light we cannot see". Halzen, the principal investigator of this venture, has long been drawn to astroparticle physics, the area of research that marries astronomy with particle physics. But IceCube was never a one-man project: It is the work of an international collaboration of hundreds of scientists and engineers. Starlight can be caught with a mirror. Neutrinos take patience. IceCube received its first major expansion this year, and physicists are proposing a successor eight times its size. Somewhere out there, another neutrino is on its way. Thanks to Halzen and team, the ice is ready.

> Why chase a particle so hard to catch? 'You could see things in the universe you couldn't see any other way,' Halzen said

The writer, visiting professor, IISER Mohali, was an astrophysicist at Raman Research Institute, Bengaluru

40 YEARS AGO

October 8, 1986


INDIAN EXPRESS
Panel set up to probe attempt on PM's life
Army act to take over security

Probe into assassination bid

THE GOVERNMENT appointed a high-level committee headed by Cabinet Secretary B G Deshmukh to inquire into the attempt on the Prime Minister's life at Rajghat on October 2. The four-member committee will also suggest remedial measures to improve the PM's security system.

CBI detains six for questioning

THE CENTRAL BUREAU of Investigation (CBI) has rounded up for interrogation six people from Delhi and around in connection with the attempt on the Prime Minister's life on October 2. The detentions followed the disclosures by the assailant, Karamjit Singh, about his activities and associates in the Capital in the past few months. CBI sources said the man from whom Karamjit Singh bought the country-made pistol had been identified. "We are close on his heels," a CBI officer said.

No talks with GNLF chief

THE UNION Home Minister, Buta Singh, ruled out any talks with the president of the Gorkha National Liberation Front, Subhash Ghisingh. Replying to a question by newsmen , Singh asked, "Why should I talk with Ghisingh?"

Sensitive gravity data leaked

LEAKAGE OF militarily sensitive gravity data from the country, particularly relating to the Himalaya, is causing jitters in defence circles. There is concern about the security implications of sharing India's gravity data with other nations because the information is a crucial input for the accurate guidance of ballistic missiles to their targets. Anyone wanting to aim ballistic missiles at military targets in India must know in advance the gravity profile along the entire path of the missile to make a direct hit.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

On anniversary of October 7, only hope can bridge the Israeli abyss.

— *Haaretz, Israel*

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To fight in the arena, howsoever imperfect, is the only way to strengthen democracy



THAROORTHINK

BY SHASHI THAROOR

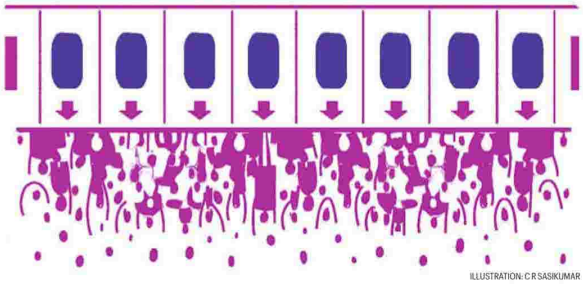


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

IN RECENT weeks, with the revelations about the Election Commission's troubling conduct and the disenfranchisement of 13 crore voters by unfair means, a provocative debate has emerged. Some are questioning whether opposition parties should continue participating in elections at all, under conditions they claim are fundamentally compromised. Critics point to the systematic erosion of democratic safeguards, the apparent capture of key institutions by *mala fide* elements, and a playing field tilted heavily in favour of the government. Why should the Opposition, they ask, legitimise a system they believe has been captured, by participating in a rigged process?

To these critics, continuing to contest elections under the present administration would be an empty ritual that grants a veneer of democratic legitimacy to what they characterise as a "managed democracy". They argue for an electoral boycott, saying such a course is rooted in moral clarity; by walking away from the ballot box, the Opposition would withhold the democratic stamp of approval that the ruling power relies upon to justify its authority both domestically and internationally. A boycott, from this perspective, is not an act of surrender, but a strategy of non-cooperation designed to expose institutional decay, delegitimise the regime, and shock the public into recognising an existential threat to our democracy.

Yet, this logic, however passionately argued, rests on a basic misreading of political power and the nature of state institutions. As the great French diplomat Talleyrand famously observed, "*les absents ont toujours tort*" — the missing ones are always wrong. To voluntarily withdraw from the electoral arena is not to delegitimise the governing power; it is simply to leave an uncontested field for political opponents to assume untrammelled control over the instruments of the state. In a system where power is derived from constitutional mechanisms, abandoning the battleground means forfeiting every leverage available to protect citizens, influence policy, and hold authority to account. A boycott does not stop the government machinery; it merely removes the challenges that an active opposition generates within it.

The historical precedent often invoked by proponents of boycotts — Gandhiji and the Indian freedom struggle — illustrates why such a strategy fails in a sovereign republic. Boycotts and civil disobedience were effective tools against British colonial rule because the oppressor was an occupying foreign power. In rejecting a subsidiary role that would have enabled colonial rule, the nationalists demonstrated its complete lack of moral authority. In that context, boycotts were meant to shame the colonial government by exposing the inadequacy of the limited representation it offered.

However, a strategy designed against an alien occupier cannot be applied to a sovereign democracy where political actors share a common citizenship and operate under a shared constitutional framework. The Indian National Congress itself recognised this distinction during the Independence movement. While it boycotted elections under the restrictive Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 to reject a flawed system that enshrined colonial tokenism, it actively chose to participate in the elections under the Government of India Act of 1935, despite limited franchise and communal electorates. Indian leaders recognised that refusing to contest would hand the right of representation to less worthy forces and abandon the public to unmediated colonial authority. In our contemporary constitutional system, choosing non-participation against domestic rivals is not a moral stand, but a spectacular act of self-emasculation.

> Even under imperfect conditions, election campaigns provide a unique platform to raise critical issues, expose executive overreach, and present alternative visions for the country

Beyond the misapplication of history, advocating electoral boycott ignores the practical realities of democratic survival. First, political parties are dynamic organisations sustained by public engagement, cadre morale, and local leadership. Abstaining from elections starves a party of its essential lifeblood. Without campaigns to organise around, candidates to field, or local offices to fight for, political cadres will disperse, local networks collapse, and financial resources dry up. Rebuilding an organisational machine after years of non-participation is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible. A party that retreats from the field of contestation rapidly renders itself irrelevant to the voters it seeks to represent.

Second, electoral participation remains the primary mechanism for public mobilisation and civic education. Even under imperfect conditions, election campaigns provide a unique platform to raise critical issues, expose executive overreach, and present alternative visions for the country. When opposition leaders take election campaigns to the streets, hold rallies, and debate policies, they keep democratic discourse alive. Ceding this space entirely to the ruling party guarantees that only one narrative reaches the public, further solidifying the government's grip on popular consciousness and leaving voters who are dissatisfied with the status quo without a voice or a vehicle for change.

Furthermore, participating in elections does not mean accepting institutional flaws with blind faith. Rather, it provides the necessary foundation for resisting them. History shows that electoral authoritarians and dominant parties are rarely weakened by moral appeals or voluntary abstentions; they are challenged, constrained, and ultimately defeated through persistent, organised resistance at the ballot box. Even in highly uneven contests across the globe, opposition participation has frequently exposed the limits of ruling power, forced unexpected concessions, created internal friction within ruling coalitions, and preserved institutional footholds that later served as launchpads for political renewal. Take Hungary this year: Despite facing an illiberal system engineered to entrench Viktor Orbán's rule, the Hungarian opposition refused to abandon the ballot box, contesting elections and exposing the regime's failings, ultimately mobilising to deliver a landslide victory. Illiberal autocracies are dismantled through competitive endurance, not voluntary retreat.

Democracy is not a fragile artefact that can be preserved by hiding it away from flawed contests; it is a muscle that strengthens only through continuous exercise. Complaining about electoral irregularities and demanding institutional accountability are not signs of naive credulity, but the necessary duties of a democratic opposition. To fight in the arena, despite the odds, biases, and structural disadvantages, is the only way for Indian democrats to safeguard the republic. To abstain from contesting would mean handing victory to those who seek to redefine the nation's destiny without resistance. We must not abandon the field to them.

The writer is a fourth-term Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram

Protect the referee, even as you question the decision



SHASHANK R JOSHI

IN EVERY game, you can abuse the player. You cannot abuse the referee. If you do, the game ends. Today in India, we are abusing the referee. The Election Commission of India (ECI) is not just another bureaucracy. It is the core of democracy. To protect it is not to support any party; it is to support the game itself. This wisdom is not new. It is in our Vedas, it was in Rome, and it was in Greece.

The Rig Veda does not start with a king. It starts with two institutions: *Sabha* and *samiti*. *Samiti* was the people — the voters. *Sabha* was the council of elders, the learned, the impartial who ensured the *samiti* could meet freely and choose freely. The Atharva Veda prays: *Sabha cha me samiti cha ma avatu* — may my *sabha* and *samiti* protect me.

The *sabha* had no army, no kingdom. Its power came from only one thing — trust. If the *sabha* was seen as biased, the *samiti* collapsed and the *janapada* broke. The ECI is our modern *sabha*. It has no seats to contest, no vote bank to protect. Its only capital is credibility. When we chip away at that credibility for political points, we are not hitting at an office in Nirvachan Sadan, but at the idea of *sabha* itself.

The Vedas also gave us a method: *Tarka* and *shastrartha*. Debate fiercely, but accept the decision of the *sabha*. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad shows King Janaka hosting a great debate where Yajnavalkya is questioned by everyone, including women scholars like Gargi. He answers. The debate ends, and his authority is higher, not lower, because he submitted to questioning. The ECI must be questioned. But after questioning, it must be obeyed. That is *dharma*.

The Romans were the greatest bureaucrats. They knew democracy needs a clean voter list more than a popular leader. They created the office of censor. The censor was not the consul who fought wars. He was more powerful. He prepared the census — the list of citizens. He could remove a senator by marking him with *nota censoria*. He was elected for 18 months, but his list lasted for 5 years. Why did Romans give so much power to two men who did nothing but count? Because they understood: If the voter list is corrupt, the republic is corrupt.



When we in India politicise the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, or the deletion and addition of voters, we forget Rome. A clean roll will always be painful. Someone's name will be deleted. Someone's booth will shift. That pain is the price of a republic. Attack the error with data, appeal to the ECI, go to court — but do not attack the censor itself. If the censor falls, the republic becomes an empire.

Athens, the mother of democracy, had a brilliant safeguard. They did not even trust elections fully. Most offices in Athens were filled not by election, but by "lot" — by lottery among citizens — under the supervision of the "eponymous archon". Why? Because they feared that elections could be manipulated by orators. Their safeguard was procedure. The archon did not decide who won; he ensured the "procedure" was followed.

The ECI is our archon. Its job is not to decide who should win — 140 crore Indians decide that. Its job is to ensure the lottery of democracy — the EVM, the VVPAT, the ink, the booth — remains pure. Every dharma is two-sided. If the players must not abuse the referee, the referee must also remember why it wears black. In the Vedic *sabha*, the elder did not speak more than necessary — he spoke through decisions, after listening to both sides. In Rome, the censor was respected because he applied *nota censoria* equally, even to his own kin. In Greece, the archon was trusted because he drew lots in the open *agora*, not behind closed doors. The referee protects itself best by transparency, by same-rule-same-speed for all jerseys, and by a dignified restraint that lets the order speak louder than the press note. The moment a referee starts explaining too much, defending too much, or being seen too much, the crowd begins to doubt the whistle. The referees work best when we see them stable, silent, and steady.

I am a doctor, not a psephologist. In the ICU, I see what happens when sodium — a single ion that no one notices — falls from 141 to 123. The body seizes and the brain starves. Sodium is invisible till it is low. The ECI is the sodium of our democracy. Invisible when it works, catastrophic when it fails. You can disagree with an order. That is your right in a democracy. File an affidavit, produce data, go to the Supreme Court. That is Vedic *tarka*, Roman *provocatio*, Greek *elenchus*. But do not call for burning down the office that guards the list. Rome tried that. When Augustus destroyed the power of the censors, the republic never returned. Protect the referee, even as you question the decision. That is the only way the game continues.

The writer is an endocrinologist and public health physician based in Mumbai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Restore trust

A STRONG democracy cannot afford an institution that displays opaqueness ('Can Election Commission untie knots of its own making? That's the question', *IE*, October 7). When civil servants, judges, and political parties alike question its authority, the foundation of electoral legitimacy shakes. The ECI must embrace transparency, consistency, and accountability to restore public trust. Ashok Lavasa rightly points out that inaction breeds contempt, reducing the ECI to a bureaucratic shell. By untangling its contradictions, the ECI can reaffirm itself as the unbiased guardian of India's democratic soul.

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE in elections depends greatly on the Election Commission's transparency and consistency ('Can Election Commission untie knots of its own making? That's the question', *IE*, October 7). The ECI should respond promptly to legitimate questions and ensure that its processes are easily understood by citizens and political parties alike. Courts and institutions must be able to scrutinise electoral decisions without unnecessary confrontation. Strengthening institutional accountability will help preserve the credibility and independence of the electoral process.

M Barathi, Bengaluru

Punish the guilty

THE CORNELL incident is another reminder of the deeply entrenched attitudes towards women that persist despite modernity and democratic institutions ('Cornell reminder on impunity, sexual violence', IE, October 7). Across India and elsewhere, women are increasingly speaking out on social media and public platforms against abuse, threats and humiliation. Rape threats and misogynistic abuse online are not merely offensive speech; they reflect a culture in which perpetrators often expect little consequence.

Tushar A Rahatgaonkar, Dombivali East



SHIBASHIS CHATTERJEE

Myth of the 'humane' execution

IN GOOD faith

IT IS hard to find a more surreal turn of events than what befell Christa Pike in Tennessee. The state prepared to execute her and gave her two doses of pentobarbital, but she survived. She was then taken from the prison to a hospital by ambulance, where doctors immediately began working to preserve her life, contrary to the state's recent actions. Pike's attorneys stated that medical personnel were attempting to remove the drug from her body. The woman found guilty of the horrific 1995 murder of 19-year-old Colleen Slemmer was reported to be unconscious, critically ill, and on a ventilator.

This represents a confrontation between the two sides of the contemporary state. In one place, authorities apply chemicals intended to cause death. In another, medical professionals employ their expertise and technology to preserve that same life. If Pike recovers, an even stranger question emerges: Can the state prepare to execute someone its medical system has just fought to save?

To make this an issue of sympathy for Pike would miss the point. Her crime was appalling. No serious discussion of capital punishment should diminish Slemmer's suffering or disregard the claims of victims and their families. The moral challenge of the death penalty stems exactly from the fact that the crimes are often so horrific. The question is: What can a constitutional state do once guilt is confirmed?

> If Christa Pike recovers, an even stranger question emerges: Can the state then prepare to execute someone its medical system has just fought to save?

American law has faced this dilemma before, if not under these circumstances. Willie Francis survived an attempt to execute him in the electric chair by the state of Louisiana, because there was a malfunction of equipment in 1946. The US Supreme Court in *Francis vs Resweber* (1947) held that a botched execution was accidental and not a separate punishment, thus permitting a second attempt. However, Justice Felix Frankfurter added a crucial caveat: "A series of abortive attempts" might create what he called an altogether different constitutional problem. Now that the condemned has reached death's door and been gravely injured again, what purpose does it serve to bring her there a second time? One might ask: When does administering justice become a demand for a deed to be performed?

Further, lethal injection owes its acceptance, in part, to medicalisation. A prisoner is positioned on what appears to be a hospital gurney. Death looks like the evisceration of a grotesque tumour. However, medicine and execution have utterly opposite moral foundations. Medicine interposes itself to preserve life or ease suffering, while execution is an intervention that can only remove a life.

The Pike case also unsettles the reassuring language of "humane" or "painless" executions. The US Supreme Court ruled that the Eighth Amendment does not ensure a painless death. But Pike's situation is not just about faulty needles or incorrect dosing. The question is whether any institution deliberately created to kill can genuinely attain the moral standing of a routine medical procedure.

By the close of 2025, 113 countries had completely abolished capital punishment for all offences. In contrast, the US carried out 47 executions that year, marking its highest yearly total since 2009. Wherever it is found in constitutional democracies, the continued use of capital punishment is becoming increasingly unusual. The reason the state holds a monopoly on legitimate violence is to substitute personal revenge for impartial justice. Yet, by intentionally ending that life, the state prevents any chance for remorse, restoration, or remedy.

As you read this, Tennessee faces the question of whether to pursue Pike's execution again. In the end, the law will probably permit this. But legality is not the only form of justice. Surely, there comes a time when even the constitutional state, having attempted and failed to end human life lawfully, acknowledges the boundaries of its authority, as sovereignty can also be demonstrated through restraint — the ability not only to wield its immense power but also to understand when and how to stop.

The writer is professor, Jadavpur University



NEGHA AND PRIYA ANGAMUTHTHU

In every trans woman's life, there is a Dorothy

A SOCIETY disturbed by a kiss must first ask why it is unable to see a trans woman's pain, love, and humanity. The Tamil film *Dorothy*, directed by Karthik Subbaraj, engages with a society still struggling to recognise transgender people as complete human beings. What troubles us is not the debate surrounding the film, but what this has chosen to focus on. A story exploring caste, patriarchy, family, systemic violence, toxic masculinity, and gender politics has been reduced to one question: How can a trans woman kiss a man?

Why does that kiss spark such moral panic? Calling it "two men kissing" reveals a refusal to recognise a trans woman as a woman. But beyond that, why should intimacy cause such discomfort? Set in the 1990s, *Dorothy* reminds us of the real-life Dorothys whose stories were never documented, living through an era where gender, caste, and class inflicted severe violence on women's bodies. Through a sharp intergenerational lens, Subbaraj confronts a centuries-old system now struggling to digest the truth. This conflict forces a deeper inquiry into identity: Who is Dorothy to Subbu? Is she a mother? A sister? A sister-in-law?

Before demanding answers, society must face a simpler question: Do you accept Subbu as Dorothy? Change is not an overnight process, but opposing and ignoring the struggles of another human remains deeply inhumane. A section of viewers forgets how Subbu struggled to guard her *kaitiakitanga*, her protective, nurturing femininity in a male-dominated world, only to obsess over a single kiss in the final scene. In truth, Dorothy represents the collective feminine that nurtures and protects a trans woman's emerging identity. In real life, Dorothy takes many forms: Mothers, mentors, female educators. In every trans woman's life, there is a Dorothy; most often, she is another woman.

Music is a vital pillar of this sanctuary. For decades, mainstream Tamil cinema offered transgender and queer people little more than ridicule. In *Dorothy*, Ilaiyaraaja's score feels like a balm to those wounds. Music provides a space where trans women safely explore their identity, historically through Ilaiyaraaja and Swarnalatha compositions like 'Enulle enulle', and 'Muthumani', now a trans anthem. In many ways, Ilaiyaraaja himself embodies Dorothy through the emotional shelter his art bestows.

> For decades, mainstream Tamil cinema offered transgender and queer people little more than ridicule. In 'Dorothy', Ilaiyaraaja's score feels like a balm to those wounds

The film's visual grammar speaks volumes. Karthik's choices such as the slow-motion parotta and salna sequence or the sharp presence of the *chappathi kalli* (prickly pear cactus) vividly convey the weight of toxic masculinity enforced upon trans bodies.

This depth extends to performance and casting. Sanath's performance deserves appreciation for its vulnerability and commitment. Yet, when cisgender actors consistently receive accolades for portraying transgender characters, it raises an undeniable question: Where does that leave trans actors who have spent years fighting simply to be cast? At the same time, *Dorothy*'s inclusion of trans actors and the international platform given to artists like Jeeva is meaningful. True representation must extend beyond who plays the lead; it must be about who gets access to opportunities.

Dorothy is a gift and a necessary step forward. To shift the collective consciousness and urge the public to view every person as human, Tamil cinema needs hundreds of more films like *Dorothy*, *Super Deluxe*, and *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu*.

Negha is an actor, writer, and co-founder of Queer Casting, Angamuthtthu is a law student

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• GLOBAL

Bolsonaro Jr's 'Trump card' over Lula in Brazil polls

Rishika Singh
New Delhi, October 7

IN THE first round of Brazil's presidential elections on Sunday, incumbent President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Flávio Bolsonaro received 45% and 47% of the vote, respectively. Since neither won over 50% of the vote but still secured the most votes among all candidates, they will go head-to-head in another round of voting on October 25.

Flávio Bolsonaro is the son of former President Jair Bolsonaro, who won the 2018 elections and rejected the 2022 loss to Lula. In 2023, Bolsonaro Sr's supporters stormed government offices in the capital, Brasília, evoking visuals of US President Donald Trump's supporters attacking the US Capitol in 2021. Jair Bolsonaro is serving a 27-year sentence in relation to the attempted 2023 coup.

The Bolsonaro clan

Flávio Bolsonaro, 45, is a lawyer by training. A senator from Rio de Janeiro, he bears a striking physical resemblance to his polarising father. In the 2022 election, the closest in Brazil's history, Lula received 50.9% of the votes against the senior Bolsonaro's 49.1%. Jair Bolsonaro's supporters saw him as a conservative, pro-business politician who would "tell it like it is", similar to other populist right-wing leaders globally. Among his key policies was relaxing protections for the Amazon rainforest to encourage commercial activities. His vow to combat graft was notable, since his rise was fuelled by mainstream political figures getting implicated in major corruption scandals.


Flávio Bolsonaro, 45, is a lawyer by training. AP

Jair Bolsonaro is also known to make homophobic and misogynistic statements. He was also criticised for his handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, with Brazil having the second-highest death toll among countries, after the US.

The Bolsonaros have enjoyed voter support among more well-off groups, the more conservative Evangelical Christians, and the country's southern regions. On the other hand, Lula, 80, is a veteran socialist now contesting for a fourth term with supporters such as Catholics, progressives and poorer groups. Flávio has criticised Lula for not being tough enough on crime and drug gangs.

The Trump factor

Since Jair Bolsonaro's presidential term, which partly overlapped with the first Trump administration, Trump has publicly supported him owing to their similar ideology and disdain for critics. He met Flávio Bolsonaro earlier this year, calling him a "smart young man, who loves his country, Brazil, very much". Within months of his second term, Trump announced 50% tariffs on imports from Brazil in July 2025 for "threats" to the US. The executive order also noted that Brazilian officials were "persecuting" Jair Bolsonaro and that this "contributes to the deliberate breakdown in the rule of law in Brazil".

Trump has earlier warmed up to other strongman leaders globally, with vocal support for those from South America. Another example is Argentina's Javier Milei. This approach is also in line with the US National Security Strategy, released in 2025. It laid out intentions for the US to be dominant in the Western Hemisphere. its effects were seen in the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

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• NOBEL PRIZE IN CHEMISTRY

Mirror-image molecules and the chemistry of life

Some molecules exist in two forms, but life's building blocks use only one. Soai and Kagan showed how to make just that form in labs — crucial for medicines


Amitabh Sinha

CERTAIN MOLECULES exist in two forms, each a non-superimposable mirror image of the other — like the left and right hands of human beings. Chemically, the two forms are the same in the sense that they are composed of the same set of atoms, connected in the same order. The difference is only in the relative three-dimensional arrangement of those atoms, such that one happens to be the mirror image of the other.

This structural asymmetry, called chirality, becomes particularly interesting in biology. Many of the fundamental molecules in biology, like the amino acids that make up proteins or the sugars in DNA, appear in only one form. The mirror image versions of these amino acids or the sugars do exist, but they are rarely used in these biological settings. This preference for homochirality in life forms has intrigued scientists for long.

This year's Nobel Prize in Chemistry has been awarded to two scientists, Henry Kagan and Kenso Soai, for demonstrating how this homochirality can emerge.

The normal chemical processes used to produce a chiral molecule results in the production of both forms, called enantiomers. Kagan developed a way of manipulating these processes in such a manner that one form was produced in much greater proportion than the other. Soai took a step further and designed the first chemical reaction in which only one of the enantiomers was produced. Outside of biological processes, such a result had never been achieved.

The first breakthrough

The propensity of biochemistry to prefer one particular enantiomer over the other was initially thought to be something unique for life forms. After all, when chiral molecules were produced in laboratories, a mixture of both enantiomers was obtained in almost even proportions. However, way back in the early 1900s, German chemist Willy Marckwald had been successful in carrying out a chemical reaction in which the proportion of the yields of the two enantiomers was slightly asymmetric.

Marckwald had used a catalyst — a chemical that speeds up the reaction without itself getting consumed into it — which itself was chiral. And this had led to one mirror-image form being produced more than the other.

However, subsequent attempts to increase the asymmetry in the yields of the two enantiomers remained unsuccessful. Besides, scientists still did not understand how the use of a chiral catalyst was affecting the reaction in a manner that one enantiomer was produced in greater quantity.

It was Kagan, working in the 1980s, who eventually answered these questions. Before him, it was believed that there was a linear relationship between the catalyst's chirality and the proportion in which the two forms of the product were produced. In other words, if the catalyst itself contained a disproportionate amount of one form, this would get reflected in the proportions of the final product as well.

Kagan was able to show that this was not true, and that much greater asymmetry in production could be achieved even if the catalyst was only mildly chiral. In the process he was also able to demonstrate the internal dynamics of how this was happening.

The next step

This breakthrough created a new excitement in the field. While studying one of the chemical reactions that had produced one particular enantiomer in large quantities, Soai realised that there were significant similarities in the catalyst used and the final product. That prompted him to explore autocatalytic reactions — chemical reactions in which the final products themselves act as catalysts.

None of the autocatalytic reactions known at the time Soai started experimenting with them in the 1990s were known to produce asymmetric formation of enantiomers. After about a decade of trying, he finally succeeded in carrying out an autocatalytic reaction that resulted in the production of one particular enantiomer, which then formed copies of itself in a self-replicating process. The final product contained 99.5% of one enantiomer, a result comparable to the kind of preference seen in biological processes for a particular version of a chiral molecule.

Mysteries of life

The work of Kagan and Soai has demonstrated that homochirality can be obtained in the laboratory as well. It was not exclusive to nature. Their work does not solve the origin of the puzzle of life — how biological processes themselves preferred homochirality. But it did open up fresh avenues for scientists to try and understand the chemistry of life.

Possibly the biggest practical implication of their work has been in the pharmaceutical industry. Many drug molecules are chiral, and it matters immensely which particular enantiomer has to be used.

This is because the human bodies prefer only those enantiomers. The other variety of molecule might not just be ineffective, they can even be harmful.

Before this Nobel Prize-winning work showed how one single enantiomer could be produced, pharma companies had been manufacturing the drug molecules as a mixture of both enantiomers, and then the desirable enantiomer was separated through a separate process. This was an expensive, wasteful and often technically difficult way of achieving the final result.

The asymmetric synthesis of a particular enantiomer, as shown by Kagan and Soai, is already being used widely by the pharmaceutical industry. This is relevant for the manufacturing of all other substances that are meant to interact with living organisms, including flavours, fragrances and agricultural chemicals like pesticides.

• 'FOR THE DISCOVERY OF NON-LINEAR EFFECTS AND AUTOCATALYSIS IN ASYMMETRIC ORGANIC SYNTHESIS'


"Like hands, all amino acids exist as two mirrored variants, but only one of them is found in the proteins in your cells. The other is rarely found in nature."


HENRI B KAGAN, 96
Professor Emeritus at then Université Paris-Sud, France


KENSO SOAI, 76
Professor Emeritus at Tokyo University of Science, Japan

WHEN MIRROR-IMAGE MOLECULES HARMED BABIES

A DRUG FOR MORNING SICKNESS: Thalidomide was introduced in the late 1950s and marketed by a West German pharma company as a sedative. It was widely prescribed, including to pregnant women for morning sickness.



BIRTH DEFECTS: By 1961, doctors had linked the drug to severe birth defects. Thousands of babies across 46 countries were affected, many with phocomelia, in which limbs are severely shortened or absent.

THE MIRROR-IMAGE PROBLEM: Thalidomide exists as two mirror-image molecules, or enantiomers. One caused birth defects while the other produced the desired effects. Later, it was found the two forms can interconvert (change into each other) in the body.

ON THURSDAY: NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

Some key terms

Chirality: The phenomenon of molecules existing in mirror-image forms — much like your left and right hands.

•

Homochirality: The preference for one mirror-image form of a molecule in life forms.

• LEGAL

Detention vs arrest: The extent and limits of police's powers

Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, October 7

LEADER OF Opposition Rahul Gandhi was detained on Wednesday as Opposition leaders protested in New Delhi demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar over alleged irregularities in the Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise.

This was the second time in as many days that the Congress leader had been detained. Since October 2, the Delhi Police has detained hundreds of protesters.

How does detention differ from arrest?

Police are empowered to maintain law and order, particularly during protests and demonstrations. In practice, this may sometimes look like an arrest and at other times a detention, often because these terms are used interchangeably.

"Arrest" is a formal act of police taking a person into custody in connection with an offence, marking the beginning of criminal proceedings. Once a person is arrested, a range of constitutional and statutory safeguards immediately come into play.

The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (or BNSS, which replaced the Code of Criminal Procedure or CrPC) does not define "detention" per se. Instead, it gives police a set of powers that allows them to stop, remove or temporarily hold people in certain situations. This is why disputes arise after protests. Someone may be taken away by police, kept in custody for several hours, and released without any case being registered. To the person involved, it can feel very much like an arrest. Legally, however, police may say that they were exercising preventive powers rather than arresting the individual for an offence.

Senior Advocate Sanjay Hegde drew a distinction between a formal arrest and the short-term custody often seen during protests. "They are temporarily not allowed to leave wherever they are detained, and they are not put under a formal arrest either," he told *The Indian Express*.

Advocate Soutik Banerjee told *The Indian Express* that the distinction is often used to avoid the scrutiny that accompanies a formal arrest. "The police know that the power to arrest cannot be exercised casually when there is no cognizable offence punishable with more than seven years being committed by the protestors. If they are arrested, courts will come down heavily on them," he said.

A cognizable offence is one for which police can arrest without a warrant.

SECTION 170 of the BNSS allows preventive action before any offence is committed. A police officer, "knowing of a design to commit any cognizable offence may arrest, without orders from a magistrate and without a warrant, the person so designing, if it appears to such officer that the commission of the offence cannot be otherwise prevented".


PRAVEEN KHANNA
Gandhi at Jantar Mantar on Wednesday

Your rights

- Article 22 of the Constitution deals with protection of an accused against arrest and detention.
- It requires production of an accused person before a magistrate within 24 hours; information about the grounds of arrest; and the right to have legal representation. The Supreme Court, in multiple cases, has held that written grounds of arrest must be furnished.

SECTION 172 of the BNSS says a police officer "may detain or remove any person resisting, refusing, ignoring or disregarding" a lawful direction. The officer must then take the person before a magistrate or, in petty cases, release them within 24 hours.

Unlike the earlier CrPC, this provision expressly allows police to "detain or remove" a person who refuses to comply with a lawful direction. "Section 172(2) BNSS is new. The CrPC had no equivalent," Hegde said. "The CrPC let police prevent cognizable offences and arrest to prevent them. It did not bind citizens to obey police directions, nor let police detain those who refused. Section 172 adds both... The idea came from state police statutes, not the CrPC. The 24-hour limit was itself a late addition."

The practice of briefly taking protesters into custody is different from "preventive detention" — which allows a person to be held without trial under special laws such as the National Security Act.

When can police detain people?

Most protest-related detentions begin with a claim that police are trying to prevent a law and order problem.

Often, there is already a prohibitory order in place. On October 2, the Delhi Police imposed Section 163 of the BNSS across New Delhi. If protestors refuse to disperse or continue activities prohibited by such an order, police may invoke preventive powers to remove them from the spot or hold them temporarily. Disobeying such an order is itself an offence under Section 223 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (or BNS, which replaced the Indian Penal Code or IPC). That is the point at which a detention can turn into an arrest with an FIR.

Courts have, however, said that such actions cannot be arbitrary. Police must be able to explain why restricting a person's liberty was necessary. The Supreme Court, in *Joginder Kumar v. State of UP* (1994) held that "the existence of the power to arrest is one thing" and "the justification for the exercise of it is quite another". In *Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar* (2014), the court told police not to arrest automatically in offences punishable up to seven years. In *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan v. Union of India* (2018) the court held that restrictions on protests should be regulatory rather than eliminating the right to protest altogether.

• HISTORY

'Greatest headache': Constituent Assembly on appointing Election Commission


EXPERT EXPLAINS
Indu Bhushan
FORMER IAS OFFICER AND ECONOMIST

ON JUNE 15, 1949, a little-remembered member of the Constituent Assembly named Shibban Lal Saxena rose to object to a deceptively simple clause. The draft Constitution said the President would appoint India's Election Commissioners. In a parliamentary system, Saxena pointed out, that meant the government of the day would effectively be choosing the referee for its own contests.

"It is quite possible that some party in power who wants to win the next election may appoint a staunch party-man as the chief Election Commissioner," he warned.

Saxena said he wasn't accusing anyone and even called the sitting Prime Minister lucky to have the independence and impartiality he did. But that, he said, was exactly the problem with resting a constitutional safeguard on the character of one man. "We are making a Constitution for ever, and not only for today," he said.

Saxena proposed that appointing an Election Commissioner should require a two-thirds majority in Parliament: not to make the Commission answerable to Parliament, but to make it impossible for one party to install its own nominee. The Assembly voted his proposal down. But the warning stayed on the record.

The next day, H N Kunzru pushed further. Provincial governments had been kept out of election administration because they might be politically biased. Fair enough, he said — but why assume the Central Government would be any less capable of bias?

Kunzru wanted safeguards strong enough that Commissioners could act "fearlessly", and then delivered a stark warning: "Worked by people whose integrity cannot be depended upon, democracy will be poisoned at the source."

The eventual compromise

Even B R Ambedkar didn't dismiss the concern. He called it one of the Drafting Committee's "greatest headaches". He considered borrowing the American model, where the Senate confirms presidential appointments, but worried it would import its own political games.

The eventual compromise: the Constitution would establish the Election Commission and shield the Chief Election Commissioner from easy removal, but leave Parliament to legislate the actual appointment mechanism. That became Article 324 — a foundation with the front door deliberately left unlocked.

For 74 years, Parliament never walked through that door. No law was passed. Then, in 2023, the Supreme Court did what Parliament hadn't: in Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India, it ruled that until Parliament acted, appointments should be recommended by a committee of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the Chief Justice of India (CJI), a structure built to keep any one side from controlling the outcome.

Parliament did act. The Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023, replaced the CJI on the selection panel with a Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the Prime Minister. Now, two of three seats on the committee effectively answer to the same person.

The perception of impartiality

None of this proves an Election Commissioner appointed under the new law will act improperly, or that the Commission has turned partisan. But it does raise a legitimate constitutional question, and it's almost exactly the one Saxena and Kunzru asked in 1949: does this appointment mechanism give the government enough distance from the body that referees elections involving the government itself?

Simply put: In an election, the government is one of the contestants. The Election Commission is the referee. The question was never whether the referee will actually favour one side. Actually, most of the time, individual Commissioners will do their jobs honestly. The question is whether a system that lets one contestant hold disproportionate sway over who gets to referee should be designed.

This is precisely why Saxena refused to let the Constitution's safeguards depend on who happened to be Prime Minister at the time. His argument was structural, not personal. It's a design principle, not a character judgment, and it holds regardless of who sits in which chair today. The system should be such that the selection of the referee should not only be impartial but also appear to be so.

This controversy isn't really about any individual Commissioner's competence or integrity. It's about whether the architecture of appointment produces both the right incentives and the right perception — because in institutions of this kind, the appearance of independence often matters as much as the fact of it. A referee no one fully trusts is, for practical purposes, no referee at all.

Seventy-seven years after Kunzru's warning against a flawed electoral machinery, the argument has looped back to that exact source: who chooses the people who run the machinery? The Constituent Assembly saw the danger clearly, debated it seriously, and then — perhaps wisely, perhaps not — left the final answer to a Parliament that would one day have to decide for itself.

Whether Parliament decided well is the debate we are having today, but what's striking is how little the terms of that debate have changed. Sometimes, the sharpest commentary on the present isn't written by today's columnists at all. It was spoken, on the floor of the Constituent Assembly, by those who could not have known exactly how the future would test their words, only that it eventually would.

MPC'S AUG 5, OCT 7 DECISIONS WERE BOTH UNANIMOUS

Dovish in August to hawkish: How MPC flipped in 2 months

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, October 7

IT WAS almost a foregone conclusion that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) would increase the policy repo rate by 25 basis points (bps) to 5.5% on Wednesday. What was not as widely expected was that the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) would also make the policy stance more restrictive — from 'neutral' to 'calibrated tightening'.

This shift is important. As Governor Sanjay Malhota said, interest rate cuts are now "off the table in the near term."

According to Madhavi Arora, Chief Economist at Emkay Global Financial Services, the change means RBI has "clearly prepared markets for a higher-for-longer interest rate environment".

While some economists did and continue to predict only a shallow rate hike cycle of 50 bps or so, markets had already priced in a long-ish hiking cycle of at least 100 bps. This was despite the MPC's unexpected dovishness in August, when it said there were "little signs of generalisation of price pressures so far" — an assessment that left some economists unconvinced.

Generalisation of inflation means higher prices spreading to other parts of the CPI basket.

A stark example of this generalisation has been seen recently: with commercial cooking gas getting expensive after the start of the West Asia war, restaurants and cafes sharply increased prices on their menu.

Consider the following: the number of items in the CPI basket whose inflation was more than 4% was 65 in January and rose to 110 in August. Moreover, prices of 314 of the 358 items were higher in August compared to July. In February, this number was 236. Data for September may show more of the same.

Little change in data

When the MPC last met, it had with it the Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation data for June, which had risen to 4.38% from 3.93% in May.

Meanwhile, Wholesale Price Index (WPI) inflation had edged up similarly to 9.87% from 9.68%.

Since then, inflation developments on both fronts have not been outsized; while retail inflation has risen to 4.82% in August, wholesale prices rose by 9.92%.

The RBI is mandated to target a CPI inflation rate of 4% in the medium-term in a band of 2-6%.

Of course, the MPC must be forward-looking and take a view on what it thinks inflation might be a year or so down the line because interest rate changes impact growth and inflation with a delay of 9-12 months. However, the RBI's own projections have not moved dramatically.

"The Governor's statement emphasising that average inflation of 5.8% over the next three quarters with core inflation projected at 4.4% needs policy recalibration reinforces the hawkishness," said Puneet Pal, PGIM India Mutual Fund's Head of Fixed Income. Pal expects incrementally 75-100 bps of rate hikes over the next nine months.

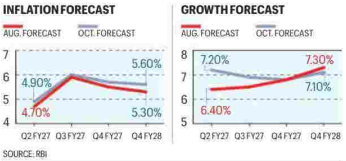
But even back in August, these forecasts were not markedly different. Retail inflation was expected to average almost 5.6% in the three quarters starting October, while core inflation was seen at 4.3% this fiscal. But it is only now that the MPC sees "some evidence of elevated inflation expectations and generalisation of inflation".

What has materially changed is the growth outlook and major central banks having raised their own policy rates.

But the central bank focuses on domestic inflation and growth developments. And signs have been apparent for a while now that price pressures are spreading due to weak rains, the El Nino, and higher memory chip prices, among other factors. The reasons behind the MPC's turn between August and now may explain what lies ahead.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

How CPI, growth forecasts have changed



SOURCE: RBI

Repo rate hikes to continue, SBI sees 50 bps jump by Dec

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, October 7

THE RESERVE Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee is widely expected to keep increasing interest rates in the coming months after kicking off the tightening cycle on Wednesday, with Soumya Kanti Ghosh, State Bank of India's Group Chief Economic Adviser, calling for a 50-basis-point hike either in the December 2-4 meeting or even before that.

"Given the steepening inflation trajectory currently underway, we believe that the December policy cycle could mostly deliver a jumbo 50 bps rate hike depending on the global conditions," Ghosh said in a report. "Given that global conditions are likely to turn volatile soon, the window of opportunity of RBI rate hike in small increments must be avoided. A 6% repo rate by December could be the best possible option." According to SBI's estimates, headline retail inflation may peak at 6.8% in November, data for which will be released around a week after the MPC announces its next interest rate decision.

Rate cuts 'off the table'

On Wednesday, the MPC raised the repo rate for the first time in over three-and-a-half years, with its 25-bps increase taking the policy rate to 5.5%. The committee also made its 'stance' more restrictive, changing it to 'calibrated tightening' from 'neutral', which means "rate cuts are off the table in the near term and policy action ahead can only be a rate hike or a pause, depending on the evolving conditions and the outlook". The central bank also raised its inflation forecast for the current fiscal to 5.2% from 5%, peaking at an average of 6% in the October–December quarter. The MPC also noted that there is "some evidence of elevated inflation expectations and generalisation of inflation", marking a departure from its assessment in August that there were "little signs of generalisation of price pressures so far".

25 bps hike in Dec?

SBI's Ghosh is in the minority with his call to increase the repo rate by 50 bps on December 4 or even before that. A snap poll of 15 economists showed the consensus view is for two more rate hikes of 25 bps each — amounting to a 50 bps rise in the repo rate — over the next six months or so.

Economists widely expect the MPC to raise the repo rate by another 25 bps to 5.75% in December. Some, such as HSBC economists led by Pranjul Bhandari, continue to predict only one more rate hike of 25 bps later this year.

"Yes, there is risk of another, especially if growth remains resilient despite a strengthening El Niño. But for now, we don't see this as a deep rate hiking cycle," they said. "Implicit in this is our belief that interest rate hikes are not being prioritised to shore up the INR. Instead, they are being used for lowering inflation (which in turn, may have a positive impact on the INR)."

The rupee fell on Wednesday, closing at 96.78-per-dollar after having fallen as low as 96.86 — not far from its all-time low of 96.96. Responding to a query on the exchange rate at a press conference, Governor Sanjay Malhotra said financial markets could be "irrational" in the short term, with some indicators suggesting the rupee was undervalued.

More than 2 rate hikes?

A small number of economists also see the repo rate being raised by another 75-100 bps. According to Suyash Choudhary, Bandhan Mutual Fund's Chief Investment Officer of Fixed Income, the current global macro environment is "exceptionally hawkish" for a country such as India that imports energy, maintains a current account deficit, and needs its "fair share" of dollar inflows.

"In the present case higher global real yields and broad-basing commodity pressures provide limited degrees of freedom for RBI. Our view is of total rate hikes of 100–125 bps including the one done today," Choudhary added.

Long-term cost of homeownership set to increase



Household budget strain

THE RBI'S repo rate is the price at which banks borrow from the central bank. When that rate rises, borrowing costs across the financial system tend to move up

ON A Rs 50 lakh home loan for 20 years, a 25-basis-point increase can mean roughly Rs 780 more in monthly EMI and nearly Rs 1.88 lakh in additional interest outgo

George Mathew
Mumbai, October 7

A 25-BASIS-point repo rate hike may look insignificant on paper. For a homebuyer, it is anything but small.

On a Rs 50 lakh home loan taken for 20 years, a 25-basis-point increase can mean roughly Rs 780 more in monthly EMI and nearly Rs 1.88 lakh in additional interest outgo over the life of the loan, experts say.

For a household already struggling to make the down payment and qualify for a loan, the RBI's rate decision can turn an affordable home into a big liability.

Pain does not stop with EMI

The RBI's repo rate is the price at which banks borrow from the central bank. When that rate rises, borrowing costs across the financial system tend to move up. Floating-rate home-loan borrowers are particularly exposed because their interest rates are linked, directly or indirectly, to benchmark rates — repo rate. The increase can either push up the EMI or force the borrower to stay indebted for longer. According to experts, banks may choose to increase the loan tenure rather than allow the EMI to jump sharply. That may soften the immediate monthly shock, but it is hardly a free lunch. A longer tenure means the borrower remains in debt for more years and can end up paying considerably more interest. For first-time homebuyers, the problem is even more severe. Loan eligibility is determined partly by the borrower's income and repayment capacity. Higher interest rates reduce the amount a household can borrow for the same EMI.

Banks raise external benchmark linked lending rates

Mumbai: Several banks revised their external benchmarked linked lending rates (EBLR) by 25 basis points (bps) after the Reserve Bank of India on Wednesday hiked the repo rate by 25 bps to 5.50%, the first hike in nearly three-and-a-half years. These revised EBLR rates will be in effect from October 8.

EBLR linked loans primarily consist of retail loans, personal loans and MSME loans. FE

RBI Gov says UPI volumes to remain firm despite MDR

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, October 7

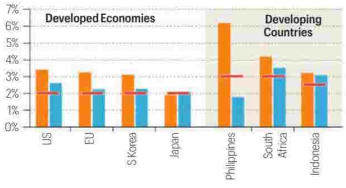
THE NATIONAL Payments Corporation of India's (NPCI's) recent decision to introduce a merchant discount rate (MDR) on select Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transactions marks a significant shift in the economics of the country's digital payments ecosystem. However, the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Governor Sanjay Malhotra has sought to make one thing clear — the new charge, according to him, is unlikely to dent the enormous scale of UPI.

"As of now, we do not see any drop in UPI volumes, and I don't personally think that a small fee will have a major impact on the volumes," he said.

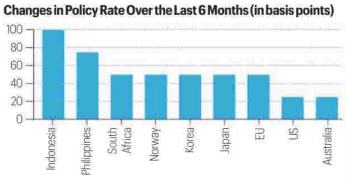
RBI JOINS INTEREST RATE HIKE CLUB

- It is not just India. Major central banks have tightened policy or raised interest rates in response to rising prices amid supply shocks and high crude oil prices.
- Inflation in most economies has crossed the central banks' comfort zone, and has been hovering above the pre-West Asia war era.

Inflation Remains Above Target in Most Economies



Changes in Policy Rate Over the Last 6 Months (in basis points)



SOURCE: HAVER, REFINITIV, CAREEDGE. DATA AS OF 27TH SEPTEMBER 2026

Musk: Oligarchs blocking Starlink service in India

New Delhi: Elon Musk, in a veiled attack on certain telecom operators, alleged that "certain oligarchs" have blocked his company's satellite communication services in India to maintain their monopoly in the country.

"Unfortunately, we are being blocked by certain oligarchs in order to maintain their monopolistic chokehold on the Indian people. You can guess who they are... This is a crime against the people of India!" Musk said on X, on response to information posted by DodgeDesigner. PTI

Rural consumer confidence weakens for six straight months: RBI survey

ENS Economic Bureau
Mumbai, October 7

RURAL CONSUMER sentiment in India has weakened steadily through 2026, with households becoming increasingly pessimistic about the economy, jobs and their own incomes, even as they continue to expect spending to rise.

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) September 2026 Rural Consumer Confidence Survey (RCCS) points to a widening gap between how rural and semi-urban households view their current circumstances and what they hope will happen over the next year.

The RBI's Current Situation Index (CSI), which captures perceptions of the economy, employment, prices, income and spending compared with a year ago, fell to 90.6 in September, from 91.7 in July.

This is the sixth consecutive decline from 100.5 in January, and marks a fall from 100.9 in September 2025. The deterioration is broad-based. The net response on the general economic situation declined from -11.9 in July to -14.1 in September. On the employment front, the net response worsened from -8.0 to -10.5, while the income measure slipped from -8.7 to -9.9, the survey shows.

These figures mean that the share of respondents who felt conditions had worsened exceeded those who saw an improvement by an increasingly large margin.

Income data, inflation

The income data is particularly revealing. In September, only 20.6% of respondents said their income had increased compared with a year earlier, while 30.5% said it had decreased. A year earlier, the corresponding figures were 24.5% and 26.5%. The net response has consequently moved from -2.1 in September 2025 to -9.9 now. Inflation is another major source of pressure. Rural households' median perception of current inflation rose to 6.8% in September, from 6.1% in July and 5.9% in May. Their one-year-ahead inflation expectation also climbed to 7.9%, from 7.4% in July and 6.8% in March. The September reading is particularly striking because it is 70 basis points (bps) higher for current inflation and 50 bps higher for future inflation than in July. The price-level responses underline this anxiety. As many as 93.2% of respondents said prices had increased compared with a year earlier, up from 91.6% in July. For the next year, 85.9% expect prices to increase.

Net spending improves, squeeze on household confidence

Yet the survey does not point to a collapse in household spending. The spending net response improved to 79.6 in September, from 77.4 in July. Spending on essential items remained particularly strong, with a net response of 84.2, while the corresponding figure for non-essential spending rose to 39.3. The disconnect between weak present sentiment and relatively strong expectations is captured by the Future Expectations Index (FEI). Although it eased to 112.8 from 113.6 in July, it remains firmly above 100, indicating optimism about the year ahead. However, this too has declined substantially from 129.3 in January.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

INTEROPERABILITY FOR NON-BANK ACCOUNT AGGREGATORS

What RBI move means for asset statement

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, October 7

DEMATERIALISED ACCOUNTS have made it easy for investors to track their investments across financial markets, be it stocks, mutual funds, debt instruments, or commodities. This has made investing quite hassle-free for the common man, eliminating the need to track statements through different apps or depositories.

The RBI's move to now allow "inter-operability" between financial account aggregators could also get your bank holdings into the singular consolidated statement, eliminating the need to track different bank statements to keep a check on deposits. The RBI on Wednesday allowed "interoperability among NBFC Account aggregators, enabling aggregation of financial information through all account aggregators from one account aggregator."

After the monetary policy statement, Governor Sanjay Malhotra said, "We are also facilitating SEBI regulated depositories to include information related to deposit accounts in their consolidated account statement."

Account aggregators are non-banking financial companies who store and move the user's banking data without having the permission to access it.

They act as a secure bridge for banking data, allowing lenders to access all relevant data swiftly for faster loan disbursements, or manage consent for other companies attempting to fetch your data.

"The account aggregators are people with whom banks enter into a contract for the purpose of sharing information. You can get onboarded as a bank customer, consenting to provide your information. And on the basis of your information, they will be able to pull data," said Vivek Iyer, Partner and National Leader for Financial Services at Grant Thornton Bharat.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

MARKETS

Sensex	NIFTY	Gold ▼	US Dollar ▲
72,638.70	22,603.05	₹1,47,767	₹96.78
-429.11	-173.05	Silver ▼	Oil ▼
-0.59%	-0.76%	₹2,20,866	$117.58

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION GOLD PER 10G, SILVER PER 1 KG; CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF OCTOBER 6, 2026

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF HARYANA
MAHENDERGARH (HARYANA) - 123031
Ref. No.: CUH/2026/Estt.Sec./T/808 Date: 06.10.2026
WALK-IN-INTERVIEW
The Walk-in-Interview for engagement of **Guest Faculty** in various departments will be held on **16.10.2026 at 09:00 AM** in the Administrative Block, Central University of Haryana, Mahendergarh. Details regarding departments, vacancies, reservation, eligibility, prescribed application form, and general instructions are available on the University website **www.cuh.ac.in.**
REGISTRAR

KERALA WATER AUTHORITY e-Tender Notice
Tender No : 05/2026-27/PPD/TVM
Others - Grey Water Reuse-15 MLD Tertiary Treatment Plant at Muttathara - Design, Engineering, Procurement, Construction,Erection, Commissioning and Operation & Maintenance for a period of 5 years after successful commissioning of 15 MLDT reatment Plant for Tertiary Treatment of Sewage Effluent at STP Muttathara,Thiruvananthapuram
EMD : Rs. 5,00,000/- **Tender fee :** Rs. 16,540 + 18% GST **Last Date for submitting Tender :** 02-11-2026 03:00:pm **Phone :** 8547638425 **Website :** www.kwa.kerala.gov.in www.etenders.kerala.gov.in
Superintending Engineer
PPD Regional Office
Thiruvananthapuram
KWA-JB-GL-6-340-2026-27

NAVI MUMBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN BIDDING PROCESS FOR GROUND HANDLING SERVICES CONCESSION AT NAVI MUMBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
Interested parties are invited to participate in the competitive e-tendering process for Ground Handling Services Concession at Navi Mumbai International Airport.
Interested parties are requested to visit the website https://nmiairport.abcprocure.com/ and access the Request for Qualification-cum-Request for Proposal **(RFQP)** document(s). For further details & instructions, please visit the E-Tender section of our website https://navimumbai.adaniairports.com
RFQP access shall be available from 8th October 2026, till IST 5:00 pm on 20th October 2026.
NAVI MUMBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT LIMITED
Email:- nmial.tenders2@adani.com
Website: https://navimumbai.adaniairports.com

TAMIL NADU SMALL INDUSTRIES CORPORATION LIMITED
(An Undertaking of the Government of Tamil Nadu)
A-25, Thiru-Vi-Ka Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai-32.
Telephone No.044-2250 1612, FAX No.044-2250 0411
e-TENDER NOTICE
Rc. No. TANSI/676/2026-PA

1	Procurement of Best Quality of Teakwood of various sizes and Thickness
2	Procurement of 0.6mm Balancing Laminated Sheet and 0.6mm Flexible Laminated of various colours and different shades of size: 8'x4', as per IS:2046:1995
3	Procurement of CR Sheet Various Sizes and thickness as per IS 513

REFER THE FOLLOWING WEBSITE FOR DOWNLOAD TENDER DOCUMENTS AND OTHER INFORMATIONS : **www.tntenders.gov.in**
Additional Chief Secretary /
Chairman and Managing Director
DIPR/3031/Tender/2026

KARNATAKA INDUSTRIAL AREAS DEVELOPMENT BOARD
(A Government of Karnataka Undertaking)
 # 2, 2/1 and 2/3, Kalidasa Marg, 1st Main Road, Gandhinagar,
Bengaluru – 560 009. Phone No. 080-22265383. Website: www.kiadb.in
No. IADB/ENGG/ETND-EP-10/910/2026-27 Date:07.10.2026
SHORT TERM NOTICE INVITING TENDER
(Through GOK Karnataka Public Procurement Portal Only)
Tender under two cover bid system is invited for the works mentioned below as per the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurement Act 1999 and Rules 2000 through electronic procurement from eligible Contractors holding valid Electrical License issued from KCEI, Government of Karnataka who have got adequate financial resources, suitable construction equipments, technical man power & sufficient past experience for the following work:
Name of the work : Providing Electrical Infrastructure Facilities at Dharwad Node Industrial Area, (Phase-II Part), Dharwad Taluk & District **(Package-2). (2nd Call).**
The last date and time of receipt of tender is : **22.10.2026 upto 04:00 pm.**
Applicants May Download Bidding Documents from the E-Procurement Portal **https://kppp.karnataka.gov.in**
Sd/-
Chief Engineer - 2
DIPR/CP/JA/3126/2026-27

Rajasthan State Road Development And Construction Corporation Ltd., JAIPUR.
No. NIT/2026-27/RSRDC-48 Date: 06.10.2026
निविदा सूचना/2026-27
निम्नलिखित कार्य के लिए केन्द्र/राज्य सरकार के अधिमानिकी निबंधनों एवं उनके अधिकृत संशोधनों में पंजीकृत एवं अनुभवी संवेदकों से निर्धारित प्रपत्र में ई-प्रोक्योरमेन्ट प्रक्रिया हेतु ऑनलाईन निविदायें आमंत्रित की जाती हैं :-

कार्य का विवरण	कार्य की कुल अनुमानित लागत (रु.)	वित्तिय पृष्ठभूमि संख्या
Construction of Proposed Boundary wall around MDS University Ltd. Ajmer. **URN: RRC2627WSOB00664**	202.92 Lakh	आरएसआरडीसी ई-305/26-27
Immediate road repair of damaged portion on Merta Lambiya Rani Road. **URN: RRC2627WSOB00666**	234.92 Lakh	आरएसआरडीसी ई-407/26-27
Construction of various School Buildings in Rural areas in Alwar. **URN: RRC2627WSOB00648**	369.73 Lakh	आरएसआरडीसी ई-404/26-27
Renewal work of Kamali-Bindaun-Mahwa Road. **URN: RRC2627WSOB00647**	498.36 Lakh	आरएसआरडीसी ई-407/26-27
Construction of Cement Concrete Pavement with drain at various places of BOT Road Bharatpur-Deeg-Alwar. **URN: RRC2627WSOB00646**	405.76 Lakh	
Repair and Maintenance work of Non-DLP portion of road Bachhauri-Bayana-Weir-Bhusawar-Chouksaviya-Khetri Road. **URN: RRC2627WSOB00648**	210.83 Lakh	
Remaining work of Auditorium Building in Nagar Parishad Campus, Jhunjhunu. **URN: RRC2627WSOB00649**	427.82 Lakh	आरएसआरडीसी ई-403/26-27

निविदा से सम्बन्धित प्रपत्र में निर्धारित शुल्क, धरोहर राशि, डाउनलोड करने व खोलने की तारीख संबंधी विस्तृत विवरण एवं संशोधन वेबसाईट- http://eproc.rajasthan.gov.in, http://sppp.rajasthan.nic.in एवं http://pwd.rajasthan.gov.in/srrdc में देखा जा सकता है। इसके संशोधनों को अलग विज्ञापन प्रकाशित के माध्यम से जिसमें http://eproc.rajasthan.gov.in पर दीजाएगी जानकारी प्रकाशित की जाएगी।
महाप्रबंधक

the hindu businessline.
FRIDAY - OCTOBER 9, 2026

Snuff it out

Sale of nicotine pouches should be banned

In a laudable move, the Centre recently instructed State governments to crack the whip on the sale of nicotine pouches. The initiative follows a series of warnings, starting with the World Health Organization's May 2026 report. The health body highlighted the rapid proliferation of these products among youth, thanks to deceptive marketing.

It has urged governments to protect gullible users from manipulative campaigns as these products are engineered for addiction. A joint study by the ICMR and National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research cited nicotine pouches as a public health concern, noting they reach consumers aged 18-40 via e-commerce platforms, hookah shops and gig delivery services. The Drugs Technical Advisory Board has also urged the government not to approve such nicotine formulations. These pouches have so far ducked strict regulatory action because they do not conveniently fall under laws that govern the sale of medicines, cigarettes or food. In contrast, for example, nicotine gums and transdermal patches used in the treatment of nicotine addiction, are regulated under the Drugs Act. The tobacco-free pouches also bypass the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act, 2003 (COTPA), which regulates only cigarettes and other tobacco products. Further, the Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes Act prohibits only vaping devices.

This regulatory grey area will hopefully be resolved as the government has clarified that the sale of nicotine pouches is unapproved and illegal. Indeed, nicotine exposure during adolescence impairs brain development, attentiveness and learning, amplifying the likelihood of long-term dependence. Research has also shown that nicotine triggers adrenaline surges and irregular heartbeats, narrows blood vessels, causes endothelial dysfunction, spurs platelet aggregation and is a major cause of atherosclerosis. In a recent impasse between the Adani Group's Mumbai airport duty-free operations and the government over imported pouch brands — such as Philip Morris's Zyn and Sweden's White Fox — the defendants contended in court that international departure area shops operate 'beyond the customs frontiers of India' and outside domestic jurisdiction. Yet, local law enforcement would retain jurisdiction over a criminal offence in these zones. Fiscal exemptions cannot be taken to mean that regulatory immunity applies as well.

It is the responsibility of both the Centre and State governments to swiftly bring to an end nicotine pouch sales. Tobacco firms view these pouches as a lucrative frontier beyond cigarettes. Tobacco major BAT predicts industry pouch revenue will reach $15 billion by 2030, almost trebling from 2025. Meanwhile, Philip Morris reported that its US pouch business yielded eight times the gross profit per thousand units of its international cigarette business in 2024. With private estimates valuing India pouch sales at about $550 million, the government must step in to snuff out this business.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



The deposit debate's blind spot

A NEW ORDER. The question should change from 'are deposits growing fast?' to 'what kind of deposits are banks getting?'



SAUMITRA BHADURI
SHUBHAM ANAND

India's banking debate has increasingly narrowed to a single number: the credit-to-deposit (CD) ratio. But that number tells only a part of the story. CD ratio rose from 68.6 per cent in September 2021 to 82.2 per cent in March 2026, and has been read as evidence that banks have lent too much while failing to mobilise enough deposits.

The warning is simple: credit has run ahead of savings, and banks may hit a funding constraint. But that diagnosis does not fit the rest of the evidence. The banking system is healthier than it has been in years, with gross bad loans at 1.8 per cent, capital adequacy at 17.7 per cent and liquidity coverage well above the regulatory floor.

The CD gap also looks less alarming in rupees than in growth rates. For instance, Rangarajan and Sambamurthy (*businessline*, August 19) noted the annual difference between credit and deposit accretion has mostly been modest, around ₹1-3 lakh crore in years when credit exceeded deposits, barely 1-1.5 per cent of the deposit base.

And when large foreign currency inflows recently swelled banking liquidity, the RBI drained nearly 60 per cent of the surplus within weeks. A system truly running out of funding does not usually coexist with liquidity absorption on this scale.

SAVINGS IN DIFFERENT FORM

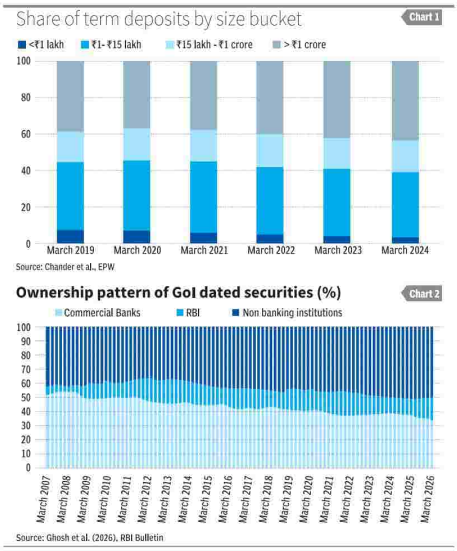
The issue, therefore, is not that India has run out of savings. It is that banks are receiving savings in a different form. The old funding model relied on stable, granular, low-cost household deposits. The new one increasingly depends on money that reaches banks indirectly, in larger blocks, and with higher run-off risk.

That raises the marginal cost of funds and weakens the monetary transmission even when headline deposits look adequate. The RBI's latest rate hike to 5.50 per cent only sharpens this point: in a tightening cycle, the question is not whether deposits exist, but how quickly their cost reprices.

QUALITY GAP

The simplest way to see the change is to stop asking whether deposits are growing and ask what kind of deposits they are. A household fixed deposit and a mutual fund's bank balance are both deposits. But they are not the same liability for a bank. One is sticky and predictable. The other is larger, more mobile, and reprices faster when returns change. In technical terms, the deposit beta rises, and funding volatility rises with it.

Chart 1 captures the shift. Deposits above ₹1 crore rose from 37 per cent of the total deposits in March 2020 to 44 per cent in March 2024. This does not mean households stopped saving. It means savings are returning to banks increasingly through institutional balance sheets.



The issue is whether a bank-led credit system can remain stable and cheap when its funding base shifts from sticky household money towards bulk, market-intermediated, and sometimes externally sourced deposits

This ownership shift is why the claim that stock markets are "draining deposits" is incomplete. At the system level, money does not vanish. It changes ownership. It moves into market products and returns as bulk deposits, which behave differently from retail money. The friction is not the existence of savings. It is the stability and pricing of bank liabilities.

This is the first break in the old model: savings are becoming market-led, while credit remains bank-led. The second break comes through the government's borrowing programme. Government borrowing does not create deposits when bonds are issued. Deposits return only when the government spends through salaries, transfers, subsidies, or contractor payments.

Fiscal cash management is, therefore, not just a treasury operation. It is a monetary variable. That would matter in any banking system, but it matters more today because the buyers of government securities have changed.

Chart 2 shows the shift. Non-bank institutions have overtaken commercial banks as the largest holders of Government of India (GoI) dated securities. When a bank buys government securities in primary issuance, it largely swaps one asset for another. But when a mutual fund, insurer, or pension fund funds the same borrowing, it pays from a bank deposit, and that deposit leaves the banking system until the government spends the proceeds.

What does this imply? If the state borrows early and spends late, banks compete for money that has temporarily moved out of their balance sheets. Paying more may help one bank win deposits from another, but it cannot create stable household deposits for the system. The result is a higher funding premium, not a larger funding base.

The same logic extends to the RBI balance sheet. Slower deposit growth can reflect weaker foreign asset accretion, lower net RBI credit to government and larger government cash balances at the central bank, all of which affect reserve money.

When the RBI runs a tighter, more hawkish liquidity stance, surplus is absorbed more aggressively; when it is more dovish, liquidity is allowed to persist. Either way, these are system flows, not branch-level failures.

The external account completes the story. Export receipts create deposits when dollars are converted into rupees. Import payments do the opposite. A current account deficit, therefore, pressures bank deposits as well as the rupee. When foreign inflows surge, deposit comfort can improve briefly, sometimes helped by rate-sensitive dynamics. The RBI may then sterilise part of the surplus to maintain its operating stance. Useful liquidity management, yes. A domestic funding base, no.

A STABLE OPTION?

The policy question should, therefore, change from "are deposits growing fast enough?" to "what kind of deposits are banks getting?" Deposit mix, run-off risk, maturity mismatch and reliance on market funding matter more than the headline CD ratio.

Put simply, the deposit debate is asking the wrong question. Savings exist. The issue is whether a bank-led credit system can remain stable and cheap when its funding base shifts from sticky household money toward bulk, market-intermediated, and sometimes externally sourced deposits. That is not a problem one ratio can diagnose. It is a transition the system must manage.

Bhaduri is a Professor at Madras School of Economics; Anand is a PhD Scholar, MSE, Chennai. Views expressed are personal

BRICS needs to address CBAM consequences

A common framework for carbon accounting and cap-and-trade norms can make a difference

Sangeeta Godbole

The BRICS climate agenda on unilateral trade and climate measures must develop credible cooperative alternatives in areas such as carbon accounting, where the need is urgent. Trade and climate policy are deeply intertwined and directly affect the industry in BRICS countries. On a closer look at the climate-related paragraphs, the 2026 Declaration shows substantial repetition of texts of BRICS Rio Summit Declaration 2025, alongside the disappearance of some of the key elements of the previous year's agenda, such as carbon accounting.

The climate section, particularly paragraphs 107-112, restates familiar positions on the UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, CBDR-RC, climate finance, unilateral climate measures, biodiversity and forests. Since BRICS issues a leaders' declaration every year, repeating them at length risks lesser focus on action points.

Unilateral climate-related trade measures (para 108), however, could have done with more emphasis. The parallel para 88 of the 2025 Rio Summit declaration explicitly identified "deforestation regulation, due diligence requirements, taxes and other measures" as unilateral and discriminatory measures of concern. It opposed protectionist measures that deliberately disrupt global supply and production chains and distort competition.

However, paragraph 110 brings in fresh perspectives and agendas. The Declaration welcomes knowledge-sharing through a 'high-level dialogue on people-centric community-based adaptation approaches', and a dialogue on aligning carbon markets with adaptation goals. More significantly, paragraph 110 recognises traditional knowledge systems, indigenous and local practices, local innovation and community experience, and welcomes the BRICS principles for advancing climate resilience through people-centric and community-based adaptation based on traditional knowledge.

Several BRICS members possess deep reservoirs of traditional knowledge and living community practices. With adaptation becoming increasingly urgent and critical in the fight against climate change, this approach connects climate adaptation to knowledge and practices that already exist within developing societies. The EU's deforestation regulation is due to apply from December 30 to large and medium operators, with later application to smaller operators. The EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, following its 2026 simplification, is scheduled to apply from July 2029, with reporting requirements and remedial action reaching deep into value chains.



EMISSIONS. Need global cooperation for its reduction

SUBSTANTIAL DEMANDS

For BRICS and partner countries, these measures will create substantial demands for traceability, documentation, data, verification and supply-chain due diligence if firms are to retain access to the European market. Their omission from the 2026 Declaration ignores precisely the trade measures that are likely to become increasingly consequential. BRICS must raise these yet-to-be operationalised measures in COP 31 to assess them from a climate perspective. Carbon accounting, missing entirely from the 2026 Declaration, lies at the heart of the emerging trade climate problem. The 2025 Rio Declaration encouraged mutually recognised methodologies and standards for assessing greenhouse gas emissions, and welcomed the BRICS principles for fair, inclusive and transparent carbon accounting in product and facility footprints.

Different jurisdictions are developing different methodologies for determining embodied emissions. The result can be a fragmented carbon accounting landscape, in which the same product carries different carbon values depending on the importing market. For developing countries pursuing rapid industrialisation, this is particularly problematic.

A common methodology that can mutually recognise and establish equivalences in carbon pricing, while respecting the Paris Agreement pillars, will create a strong tool for global cooperation in emissions reduction effort.

The writer is former IRS. She researches and teaches the intersection of trade and environment. Views are personal

LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

RBI's latest rate hike

This refers to the editorial 'The Hike and After' (Oct 8). As a warrior against inflation, the RBI has hiked the repo rate by 25 basis points and changed its policy stance to calibrated tightening. Rising oil prices, a supply-side concern, continue to push inflation upward, for which a rate hike alone cannot be a sufficient solution to tame inflation. There can be a trade-off between controlling inflation and sustaining GDP growth. If inflation is to be tamed and brought within a tolerable range, some moderation in GDP growth may have to be accepted, particularly when monetary tightening is used aggressively to contain price pressures. The rate hike will further increase India's 10-year bond yields, thereby narrowing the yield spread between Indian and US 10-year bonds. The more the yield spread narrows, the higher the chances of foreign investors reducing their exposure to Indian bonds. This will also have a spiralling effect on the Indian equity market as foreign investors may shift their funds towards US assets.

S Lakshminarayanan
Cuddalore, TN

Mis-selling a burden

This is with reference to the article 'Tackling Mis-selling Malaise in Insurance,' (Oct8). The suggestion to ask insurers to contribute 2 bps of annual gross premium, in addition to the PEPF created by the IRDAI for policyholder awareness and education, is a practical one. Mis-selling undermines the very purpose of insurance. While insurance is meant for the financial protection and security of the policyholder, mis-selling subverts the process and becomes a long-term burden on the policyholder, or often leads to discontinuation of the policy. The problem is partly rooted in the incentive structure governing insurance distribution, particularly commission and other sales-linked remuneration. Mis-selling by agents or other intermediaries should be penalised.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

A coordinated approach

This refers to 'Modest Rate Hike Cycle Commences' (Oct8). The RBI's cautious rate hike is understandable as inflation risks have resurfaced amid weak monsoon conditions and higher crude oil prices. However, repeated rate increases could affect household budgets, borrowing costs and private investment. The Reserve Bank should proceed gradually, guided by actual inflation trends, rather than temporary shocks. Better liquidity management can also prevent excessive tightening of credit conditions. The government should address food supply constraints, strengthen storage and distribution systems and monitor fuel prices. A coordinated approach can contain inflation while preserving economic growth.

Durga Arunkumar
Coonoor, TN

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UP's mobile procurement

To be effective, this initiative needs to be tweaked

Sanjeev Kapoor
Kushankur Dey

Wheat procurement for the Rabi Marketing Season (RMS) 2026-27 has been concluded in Uttar Pradesh, a leading wheat-producing State that accounts for about 31 per cent of the country's total wheat output. However, its wheat procurement volume has significantly declined after 2022-23, standing at 2-4 per cent of the total marketed surplus of wheat in the State. As a corrective measure, the State government piloted mobile procurement (MP) at minimum support prices (MSP) in 2025-26.

The rationale for MP is threefold. First, MSP-based wheat procurement is extremely low compared to the PDS requirement. This is attributed to the increased quantity under various Central Government welfare and poverty alleviation schemes on the one hand, and a sharp decline in procurement on the other. To ensure food security through the PDS, the deficit has to be offset through inter-State transfers of wheat, especially from Punjab and Haryana, which carry serious cost implications. As an alternative, the State initiated MP for wheat.

Second, private parties' procurement of wheat at higher prices from the farm-gate affected government agencies' MSP-based procurement at static or physical procurement centres. Third, with the increased open-market wheat prices, especially in 2024-25, smallholder access to static procurement centres and their participation in procurement operations have declined. This was compounded by higher transportation costs and the hold-up problem of farmers' produce at static centres.

PROCUREMENT FIGURES

The Department of Food and Civil Supplies of the State reported that about 2.28 lakh tonnes (lt) incremental procurement (22 per cent of total procurement) was contributed by MP, and 18 per cent of the beneficiary farmers of MSP procurement (1,43,895) sold wheat at mobile procurement centres (MPCs) for RMS 2025-26.

This yielded ₹8.32 crore to the State government, including market fee of ₹5.54 crore and development cess of ₹2.77 crores for RMS 2025-26. The revenues collected through the market fee and development cess have been used to provide participating farmers with services, such as



WHEAT. Procurement mainly driven by market prices

drinking water facilities, resting places, and vehicle parking at the static procurement centres.

Notwithstanding MP's potential to address the State's concerns about food security and farmers' welfare, market prices drive the fortunes of the incremental procurement strategy.

If market prices remain above the MSP, how can the State increase wheat procurement through MP in a highly competitive market? How can the commercial market operations in MSP-based wheat procurement be blended with food security?

First, an early-mover advantage at the start of the wheat marketing season, along with a calibrated policy framework for handling and transportation agencies, could help the State procure more wheat.

Second, mobile procurement should not replace static procurement, but it should be institutionalised to boost farmer participation in MSP-based procurement. Instead of implementing mobile procurement across the State, it should be implemented in selected districts where the alternative market is weak, and the marketable surplus of wheat is higher. The State procurement agencies need to map these districts based on historical wheat market price and quantity data.

Third, the State can frame standard operating procedures for MP, including mechanisms for payment for transportation when an empty transport vehicle travels from the physical procurement entrance to the MPC.

In sum, the government can rope in active farmer producer organisations to facilitate MP operations at the farm-gate, which can act as MPCs, aggregating wheat from member-farmers and selling it to procurement agencies at their own locations.

Kapoor and Dey are faculty members of the Agribusiness Management area of IIM Lucknow. Views expressed are personal.



PRATIM RANJAN BOSE



REUTERS

Will democracy ever return to Bangladesh?

DIVIDED NATION. The reins of power are firmly in the hands of Islamists. Hasina's proposed return to Dhaka provides a glimmer of hope for the nationalists

The Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Dinesh Trivedi, offered a bitter pill to Dhaka in his usual sugar-coated manner. "Bangladesh military aircraft came to India... Hasina *ji* was still the Prime Minister ...We had hardly any choice on that," he replied to a routine question about giving shelter to Sheikh Hasina during a conference.

He reiterated that the "extradition" request would undergo legal scrutiny. This was as good as asking Dhaka to prove the legality of its demand. The ruling dispensation is unlikely to dare do so, because that would open a Pandora's box over the retributive justice it has pursued over the last two years.

There is nothing extraordinary about Trivedi's response. These are facts, known to all. Extradition became a non-issue after Hasina announced plans to return to her country in December. The Indian High Commissioner merely used the opportunity to burst a major propaganda narrative designed to distract attention from real issues.

Beyond the typical Awami League-BNP binary and a winner-takes-all attitude, which is the bedrock of Bangladeshi politics, this small yet populous South Asian nation has slipped into an ideological battle following the 2024 transition.

Lines were drawn along the national identities defined in 1971. Power tilted to those opposed to that identity. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's Bangladesh Nationalist Party is a beneficiary, but the reins remain firmly in the hands of the Islamists, led by Jamaat-e-Islami.

Democracy is a long-lost debate in Bangladesh. Probably, the country was never prepared for it. If Hasina was blamed for winning elections boycotted by the Opposition and manufacturing outcomes, the BNP rose to power in an even less democratic situation, where the Opposition did not even have the right to speak, let alone enjoy political freedom. Even that election was not free from allegations of rigging, as claimed by Jatiya Party chief GM Quader.

AWAMI LEAGUE OSTRACISED

The Awami League was equated with a terrorist organisation and banned. The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) issued death sentences against Hasina and her colleagues in several cases. According to Prof Brahma Chellaney, the trial was so farcical that "calling the tribunal a kangaroo court would be an insult to kangaroos."

Anywhere between 100 and 150 former MPs and 30-odd ministers are jailed. Arrests continue under Tarique's rule. That is apart from tens of thousands of party activists imprisoned without trial. Prison deaths are rampant. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 10 Awami office-bearers, "most of whom were not charged with any crime," have died in prison during Tarique Rahman's BNP rule.

Ostracising the Awami League is the smaller part of the story. For those who believe in the founding ideals of the nation, Bangladesh is being reduced to Stalin's Russia. Doctors, professors, businessmen and journalists are either displaced, rotting in jail or maintaining silence out of fear. From fake murder charges to allegations of corruption, every possible instrument is weaponised against them. Their voices remain unrepresented in the heavily censored Bangladeshi media and public discourse. The interim administration of Dr Muhammad Yunus put this model in force. Tarique Rahman is following it to the letter, creating a false image that Bangladesh is against Hasina and India.

There had always been an undercurrent of anti-Hindu, and therefore anti-India, sentiments in Bangladesh. This originated from the Two-Nation theory and the religion-based Partition. The sentiments were evident even in 1971 and will remain so in the foreseeable future. We cannot do much about it.

> Whether you call it security interests, geopolitics or people-to-people relations, backing Hasina on her return journey to Dhaka will be a great opportunity for India

The rest goes up and down, depending on political expediency and national frustration. A nation that is yet to convince everyone of its nationhood finds scapegoats. Delhi's poor political management gives scope. Islamists make maximum use of it. But the Awami League is no saint either. Hasina blamed India for her 2001 loss as late as in 2017.

But right at this moment, when the nation is as divided as it was before 1971, one half of the population is resting its case on Hasina and India. They are nationalists who trust the independence achieved under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and want to reclaim their nation.

The Awami League as a political party has less to do here. The command structure of the party is broken. Top leadership, excluding Hasina, is discredited. It's all about people — including the grassroots activists of the Awami League and people at large — and Hasina. She is their last hope and, since Delhi gave her refuge, they trust India.

Unbelievable but true. There is a Bangladesh that is not visible, and its people are fuming. The common Awami supporters have regrouped. This author interacted with a couple of such groups. They did not hold any position in the party and did not benefit from its long stay in power. Many suffered jail terms over the last two years, but they are undeterred.

TO GET TURBULENT AGAIN

Bangladesh is all set to get turbulent again, with or without India. It is up to Delhi to make the best use of the opportunity. The Narendra Modi government failed to protect Bangladeshi Hindus. Chinmay Das is in jail for two years, merely for demanding political rights for minorities.

Tarique Rahman's BNP is playing cat and mouse with India. The power that Delhi had over Bangladesh has substantially eroded in the last six months by its policy surrender to Dhaka. Hasina is the greatest asset to the country for leaving a lasting impression on a sizeable population.

Whether you call it security interests, geopolitics or people-to-people relations, backing Hasina on her return journey to Dhaka will be a great opportunity. The grassroots Awami activists and people at large will take care of the rest. Like a cornered cat, they are living the dream to take revenge.

The writer is an independent journalist

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

October 9, 2006

SEBI plans separate entity for surveillance, investigation

Capital market regulator SEBI plans to create a separate outfit with independent professionals for stock market surveillance and investigation, to make these two key activities more effective. According to a SEBI official, the idea is to rope in independent professionals such as practising chartered accountants, lawyers and financial experts to do this job.

SSP units may get higher concession

The Centre is considering raising the concession rate for single super phosphate (SSP) manufacturers in keeping with an Agriculture Ministry Task Force recommendation to treat sulphur on a par with nitrogen, phosphorous and potash for both price fixation and subsidy eligibility. SSP production has fallen from almost 40 lakh tonnes (lt) in 1997-98 to 26.95 lt in 2005-06.

Maharashtra Govt puts oil exploration plans on hold

The Maharashtra Government has put on hold its plan to enter the oil and gas exploration activities. According to State Government sources, some departments have opposed the plan on grounds of financial risk involved with the venture.

AI, defence shares most at risk as US midterms near

Matthew Griffin
Felice Maranz

Artificial intelligence regulation, along with government spending on healthcare and defence, are emerging as equity investors' chief points of focus as the final month of the US midterm campaign kicks into high gear. Polls show the Democratic party as a heavy favourite to win control of the House of Representatives, with an edge in key Senate races as well. Taking at least one chamber of Congress would give the party control of committees that can propose legislation and open investigations.

POTENTIAL RISKS AHEAD

Concerns about AI cross party lines, with voters worried about potential risks along with job losses and higher electricity prices. Some Wall Street strategists are positioning for a push from Democrats for tighter regulation, which could fuel selling pressure. "The midterms will be critical not for the immediate risk of federal policy restricting data centers, but to lay the groundwork for potential legislation toward that end in 2029," Ariana Salvatore, head of US public policy research at Morgan Stanley, said in a note.

History suggests that whatever happens, the midterm elections are unlikely to knock the stock market off its course. The S&P 500 Index has risen in the 12 months after every midterm election since 1946, according to Wells Fargo. President Donald Trump's veto powers can keep Democrats in check, a recipe for government gridlock that might create stability for investors. The Cboe Volatility Index signals little election-related turmoil, making it cheap to bet on price swings picking up.

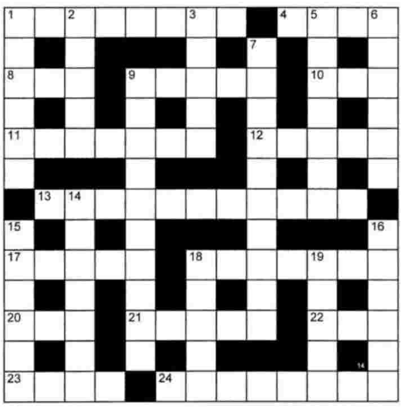


AI REGULATION. Concerns about the tech cross party lines

Compared with the 2024 presidential election, "the equity impact for the upcoming midterms across election outcomes scenarios will likely be more nuanced and favour stock picking", JPMorgan Chase & Co strategists led by Dubravko Lakos-Bujas wrote in a note. Over the next two years, Trump is likely to veto any legislation that's too unfavourable to the technology industry. That may limit risk to fundamentals for chipmaker Nvidia Corp, the AI rally's poster child, and megacap peers such as Alphabet Inc, Meta Platforms Inc and Microsoft Corp.

Data centre real estate investment trusts and neocloud companies are negatively exposed to potential legislative proposals to levy a tax on computing power. Off-the-grid power providers such as Bloom Energy Corp, GE Vernova Inc and Cummins Inc may get a boost from more restrictive policies, the analysts said. BLOOMBERG

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2753



EASY

ACROSS
1. The fipple-flute (8)
4. Domestic animals; favourites (4)
8. A 'little piggy' (3)
9. Greek 'D' (5)
10. Except that (3)
11. Bunting (the bird) (7)
12. A mistake (5)
13. Cause for anger (11)
17. Player of the pibroch (5)
18. Initiated as into hunting (7)
20. Collection of table-talk, gossip (3)
21. Unclothed (5)
22. A falsehood (3)
23. Those voting against (4)
24. Glamorous high standing (8)

DOWN
1. To allowance out (6)
2. A box; thorax (5)
3. Girl's name (5)
5. A trade stoppage (7)
6. Ringed planet (6)
7. State of being father or mother (10)
9. Bringing to one's door (10)
14. To put back; to substitute (7)
15. To wrench (ankle, etc) (6)
16. Stick to (6)
18. Bread maker (5)
19. Indian capital (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS
1. A sort of judge issuing flute-like notes (8)
4. Take a pace back, like Mutt and Moggy (4)
8. What to do to the line in order to conform (3)
9. River mouth has a letter for a Greek (5)
10. On the other hand, almost strike one with your head (3)
11. Alternatively, tonal variation may be given to a bird (7)
12. One of those mistakes that gave rise to comedy (5)
13. Is in favour of one's calling giving grounds for quarrel (11)
17. A musician may be the one to decorate the cake (5)
18. Hot and so passionate, being marked for the hunt (7)
20. One could ban such collected sayings as being fruity (3)
21. Is unsuited to appearing like this (5)
22. It isn't true that Weill put it back in (3)
23. Those opposing motion will, we are told, be inquisitive (4)
24. Gets pier built with a certain cachet (8)

DOWN
1. Number one sailor turning up to portion things out (6)
2. A coffer may be expanded with inspiration (5)
3. In Paris she goes north to find a girl (5)
5. Turning amber, proceed, only to find there's a stoppage (7)
6. He has his rings, Heaven knows! (6)
7. Father has torn his cowl, showing the state he's in (10)
9. Is engaged in a round occupation perhaps (10)
14. Salesman is given material to put back (7)
15. Right sort of pains suffered in a muscular wrench (6)
16. Had to be changed, before it would stick (6)
18. Tradesman who followed the butcher before the candlestick maker (5)
19. I held out for capital in the subcontinent (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2752

ACROSS 1. Cartwheel 5. Gas 7. Park 8. Fearsome 10. Bandages 11. Belt 13. Enfold 15. Tinsel 18. Bath 19. Darkroom 22. Ironical 23. Wire 24. Dis 25. Cheerless

DOWN 1. Capable 2. Rerun 3. Exeter 4. Lark 5. Grovels 6. Sweat 9. Dally 12. Dicky 14. Fatuous 16. Limpets 17. Savage 18. Blind 20. Olive 21. Disc

Opinion

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2026



BUSINESS OF TRUST

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman

"Business has to be trusted. Taxpayers have to be trusted. And businesses among themselves, with trust, if they do it, we shouldn't be too intrusive

The spectre of drought

Besides relief, public works interventions should enhance water security

AS INDIAN AGRICULTURE substantially depends on rain-fed systems, the spectre of drought is ever present due to fluctuations in precipitation. This year there was an El Niño-driven deficiency of 12.6% in southwest monsoon rainfall—comparable to 2014 and 2015—with many states registering a shortfall of more than 20% which is the threshold for drought. Thanks to a landmark Supreme Court ruling in 2016, a revised manual for drought management has been released by the government which should help in timely declaration of drought conditions. Only Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh have so far indicated they have been hit. Due to a 53.4% rainfall deficit from June to August, the Andhra government declared that 21 of the state's 28 districts have been affected. In Maharashtra, after the chief minister visited affected areas, 74% of the area of the state was declared as drought-hit.

Not so long ago, widespread drought conditions would occasion serious concern at the highest levels of the government as they entailed a major political and economic crisis. Not anymore. The drought years of 2014 and 2015, for instance, were associated with a contraction in kharif food grain output but economic growth was 7.2 and 8%. Although the economy is far from being drought-proofed, there has been progress in building irrigation facilities and adoption of advanced technologies, including the growing use of climate-resistant seeds which are a priority for agri-R&D. Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan appears confident of handling drought conditions as districts have been identified that are vulnerable to deficiency in rainfall and contingency plans have been drawn up. Chouhan plans to visit the affected states and will have consultations on how cropping patterns can be shifted taking water availability into account.

Despite these progressive changes, however, the fortunes of agriculture still depend on its tryst with the southwest monsoon as 55 to 60% of its contribution to the economy emanates from rain-fed crop lands. A substantial rainfall deficiency that created widespread drought conditions call for a strong policy response that enhance the water security of the affected states. The biggest policy challenge in this regard is to nudge shifts to less water-intensive crops in Karnataka and Maharashtra, which has ordered a 10% water cut to prioritise drinking water needs as reservoir levels are severely depleted. With around 4% of the cropped area, sugarcane takes up 65% of the irrigation water in Maharashtra. In Karnataka, rice and sugarcane take up 70% of irrigation water. Considering the power of the sugar lobby, can Chouhan persuade these states to grow less water-intensive crops?

While providing relief is the priority, the ruling dispensation must also use its flagship employment guarantee scheme, Viksit Bharat—Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) to good effect in drought-affected states. While no eligible rural worker needs to remain without work even for a single day, this scheme should also ensure that the bulk of the work is in permissible projects that enhance water security. These include check dams, gully plugs, underground dykes, recharge shafts, injection wells, rejuvenation of river and other water bodies, reclamation of water-logged land, and renovation of field water distribution channels. Around 15.64 million rural households sought work in September, which was higher year-on-year by 34%. The VB-G RAM G's true test is in alleviating distress by providing work to these growing numbers as drought stalks the countryside.

It's a depressing time to care about free markets

FREE-MARKET-ORIENTED ECONOMISTS PROBABLY live in a state of perpetual despair these days. Politicians and voters on both the left and right are turning on markets. Polls suggest widespread support for interventionist policies that economists long discarded for causing more harm than good.

We can blame ignorance, either of the population or of economists naive to people's changing needs and challenges. But I suspect what's behind the support for populism is the same thing that is behind every financial blow-up—the desire to believe we can have both low, or no, risk and upside, too.

The idea is seductive. It's also the hollow promise unpinning almost every financial scam or ill-considered financial innovation that's ended in calamity. It never works out, as we learned from the savings and loan crisis in the 1980s, the blowup of Long-Term Capital Management in 1998, the meltdown of mortgage-backed securities and the Bernie Madoff scandal in 2008, and who knows what next.

The fundamental law of finance is that higher returns only come with the risk of loss. I call the persistent denial of this fact the risk delusion, and even the best minds fall for it time and again. It should not be a surprise that the same schtick is appealing when it comes to policy, too, particularly at a time when inflation has stretched budgets for some while others fear new technology may leave them unemployable.

A majority of Americans in both parties support price controls on childcare, prescription drugs, and credit card interest costs, according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* survey. Other polls have found measures to cap rent increases are popular on both sides of the political divide. These ideas violate basic economics and ignore the long history of price control producing shortages and even higher prices once the ceiling is lifted. Yet, they are compelling as the negative consequences aren't apparent at the outset.

Inflation, for example, is a big risk to consumers; it leaves people uncertain about how much their income will buy every time they go to the grocery store. Price controls seem to assure stability. Even Paul Samuelson, the Nobel laureate and father of modern economics, thought they were a good idea. The problem is safety means less upside; in this case, a paucity of goods available when you need them. You may know the price at the market, but you don't know if you will find empty grocery shelves or, with rent controls, a sufficient supply of apartments.



ALLISON SCHRAGER

Bloomberg

Populism is also at odds with economic reasoning when it comes to taxes. A wealth tax on billionaires is popular among voters and has also garnered support from some economists, who believe it's possible to outsmart the law of risk and reward. A big part of the appeal is the levy being paired with the promise of more government benefits, such as healthcare in California.

Most economists, however, hate wealth taxes because wealth is harder to value and easier to move around than income. Any tax on it, therefore, is easy to evade. Wealth taxation also has a greater impact on people's behaviour and, consequently, on economic growth.

Most wealthy people invest their money in their own firms or the market. A tax incentivises them to move money out of productive investments and into assets that are harder to value and potentially less productive. A 2.5% wealth tax is the equivalent of a 50% capital gains tax if you assume a 5% return. Reducing the returns to risk-taking generally means less risk is taken, translating into fewer companies and jobs created, and slower growth. Economists prefer progressive consumption or well-designed income taxes instead.

The promise of no risk and a high return also explains why we have run up so much debt to expand benefits, and why politicians keep dangling more, including $5,000 checks to voters, an allowance for stay-at-home mothers or further tax cuts. No one mentions the downside risk of higher interest rates or a painful financial reckoning.

The bipartisan interest in government ownership of private corporations and industrial policy comes from the same playbook. These are dark days for those of us who dedicated our lives to both learning how the economy works and educating people about it. Pursuing safety with the expectation of high return leads, at best, to no growth and, at worst, to a bad result you didn't prepare for. We always believe this time is different, that we are now smart enough to have a well-designed policy or financial algorithm that can outsmart risk. Alas, it is never true.

CLEARING SALE

SC JUDGMENT IS NOT A PERMANENT EXEMPTION FROM RESPONSIBILITY FOR CLEARING MEMBERS

When stockbroker goes rogue

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE for your holdings if your stockbroker goes rogue? The Supreme Court, in its recent judgment in *Edelweiss Custodial Services Limited v. NSE Clearing Ltd*, explores the answer. The case concerned Anugrah Stock & Broking, which operated as a stockbroker and a depository participant (DP). It offered derivatives advisory services (DAS) in the nature of portfolio management services, albeit without the requisite registration. Under such services, Anugrah accepted clients' securities under agreements promising fixed returns. Its role as DP facilitated the movement of securities from its clients' demat accounts, which were then used as collateral for trades on its own account in the futures and options (F&O) segment. However, after suffering huge losses, it soon found itself in murky waters and could no longer meet its settlement obligations with the clearing members (CMs).

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing Partner, Finsec Law Advisors



To digress, CMs are intermediaries responsible for clearing and settling trades. In the F&O segment, traders can take positions worth more than the amount deposited upfront. These positions are backed by margins, which may be provided as securities. The collateral travels from the client to the stockbroker, then to the CM, and, ultimately, the clearing corporation.

The responsibility at each stage is, however, different. A client is responsible for obligations arising from its own trades. The stockbroker is responsible for the aggregate obligations of itself and its clients towards the clearing member. The clearing member, in turn, must satisfy the settlement obligations owed to the clearing corporation.

In the same way, when Anugrah was unable to satisfy its settlement obligations, its professional clearing member (PCM), Edelweiss, liquidated securities worth around ₹460 crore. These included securities belonging to clients who had subscribed to Anugrah's Ponzi-like DAS scheme. Sebi later proceeded against Anugrah and eventually shut its operations. The investors, however, eager to recover their losses from any option available, filed complaints against the PCMs for liquidating their securities.

Subsequently, the NSE Clearing Limited (NCL), (wrongfully) found the PCMs liable for liquidating the shares. It imposed a penalty and directed restitution within 15 days. By the time restitution was ordered, the securities had appreciated to over ₹900 crore. Further, in case of non-compliance, collateral equivalent to the securities' value on the sixteenth day, together with an additional 5%, was to be blocked. A plain reading of the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act (SCRA), 1956, and NCL bye-laws makes it clear that it does not possess any power to order restitution. The NCL can only levy penalties, and in certain circumstances order expulsion of the CM.

Sebi's July 2021 framework on segregation and monitoring of collateral introduced daily client-level reporting and gave clearing members visibility of client positions

However, the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT), one might say with its overreaching hand, blessed the NCL's decision. SAT was satisfied that, if not the NCL, its own rules allowed it to suo motu direct restitution of the liquidated shares. That is how the case found its way to the apex court.

The court found itself answering three questions. First, whether a PCM was obliged and equipped to verify the debit and credit positions of a trading member's individual clients before liquidating the collateral. Second, whether the NCL's committee could order restitution. Third, whether investors could claim against a PCM for the default of their stockbroker.

On the first issue, the court noted that a PCM's client was the trading member, not its individual investors. Accordingly, the responsibility for ensuring that one investor's securities were not used for another investor rested with Anugrah. Edelweiss was only required to ensure that Anugrah's collateral was not used to meet another trading member's obligations.

Further, the PCMs had no visibility of the individual investors' debit and credit positions. Although the clearing agreement allowed PCMs to seek information from Anugrah, it imposed no duty to verify each investor's account before liquidation. Therefore, when Anugrah defaulted, Edelweiss could enforce the collateral furnished by Anugrah without first looking through Anugrah and reconstructing each investor's position.

The second, and rather more interesting part of the judgment, concerns restitution. The NCL sought to justify its direction on the basis that the greater power to expel a CM must include the lesser power to order restitution. Attractive as that argument may sound, restitution and expulsion do entirely different things. Expulsion removes a member from the market. Restitution makes one entity bear another's financial loss.

The court held that neither the SCRA nor NSE Clearing's bye-laws empowered its committee to direct restitution. SAT could not fill this gap through its rules either. Its power to regulate procedure could not create a substantive remedy which the original authority had no power to grant. The failure to specify restitution in the show-cause notice was also significant, though it became inconsequential once the court found the power itself did not exist.

Third, the court rejected the investors' claims against the PCMs for Anugrah's default. It was rather unsympathetic towards the investors, noting that they had willingly participated in an illegal assured-return arrangement in the highly speculative F&O segment. The court left them free to pursue their stockbrokers, although recovery from a defunct broker may be easier ordered than achieved.

However, the judgment comes with an important date stamp. Sebi's July 2021 framework on segregation and monitoring of collateral introduced daily client-level reporting and gave clearing members visibility of client positions. The court itself recognised that this later framework imposes obligations on PCMs even though they have no direct contract with investors. The judgment is therefore not a permanent exemption from responsibility for CMs. It only decides their responsibility under the earlier framework.

So, who is responsible when a stockbroker goes rogue? In this case, not the PCMs. Under the post-2021 framework, the answer may well be different and possibly unfair on the PCMs who now have obligations without any vision. For the Anugrah investors, the court's decision may be a dead end.

Co-authored with ***Yash Vardhan,*** *Associate, Finsec Law Advisors*

Keeping 'Reform Express' on track



SAMEER GUPTA
BIPIN SAPRA

Respectively National Tax Leader and Indirect Tax Policy Leader, EY India

The GST council's decisions on input tax credit and export service relaxations, and emphasis on procedural simplification and decriminalisation are welcome steps

THE GOODS AND Services Tax (GST) Council deserves appreciation for delivering yet another comprehensive suite of reforms that addresses some of the long-standing challenges faced by Indian businesses. Building on the landmark GST rate rationalisation exercise of 2025, the council has now turned its attention towards unlocking liquidity, reducing litigation, simplifying compliance, and improving competitiveness.

The recommendations of the 57th GST Council meeting are a powerful reflection of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of India's economic transformation through the "Reform Express"—a journey driven by continuous, responsive, and forward-looking reforms. They demonstrate that GST is no longer merely a tax reform introduced in 2017. Instead, it has evolved into a dynamic framework that continues to be refined in line with economic realities, technological advancements, and industry expectations. In many ways, these reforms signal the emergence of GST 3.0—a phase focused on making GST a catalyst for investment, ease of doing business, and economic growth.

Among the most significant reforms is the council's decision to address the long-standing issue of accumulated input tax credit (ITC). Following rate rationalisation, several sectors, including FMCG, food, pharmaceuticals, and textiles, have witnessed a build-up of unutilised credits due to inverted duty structures. This accumulation is particularly significant in relation to input services and capital goods, since refunds under the inverted duty structure have so far been restricted to credits attributable to input goods.

The proposal to bring input services and capital goods within the refund framework for inverted duty structures and zero-rated supplies is therefore a major structural correction. It has the potential to unlock substantial working capital for manufacturers, exporters, and capital-intensive industries. By converting accumulated tax credits into deployable business capital, the reform can support fresh investment, capacity expansion, technology adoption, and job creation. Importantly, it provides industry with a meaningful growth stimulus by unlocking its own blocked capital, without requiring additional fiscal outlay from the government.

The reforms have the potential to unlock working capital, reduce the cost of doing business, improve tax certainty, and minimise litigation

Equally noteworthy is the rationalisation of the blocked credit provisions under Section 17(5). By allowing ITC on a broader range of genuine business expenditures, including employee insurance, telecommunication towers, pipelines, and certain categories of business assets, the council has addressed a long-standing industry concern that taxes paid on legitimate business inputs should not become an embedded cost. Reducing tax cascading will improve efficiency, lower costs, and enhance the competitiveness of Indian goods and services.

Another landmark reform relates to the export of services. India's services sector remains a key driver of economic growth, yet many businesses have faced challenges due to restrictive place-of-supply provisions and stringent export conditions. The proposed relaxations, including extending export benefits to transactions between Indian and overseas establishments of the same entity and providing relief to sectors such as clinical trials and R&D services, better align tax provisions with commercial realities and strengthen India's position as a preferred destination for high-value services exports.

Beyond substantive policy reforms, the council deserves equal recognition for its emphasis on procedural simplification. Automated refund processing, technology-enabled validations, and streamlined compliance processes are expected to improve working-capital cycles, particularly for exporters and MSMEs. Simplification of registration procedures, especially for sellers operating through e-commerce platforms, will further support formalisation and ease of doing business. With GSTN, e-invoicing, and e-way bills creating one of the world's largest digital compliance ecosystems, the GST framework is increasingly positioned to transition from enforcement-led administration to data-driven, trust-based governance. The continued move towards decriminalisation of GST law is another welcome step. The omission of specified arrest provisions and rationalisation of prosecution provisions reflect a more balanced and trust-based tax administration, helping distinguish genuine compliance lapses from deliberate tax evasion while strengthening taxpayer confidence.

Taken together, the reforms emerging from the 57th GST Council meeting have the potential to unlock substantial working capital, reduce the cost of doing business, improve tax certainty, and minimise litigation. Their impact is likely to support higher investments, improve consumer affordability, strengthen India's competitiveness, boost investor confidence, and contribute to sustained GST revenue growth for both the Centre and the states.

Perhaps the most significant outcome, however, is the growing confidence within industry in the GST Council's willingness and ability to resolve complex issues through continuous engagement and reform. Successive council meetings have addressed several long-standing concerns, strengthening industry's faith in the reform process and raising expectations for the next phase of GST. Industry now looks forward to the council building on this momentum through measures such as further credit rationalisation, centralised administration, greater harmonisation of audit and investigation practices, further decriminalisation of the law, resolution of sector-specific ambiguities, and removal of legacy anomalies that continue to create uncertainty and increase the cost of compliance.

The 57th GST Council meeting reinforces a simple but powerful message: India's "Reform Express" continues to gather momentum. As GST enters its next decade, the objective is no longer merely to sustain the system, but to continuously simplify, strengthen, and improve it. This unwavering commitment to reform, responsiveness, and taxpayer facilitation will not only reinforce GST's position as one of India's most significant economic transformations, but also enable it to play an important role in supporting the country's journey towards becoming a developed economy by 2047.

With inputs from ***Swati Saraf,*** *Director-Tax, EY India*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pre-emptive effort

Apropos of "Reality bites" (*FE*, October 8), the RBI's decision should be viewed less as a move against growth and more as a pre-emptive effort to protect its foundations. With economic activity remaining resilient, it has some room to raise rates without causing a sharp slowdown, while its bigger concern is that persistent food, energy, and imported inflation could get entrenched and eventually hurt consumption, investment, and business confidence. A higher repo rate can moderate excessive credit growth, support the rupee by making Indian financial assets more attractive, and contain inflation expectations. In that sense, the RBI is trying to act before inflation becomes a larger economic problem—accepting a measured cost in borrowing conditions to preserve price and currency stability and sustainable growth over the medium term.
—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

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Seamless connectivity

Integrated transport planning will bolster mobility

The Union Cabinet's approval for the formation of the Integrated Transport & Logistics Authority (ITLA) is a welcome recognition that India's transport infrastructure cannot be planned effectively in departmental silos. Roads, railways, ports, aviation, inland waterways and urban transport are economically interdependent. Yet investment decisions are still largely taken within individual ministries and agencies, often without adequately considering their implications for the wider transport network. ITLA is intended to address this gap. It will prepare a National Transport Master Plan with a horizon of more than 10 years, assess sectoral and annual plans of transport ministries, technically appraise central infrastructure projects costing ₹500 crore or more, monitor their implementation, and undertake post-project impact assessment. It will also create a National Transport Data Repository, drawing on sources such as goods and services tax eway bills, FASTag, Vahan and other mobility data. The rationale is sound. It is not the objective of the transport policy to maximise investment in individual modes but to minimise the cost and time involved in moving people and goods. A new highway may be valuable, but its economic payoff could depend on the availability of a rail connection, an efficient port, or a logistics hub. Integrated planning can, therefore, improve capital allocation, reduce duplication, and lower logistics costs.

India has often created institutions for coordination without giving them sufficient authority to coordinate. The Unified Metropolitan Transport Authorities (UMTAs), proposed in several cities, have often remained largely advisory because the agencies controlling transport infrastructure, operations and finances continue to function independently. New Delhi's renewed effort to establish a UMTA is a reminder that even within a single metropolitan area, integration remains difficult when responsibilities and funding are fragmented. The same lesson applies to ITLA. As a special-purpose vehicle under the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, rather than under a transport ministry, it has the potential to provide a more neutral perspective across modes. But neutrality alone will not make ministries comply with its recommendations. Its appraisal and monitoring functions must have a meaningful bearing on project selection, investment priorities and implementation. Otherwise, the authority risks becoming another layer of consultation. There is also a risk of duplication with PM Gati Shakti.

The proposed data repository could be particularly valuable. India has enormous transport-related data, but it remains dispersed across ministries, operators and platforms. Bringing these together could make it possible to better understand freight flows, congestion, vehicle utilisation, and passenger demand. But data integration will require common standards, interoperability, and appropriate safeguards, not merely another database. The experience of the National Common Mobility Card (NCMC) offers a useful caution at the urban level. Launched in 2019 with the promise of "One Nation, One Card", it was meant to allow seamless payments across metros, buses and other transport systems. Yet interoperability has progressed only gradually: As recently as July this year, the government said the NCMC was functional in only 13 metro projects and 11 bus transport corporations. The problem illustrates how difficult genuine integration can be. ITLA should, therefore, be judged not by the quality of its master plan but by whether that plan changes investment and implementation.

Policy stability

Exporters need greater certainty in tax-remission policy

The government's recent decision to extend the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (Rodtep) scheme by only three months, to December 31, provides continuity but little certainty. The Directorate General of Foreign Trade has kept the existing rates and value caps unchanged during the extension period. Exporters typically finalise shipment orders well in advance, making it difficult to factor in the tax remission while determining prices when the continuation remains uncertain. Rodtep's expenditure was ₹18,313 crore in 2024-25, while the 2025-26 revised estimate (RE) stood at ₹18,233 crore. For 2026-27, however, the Budget estimate was cut to ₹10,000 crore, 45 per cent below the previous year's RE.

Rodtep is not an export incentive or subsidy in the conventional sense. It returns the embedded central, state and local taxes and levies that exporters have paid, such as those which cannot otherwise be refunded, including taxes on fuel, electricity duties and *mandi* charges. Its purpose is to ensure that taxes are not exported with the goods. The scheme was introduced in 2021 to replace the Merchandise Exports from India Scheme and align India's export-support framework with World Trade Organization guidelines. The case for greater predictability is strengthened by the scheme's scale. It covers more than 10,700 export-product categories, covering diverse sectors of the economy, and as of March 31, 2025, disbursements under the scheme had crossed ₹57,976.78 crore since its launch, underscoring its significant role in supporting India's merchandise exports. India's exports are also gaining momentum. According to the commerce ministry's latest trade data, cumulative merchandise exports rose 17.85 per cent to $215.91 billion during April-August 2026-27, from $183.21 billion in the corresponding period a year earlier.

Notably, the scheme has already seen policy volatility. In February, the government restricted Rodtep rates and value caps to 50 per cent of the prevailing levels. The rates were restored at the end of March after disruption in West Asia affected shipping routes, schedules and logistics costs. While the decision was a response to an exceptional external shock, it highlighted the difficulties exporters faced when policy changes after prices had already been negotiated with overseas buyers. Recognising this, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Commerce has recommended that any future revision of Rodtep rates be preceded by structured consultation with industry stakeholders and accompanied by a clearly defined minimum transition period. This would help ensure that exporters are not forced to absorb losses on orders contracted on the basis of earlier rates. The commerce ministry has itself sought a five-year extension and an increase in the allocation of funds under the scheme. The government should consider the request and provide exporters a stable policy environment. The external environment is challenging and India needs to push exports both to attain stability in its external account and to grow at higher rates. The least the government should aim to do is to keep the domestic policy environment stable and not add to the complexities that exporters are anyway facing.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Geopolitical risks and monetary policy

Central banks need to factor in geopolitical risks before they materialise, not treat them as a sideshow



FINGER ON THE PULSE

T T RAM MOHAN

Last May, the rupee came under pressure, rising above 96 to the dollar. In June, the Reserve Bank of India announced several measures to facilitate concessional swaps for foreign inflows, notably through the foreign currency non-resident (Bank) or FCNR(B) deposits. The expectation then was that these measures would result in inflows of around $50 billion and help ease the pressure on the rupee.

Your columnist had argued at the time that, given the outlook for oil prices and foreign institutional investor (FII) outflows, the inflow of funds under the RBI schemes would not suffice. A rise in the policy rate was inevitable. The inevitable has happened. The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) opted for a 25 basis points increase in the repo rate on October 7.

The inflows under the RBI's special measures amounted to a staggering $143 billion. Yet the rupee trades now at around 96.79 to the dollar. After a two-month hiatus, the exodus of FII funds resumed in September with net outflows of $6 billion.

The economic environment has changed materially in two respects since June. The price of crude oil has gone up from $85-90 to over $100 now. This is the price of oil futures. The market price of crude futures does not reflect the landed cost to India. The government's chief economic advisor says that the price of India's oil import basket is $114 today. That is an increase of 61 per cent over the average price of $71 in FY26. We now face oil prices well above our comfort range.

The second factor is the decision of the United States Federal Reserve last month to raise the policy rate by 25 basis points. The betting is that more rate hikes by the Fed are in the offing as inflation in the US remains above the target.

Any rise in Treasury yields affects India in two ways. One, it results in an exit of funds from emerging markets in general, which causes the rupee to depreciate. Two, it results in a narrowing of the yields on 10-year bonds in the US and in India. At 195 basis points, the difference in yields on 10-year government bonds is at its lowest in five years. This factor, too, contributes to the downward pressure on the rupee.

The RBI does not wish to defend any particular value of the rupee. Nevertheless, it has to respond to a sharp depreciation in the rupee because that can stoke domestic inflation. The measures announced in June have not been able to contain the rupee's depreciation. They ended up creating surplus liquidity in the system, about half of which has since been mopped up by the RBI. Surplus liquidity in the system renders the transmission of rate hikes that much more difficult.

Thus, by deferring a rate hike in June and August, the RBI is now having to deal with several issues: Higher oil prices, surplus liquidity, higher US Treasury yields, a narrower differential between long-term yields in the US and India, and a continued exodus of FII funds. A pre-emptive hike in the policy rate would have made its job easier. It would conceivably have eased the requirement for intervention through dollar sales in the foreign exchange market.

Monetary policy is said to be forward-looking. However, there is a serious limitation to how "forward-looking" is understood today. Central banks (and international agencies) tend to take a view on the economic situation, outline a baseline forecast and say it is subject to "geopolitical risks".

In a world in which geopolitical risks are pretty much the norm, such an approach will not do. Central banks cannot afford to react to geopolitical risks — wars, sanctions, trade conflicts — after these have materialised. They will need to factor geopolitical risks explicitly into monetary policy, not treat them as a sideshow. How long will conflicts stretch out? What would that mean for energy prices and supply chain disruptions? Central banks need to ask and answer questions such as these in conducting monetary policy.

In June and August, the questions that needed to be asked were: One, does the US-Iran conflict have a reasonable chance of resolution? And, two, if it does not, what does that bode for oil prices? The answers should have been clear enough. The Iranian and American positions on the core issues were (and still are) so far apart that there was little chance of an amicable resolution. And that meant the continued disruption of oil supplies and an inexorable climb in oil prices to well above the $85-90 range. The implications of oil prices rising above $100 and staying there should have been factored into monetary policy.

Central banks need to create a Strategic Affairs unit that includes people with expertise in international relations, defence studies, the energy sector and economics. The idea is not to replicate the work done in ministries and intelligence agencies. Central banks cannot be in the business of forecasting wars. Rather, the unit must liaise with the concerned agencies and obtain and process geopolitical intelligence relevant to maintaining economic stability.

Central banks know how to respond if there is a major disruption that causes oil prices to rise to $120. What they need is a distribution of probabilities about the disruption. The MPC would have before it, say, a baseline forecast of oil prices of $85-90 per barrel with a 30 per cent probability that oil prices would rise to $120 following a major disruption in the Strait of Hormuz. It would then be better placed to judge whether a rate hike and the associated sacrifice of growth are justified.

The distribution of probabilities is precisely what the Strategic Affairs unit would seek to determine. The unit would convert the assessments it receives into scenarios for oil prices, inflation and exchange rates with probabilities attached to each scenario.

The RBI's biannual Monetary Policy Report provides fan charts for inflation and gross domestic product growth, indicating a range of outcomes. These are statistical probabilities based on historical modelling. What is required is scenario-building for current geopolitical risks of the sort outlined above. Creating a Strategic Affairs unit would signal to the world that the appreciation of geopolitical risks has moved centre-stage at the RBI.

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Tata rift echoes beyond Bombay House



THE OCCASIONAL ASIDE

AMIT TANDON

In 1983, Swraj Paul tried to take control of Escorts and Delhi Cloth and General Mills (DCM) by buying their shares on the market. By various accounts, he acquired 7.5 per cent in Escorts, while the Nanda family controlled around 5 per cent; and 13 per cent of DCM, compared with the Shri Ram family's 10 per cent. Though Paul eventually withdrew his bid, the episode exposed how many families controlled large companies with single-digit stakes until then, relying on the support of state-owned financial institutions. Their obvious response to this attack was to raise their ownership. Today, promoter shareholding in the Nifty500 averages around 50 per cent.

More than four decades later, the challenge for controlling-shareholders comes not from outside, but from within. On September 17, the Tata Sons board reappointed N Chandrasekaran and cleared the path to listing the company, over the opposition of Noel Tata, chairman of Tata Trusts, which owns 66 per cent of Tata Sons and seen as the keeper of its values, fears that a listing will dilute its charter.

Business families will read the dispute as a warning that ownership alone does not guarantee control of the boardroom, overturning an article of faith since 1983 — that a bigger stake is the surest defence. The fallout is likely to play out across at least four fronts.

First, more families may choose to keep control as chairperson or in an executive capacity, rather than hand it to professional managers. A 2024 Deloitte study of 41 Nifty 50 companies (excluding public-sector enterprises) found that 31 were run by non-promoter chief executive officers and only 10 by promoters. Across India Inc as a whole, the share is likely to be lower still, given that about two-thirds of the S&P BSE 500 companies are family-owned. This episode could slow, or even reverse, the move towards professionalising businesses.

Will this impact India Inc's performance? Families can point to evidence that ownership commitment pays. Credit Suisse's Family 1000 research found that since 2006, family- or founder-owned listed companies have outperformed non-family companies by an annual average of 370 basis points. And in India, a study of 4,056 promoter-owned listed firms found that in group-affiliated companies, the level of promoter ownership had no effect on performance.

But the evidence cuts both ways. A landmark study of Danish firms found that when the CEO role passed to a family member, operating profitability fell by at least four percentage points. Even Credit Suisse found that family-owned companies score slightly lower on corporate governance than their non-family peers. A study covering 131 large listed Indian companies shows family firms with non-family CEOs performed better than those with family CEOs. Owning a company is different from running it.

Second, promoters may lean towards independent directors who are unlikely to challenge them. India's problem is not too few independent directors but the wrong ones, appointed through processes that favour reputation over capability. Tuhin Kanta Pandey, chairman of the Securities and Exchange Board of India, has urged boards to recruit independent directors from beyond cosy networks and equip them to dissent, observing that "a board that never disagrees is not aligned — it's asleep". If promoters respond by packing boards with pliant directors, they will weaken the very oversight that minority shareholders rely on. And as one promoter told *Business Standard*, long-serving professionals can build fiefdoms and fill boards with people unlikely to challenge them.

Third, families will revisit their governance charters, since professionalising a board need not mean sidelining promoters. Companies will spell out who sets strategy, who executes it, and how disagreements are resolved, often through Articles of Association listing reserved matters that need promoter approval. Expect tighter affirmative voting rights, explicit rules on how nominee directors must vote, and clauses on replacing nominee directors and breaking board deadlocks, though nominees still owe their fiduciary duty to the company, not to whoever appointed them.

Yet drafting has limits. No document can fully anticipate a split within the owning family. And if affirmative rights written into charter documents do not hold, foreign direct investors, who rely on such rights, may grow more cautious.

Fourth, families will streamline their shareholding. Many groups still carry layers of crossholdings, investment companies and informal arrangements dating back decades. Families will collapse these into single holding vehicles, trusts or even individual names, to put control on a clearer legal footing. This is critical because today's fault lines often run within families, not with outsiders — the Chhabrias at Finolex, the Kirloskars, the Kalyanis and Hiremaths — to name just a few. These cases show how fragile even documented settlements, holding companies, trusts and wills can be.

In 1983, families protected control by raising their stakes. A bigger stake may not be enough if pressure comes from within. The current episode exposes friction that legal drafting cannot resolve. The businesses that come through will be those that plan succession early, apply their own rules consistently and leave management to professionals — they can work with. Such relationships rest on mutual trust and a shared long-term vision. The question now will no longer be whether someone is the best CEO in the market, but whether the controlling and minority shareholders, the boards and managements will align, to pull in the same direction.

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The deep mind of Demis Hassabis

BOOK REVIEW

DEVANGSHU DATTA

Since the release of the first iteration of ChatGPT in late 2022, artificial intelligence (AI) has dominated the conversation. While AI has been responsible for many startling developments, it has also been controversial with debates raging about the dangers of the technology.

One AI-driven achievement that is unequivocally beneficial is the work on protein-folding. An AI algorithm, AlphaFold, developed a compendium of 260 million protein structures that is publicly available. This has helped accelerate drug-development and the understanding of diseases. The man responsible, Demis Hassabis — and John Jumper, who led his team at DeepMind — received a well-deserved 2024 Nobel Prize for chemistry.

The author of this book is a veteran journalist who has covered the relevant beats for decades for *The Washington Post* and *The Economist*. He had deep access (if readers will forgive the pun) spending hundreds of hours chatting with Mr Hassabis and his associates over a three-year period. So the book could be described as definitive, if there can be such a thing in AI where things evolve with such rapidity.

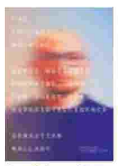
Sebastian Mallaby covers Mr Hassabis' life, the creation of DeepMind, and his struggles to keep the company's (financially unrewarding) research focus, while convincing investors to keep funding it. The book also covers the race between different schools of AI as developed by different companies and researchers. It attempts to explain much of the technology in non-technical language. It maps corporate battles between the world's mega-billionaires as they jumped on to the AI bandwagon and tried to steal marches on each other.

The corporate shenanigans are well documented, along with vignettes that throw light on the tech bro culture and somewhat childish tantrums that are part and parcel of Silicon Valley. The author struggles, however, when it comes to explaining the technology, sometimes moving into near-meaningless verbiage. He also struggles to stay neutral when charting the course of ethical deployment of AI.

Mr Mallaby is also sympathetic to Mustafa Suleyman, a former associate and co-founder of DeepMind and once a close friend of Mr Hassabis, who was a pioneer in the battle to keep AI ethical. Mr Suleyman is also a formidable thinker, whose heart is probably in the right place. But he caused big fissures in DeepMind and may have permanently damaged the AI ethics movement and AI's applications to health care, with his abrasive style of functioning.

So who is Demis Hassabis? He's a Londoner through and through who's refused to migrate to Silicon Valley. He's the son of immigrants with a Greek-Cypriot father, who was a street musician, and a Singaporean Chinese mother who worked as a nurse. At age five, it became obvious that he was extraordinarily gifted. One of his professors remarked that while most Nobel winners need to be talented and lucky (in picking research focus), it was obvious Mr Hassabis would make it to the top in whatever field he chose.

By 11, he was the second-best chess-player of his generation (Judit Polgar was no 1). By 15, he was a multiple world gaming champion and designing some of the most popular games in history. He refused a seven figure salary from Bullfrog (a famous design studio) to study computer science at Cambridge. At 20, he emerged with a double first. By then, he was obsessed with "solving intelligence". That led to a switch to neuroscience, which he considered crucial for the next stage in developing computer intelligence. His PhD thesis in neuroscience found a critical link between memory and imagination and has been cited thousands of times. After that, he did post-doctoral research at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



The Infinity Machine: Demis Hassabis, Deepmind, and the Quest for Superintelligence
by Sebastian Mallaby
Published by Penguin
464 pages ₹1,299

When he founded DeepMind, many observers were puzzled by the company and its unusual focus. DeepMind remained London-based. It was a for-profit. Mr Hassabis convinced a few London angels to come up with seed funding, and then Peter Thiel and Elon Musk gave him money. Finally, Google bought the company. Amazingly, Mr Hassabis was allowed to continue running it, and to continue being headquartered in London and focused on whatever he considered interesting in his quest to solve intelligence.

In 2016, Mr Hassabis and his team cracked the most mathematically intractable game — Go — creating an algorithm AlphaGo, which beat a reigning world champion (and drove him into retirement within two years). A refinement created the Alphazero algorithm, which taught itself with almost no human assistance. That revolutionised the computer approach to chess, Go, and shogi. The Alpha algorithm was how DeepMind initially attacked protein folding which is orders of magnitude more difficult.

This account could not have been written without the level of access Mr Mallaby developed. The book is carefully researched and almost obsessively footnoted, with independent verification and sources for almost every factual statement and every quote.

But access of this order can lead to a version of Stockholm Syndrome where the writer develops too much empathy for a subject. Mr Mallaby openly admires Mr Hassabis and that means he is almost uncritical in his assessment of an admittedly extraordinary individual.

The reviewer is a New Delhi-based independent journalist

OUR VIEW

ISTOCKPHOTO



If a pilot goes rogue, can software grab control?

The recent FlyDubai cockpit scare may make fly-by-wire tech seem like an aviation security solution. The hitch has been that remote aircraft control technology is not free of risk either

The cockpit clash aboard a FlyDubai flight late last month that nearly cost the crew and passengers their lives exposed a worrisome vulnerability in civil aviation. Flying from Dubai to Tel Aviv, the aircraft plunged after its co-pilot attacked the captain, who, despite being injured, managed to unlock the heavily secured cockpit door, enabling passengers to storm in and subdue the attacker. The plane landed safely but highlighted a paradox in aviation security. Reinforced cockpit doors, mandated globally after 9/11, were designed to keep hijackers out—and unable to grab flight controls. Ironically, the high-security door was the obstacle to a rescue in this case as the threat came from within the cockpit. But the big question raised by the episode is this: In this era of drones and self-driving cars, why can't we count on remote intervention if a pilot goes rogue?

Technology to give computers greater control exists. Fly-by-wire (FBW), in development since the 1930s, replaced mechanical links with electronic signals. In 1972, the US space agency Nasa modified an F-8 Crusader to fly with a fully digital FBW system. Modern FBW systems process pilot commands digitally through onboard tech. In military aviation, fighters like the F-16 can prevent ground collisions with systems that override pilot inputs. India's Tejas has automated stabilizers in case a pilot blacks out or suffers severe spatial disorientation. National Aerospace Laboratories under India's Council of Scientific and Industrial Research is working on 'command-by-wire' flight control. Civil aviation has also been giving computers greater authority. Airbus aircraft use digital flight-envelope protections that can reject commands that defy safety limits, while Boeing typically prefers more empowered pilots, with systems resisting risky inputs rather than imposing danger lines. Neither approach, however, crosses the red line of letting software or a remote operator snatch away control. FBW stops short of that because a tech system powerful enough to neutralize a rogue pilot's actions would also create risks of its own. A ground link or onboard algorithm that can fly the plane pilotless could also be hacked, compromised or triggered by a software failure. Boeing's 2006 'uninterruptible autopilot' patent illustrates the dilemma. It envisages detecting a security breach, isolating pilots and turning control over to a certified pilot on the ground through an encrypted satellite link. Hack-proof or not, it has not been implemented.

Machine authority is advancing in various ways. MIT's Air-Guardian uses eye-tracking to monitor where pilots are looking and spot divergences in human and machine attention. Garmin's Emergency Autoland goes further, taking complete control if a pilot is unable to operate; it is designed to pick an airport, contact air-traffic controllers and land the plane on its own. Certified by the US Federal Aviation Administration, it has been installed in over 2,000 aircraft so far. Although regulators may be ready to let software take control when a pilot is incapacitated, a rogue pilot who is conscious and capable of flying poses an entirely different threat. The Dubai-Tel Aviv flight was saved by a captain who fought back, passengers who helped and crew who restored control. But relying on human bravery is dicey. Flight safety may need better tech support. The judgement calls that confront us are when to let software overrule a human and who takes that decision.

THEIR VIEW

Securities transaction tax: what explains its charmed existence?

It began in lieu of capital-gains tax relief but has survived its original rationale on flimsy grounds



SRINATH SRIDHARAN & ARJUN RAGHAVENDRA M.
are, respectively, a corporate advisor and author of 'Family and Dhanda'; and a Supreme Court advocate and former IRS officer.

The securities transaction tax (STT) was born in July 2004 as one half of a bargain. Long-term capital gains (LTCG) tax on listed equity was axed, while tax on short-term gains was cut to 10%, but a new STT was levied in lieu of that relief. Every exchange trade would bear this tiny levy, collected at source and thus almost impossible to evade.

Capital gains tax was litigation-prone, contested between business income and investment gain. A transaction tax settled the matter at the moment of trade. The levy was never meant to be a revenue source; it was a receipt for the tax-relief it arrived with. Broker pushback within weeks produced differentiated rates that survive today; they are highest on delivery and lowest on derivatives.

Two decades on, the exemption has disappeared but the receipt remains. In 2018, LTCG tax returned at 10% above a threshold. In July 2024, it rose to 12.5%, while the short-term gains tax went up to 20%. STT did not fall in step. It was raised on derivatives in 2023, then in 2024, and again in the 2026-27 budget, with futures at 0.05% of traded value and options at 0.15% of premium. The 2026 investor therefore pays capital-gains tax alongside the transaction tax originally introduced in exchange for tax relief.

In 2004, taxing gains on securities was a problem. But today, exchanges, brokers, depositories and tax systems leave an electronic trail and capital gains can be reported and reconciled across institutions. A tax designed to overcome the data limitations of 2004 should not become permanent merely because it is easy and sizeable to collect.

In 2023-24, the NSE Nifty rose about 28% and STT collections grew 35%. In 2024-25, the Nifty went up 5.3% while STT jumped 58%to ₹53,296 crore. In 2025-26, the Nifty fell 5% and the Sensex 7%, yet STT still rose 8% to ₹57,522 crore. This year, with derivatives volumes under pressure from tighter contract size and collateral rules, collections to mid-September are up 53%.

The STT increasingly measures how many times the same rupee changes hands in a session. A treasury that celebrates higher collections risks making an old error in fiscal reasoning—reading higher tax collections as evidence of economic growth when it is not.

A larger question looms as Indian households embrace financial markets. When STT was introduced, the country had fewer than 10 million demat accounts. Today, there are about 230 million, most opened in the last six years. A levy designed when equity was a boutique pursuit now falls on the mass saver who was drawn into markets through systematic investment plans (SIPs) and inclusion drives. Less than a fifth trade actively, so the burden is concentrated. The question is whether India is drawing households into investing or trading.

A Securities and Exchange Board of India's study sharpens the concern. Individual traders lost ₹91,685 crore in equity derivatives in 2025-26, while their STT bill rose 35% to ₹6,645 crore. STT accounted for 27% of their transaction costs, up from 13% in 2021-22. Options accounted for 92% of aggregate individual losses. The study also found that 4.3 million individual derivatives traders, around 35%, had no underlying equity portfolio at the end of 2025-26, while 78% had equity portfolios below ₹1 lakh. India has spent years encouraging household financialization through demat accounts, mutual funds, etc. If participation shifts towards leveraged or frequent derivatives activity, its quality deserves attention alongside its scale.

There is a policy contradiction here. Sebi spent 2025 and 2026 curbing speculative derivatives volumes as a matter of investor protection, while the exchequer budgeted ₹73,700 crore from STT in 2026-27 and raised rates. This budget speech described the hikes as a "reasonable course correction" in the futures and derivatives segment while linking it to additional revenue. So one arm of the state treats the fever while the other is billing it.

The case for revisiting STT rests on three failures. Its reason vanished in 2018 when the capital-gains tax-off was withdrawn. Its original purpose was defeated when it became a behavioural tool for derivatives intervention, apart from a coffer-filler. Its conflicted nature is exposed when the budget counts on revenue from trading activity that the regulator is trying to reduce.

The question is whether a tax, in this case the STT, whose reason, logic and original bargain have disappeared should survive simply because the receipt remains attractive.

QUICK READ

The securities transaction tax came into existence in 2004 as a tiny token levy in place of a heavy capital gains tax burden. It was a tracker rather than a revenue source for the Centre.

Not only has capital gains tax come right back since then, STT has turned into both a coffer filler and market intervention tool in defiance of its purpose, and that too, in a contradictory way.

10 YEARS AGO


mint
Who regulated spot exchanges?

JUST A THOUGHT

It is a fairly open secret that almost all systems can be hacked, somehow. It is a less spoken of secret that such hacking has actually gone quite mainstream.

DAN KAMINSKY

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Achtung: discontent seems set to amplify across Europe

RAHUL JACOB



is a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

More than 75 years after the end of World War II, conflict is spreading across Europe once again. But this time, the antagonism is within nations, and the contest, though fierce, is mostly non-violent and will be determined by the ballot box. This week alone, Spain's left-of-centre prime minister Pedro Sánchez dissolved parliament early and called for fresh elections after his plan to speed up housing projects in the country was blocked by his right-wing political opponents. Sánchez was responding to nationwide outrage after an 87-year-old woman was evicted from her Madrid apartment because she was unable to meet a rent increase, triggering mass protests over the country's lack of housing.

In France, meanwhile, on Tuesday more than 250,000 people took to the streets to protest poor conditions in state schools, exacerbated by severe budget cuts of €43 billion intended to contain a widening deficit, placed at 5.4% of GDP. Students were quickly joined by teachers and firefighters as the movement widened. The far-right front-runner for next year's presidential election, Marine Le Pen, accused the far left of instigating violence.

Last week, the UK's Prime Minister Andy Burnham told his Labour Party conference that he would, in effect, roll back Thatcherism. Burnham's folksy manner and cost-of-living band aids have bolstered Labour's prospects, which have also been helped by a spate of scandals affecting the anti-immigration UK Reform Party led by Nigel Farage. Appointed prime minister this summer, Burnham moved quickly to lower taxes on energy for a fixed duration in response to the Strait of Hormuz conflict, giving people "breathing space" as fuel costs rose. He also boldly announced that his government planned to curb the rise in pension costs while finding funds for increasing the care of elderly people in need of attention at home. And he plans a survey of the UK to see if people want to undo Brexit. The UK's budget this month will offer an insight into how he plans to make good on his many promises.

It is too early to determine whether Burnham's honeymoon will last, but the centre-left across the developed world could learn something from the man who was Manchester's mayor for almost a decade. On top of that list should be Burnham's focus on cost-of-living issues and his ability to signal a decisive turn away from technocratic neo-liberalism. By contrast, President Friedrich Merz of Germany, a corporate lawyer, who in breaks from politics was chair of the supervisory board of BlackRock Germany, and President Emmanuel Macron of France, a former investment banker, seem distant from ground-level concerns even as right-wing populists enjoy a huge upswing in their nations. Both these leaders have abysmal approval ratings in their respective countries.

Burnham's upbeat style is somewhat similar to that of New York City's mayor Zohran Mamdani, whose first year in office has been characterized by wild popularity as he tackles issues seemingly as simple as filling potholes, complete with TikTok videos to prove it, and more complex ones such as setting up low-cost grocery stores across the five boroughs of New York.

QUICK READ

Protests in France have captured attention but youth restlessness is visible in Spain, Germany and other countries. Unlike the UK's Andy Burnham, political leaders seem woefully out of touch.

Sharp budget cuts forced by costlier credit are adding to discontent over failing welfare provisions and making space for political extremes. It all points to European turbulence ahead.

Regardless of who is in power, the real crisis in the West is a rise in short-term debt coinciding with rising interest rates. This is especially true of the US, UK and France. Inevitably, governments struggle to make the case that generous welfare spending on pensions and healthcare needs to be cut. If handled poorly, as in France, whose budget proposed to cut primary and secondary teacher positions against a backdrop of already overcrowded classrooms, mass protests could easily follow. The problem is that Western governments spent too much in response to the financial crisis of 2008 and the pandemic, and now the cutbacks are falling inequitably upon public services even as stock markets have risen and housing becomes more expensive. Spain has built fewer homes per capita than any high-income country in the past decade, according to the *Financial Times*. More than half of young adults live with their parents, compared with a third in 2005. The UK's Labour government is well behind its targets for building new housing in the country.

In this environment of growing inequality and housing stress, budget cuts are an easy target for the far right or far left, in part because social media makes it easier for propagandists to make wild claims about an influx of immigrants, for instance, or the unfairness of cutbacks without those claims being evaluated by independent media. Add to this general discontent the fact that a slowdown in job creation across the developed world—as in India—is disproportionately hurting new entrants to the workforce, and you have the makings of a series of political crises in the West. Youth unemployment in Italy is now at 20% Even in the US, a reliable job-creating machine, youth unemployment at 7% is twice that of older cohorts.

On Monday, I was awoken at 5.30am by the din of student protests outside the college of medicine in Paris. As the day progressed, the protests grew larger and louder still, with organizers saying the actual number across the country was half a million. What's remarkable was how unfazed my host and the city at large seemed. Perpetual political despondency in our world of inadequate governance and narrowing policy choices is now simply commonplace.

MY VIEW | ACUTE ANGLE

Demographic dissidents: Gen Z favours politics of the present

Education and jobs in a free and open society are clearly the top priorities of a generation born between 1997 and 2012



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AP

Tens of thousands of Indians are on the streets again. Led by a bolt-from-the-blue insurgent movement of the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP), citizens are protesting the unprecedented culling of voter rolls through the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) 'process.' They are demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, under whose leadership millions of voters were ruled ineligible to cast their ballots. In West Bengal, this amounted to about 12% of the electorate. This movement comes merely weeks after a similar agitation by the CJP led to the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan as India's education minister.

Recent youth movements in India's neighbourhood have had momentous consequences. In Bangladesh, a student movement led, after a military intervention, to the resignation and exile of its then prime minister Sheikh Hasina in 2024. In 2025, a youth movement in Nepal forced the resignation of the prime minister and the installation of a caretaker government. Similar unrest and political pressure elsewhere have led not necessarily to government collapse, but major policy reversals in Kenya, Indonesia, the Philippines and Peru. All these movements are generally labelled 'Gen Z revolutions.' The same Gen Z label is being attached to the CJP-led protests in India.

The name 'Gen Z' comes from the US, where the need to categorize and label is an imperative of social scientists. People born after World War II have been assigned to generational cohorts spanning 15 years. Hence, we have Baby Boomers (born between 1950 and 1964), Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980), Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and Gen Alpha (born in 2013 and later). The Gen Z population is between 14 and 29 years old.

Is there anything other than age that the global Gen Z shares? An expert consensus suggests that it's their digital immersion in apps like TikTok, YouTube and Instagram to consume entertainment and information. Entertainment and information are usually culture-specific, but what's common is the many hours they spend online, how they create online identities and organize (socially and politically) online. They also supposedly share concerns about climate change, inequality, corruption and established political parties. Gen Z is said to be left-leaning. One is reminded of the quote (usually misattributed to Churchill): "If you're not a liberal at 20, you have no heart; if you're not a conservative by 40, you have no brain."

Just as relevant may be the question of whether there are things that almost all 14-29 year olds share regardless of when they were born, be it 1905 or 2005. That list is quite long. This is the age they seek mates, have children (though that is changing with delayed marriage and parenthood), finish education, find work and move. The single most important determinant of migration propensity is age, and this is the age group that changes location with the least hesitation. These features are part and parcel of a mentality that is less fearful and more risk-oriented than that of elders, that can do romantic things like falling recklessly in love with a person or an idea.

This combination of digital immersion, online politics and risk-orientation may indeed be global, but there are major differences in the size of Gen Z between the developed and developing world. In India, Gen Z is the bulkiest cohort. It has about 407 million people, or about 27.6% of the population. Indonesia's share is a little less, and Nigeria's a little larger. Together with the Millennials, Gen Z makes up roughly half of India's people (and well more than half the electorate). In contrast, Gen Z makes up about 20.9% of the US, 18.8% of China, 15.8% of Germany and only 14.5% of Japan.

Think of the ways in which this demographic difference plays out politically. In the US, two-thirds of voters under 30 are left-oriented; the shares are roughly reversed for voters over 50. Had the share of younger voters in the US been similar to India's, the Democratic party would win a lot more. In Germany, where the youth vote is even smaller than in the US, the extreme-right, anti-immigration Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) made stunning electoral gains in two states in the last onth. The party's vision of a better future for the older German electorate looks very much like a past in which there was nobody who looked or behaved differently.

QUICK READ

Digital immersion, online politics and risk-orientation are common to Gen Z globally. In India, it's also the bulkiest age cohort with over 400 million people. That's more than every fourth Indian.

A youth bulge needn't always boost growth. Unless smart policy choices are made on education and development, a demographic dividend can turn into demographic dissidence.

What does a better future look like for the Gen Z-heavy Indian electorate? The political messaging from the Centre asks them to look at a glorious untainted past, supposedly last achieved a millennium ago. But Gen Z is grounded in a present in which education and jobs are understandably top priorities. A better future for them is one in which they have decent, well-paid work in a free and open society. But the reality is that youth unemployment is routinely higher than it is in the overall population and young people are routinely shut out of decision-making institutions and processes by entrenched older political elites. "These are kids," they hear, "what do they know about how things work?"

India's demographic present is not unanticipated. In fact, these fat cohorts of Millennials and Gen Z were supposed to provide a demographic dividend of high economic growth enabled by a low dependency ratio (with the country's working-age population being larger than its young and old dependent populations). This is never a given; it is only possible when capable governments make smart choices on education and development. Without smart choices—and worse, a misdirection of priorities focusing on identity politics—a demographic dividend can turn into demographic dissidence.

If the ability to sing all six stanzas of Vande Mataram improved the job prospects of Gen Z, they would happily memorize the whole poem. After all, they have had to memorize much in order to ascend a steep educational ladder. Absent that, many in Gen Z will dissent. Even if active dissenters comprise a mere 5% of the cohort, their number—20 million—is staggering. And they will dissent because it's their future that's at stake.

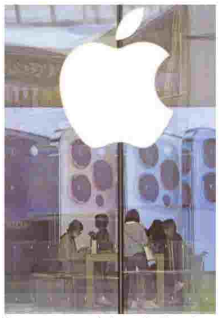
MINT CURATOR

Expect Apple's results to hinge on its foldable iPhone gambit

Are brand loyalists awaiting Duo deliveries? Analysts aren't sure



DAVE LEE
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Suspense surrounds the market fate of Apple's pricey new model. AP

A big question Apple Inc analysts are asking is: How many consumers are waiting for the iPhone Duo? The answer is hugely important to Apple's stock this year and beyond. The new iPhone Pro range has been out for nearly three weeks, and from the get-go analysts noted somewhat flat consumer interest compared with last year's Pro models.

One thesis is that a significant number of would-be buyers are waiting for Apple's new foldable model, which doesn't come out until 23 October.

If that's true, then it's good news for Apple, its investors and the company's new chief executive officer, John Ternus—who would love a breakout hit to begin his tenure. At a starting price of $1,999, the Duo would boost the iPhone's average selling price—a key metric watched by Wall Street. Add the signal that Duo's success would suggest Apple still has the innovative 'juice,' as they say, and the stock could build on what's already been a banner year—up 22% since the start of the year.

But if it's not the case, and consumers are just holding off on an upgrade altogether, Apple's bold attempt to breathe new life into its most important product will appear to have fallen flat, a sign that even Apple couldn't bring the potentially lucrative foldable form factor to the masses.

For clues on what's going on with the iPhone, analysts look to a simple but imperfect metric: wait times for delivery when customers try to buy a device. When the new iPhone Pro was available for pre-orders, analysts at both Bank of America (BoA) and UBS observed muted demand compared with last year's models. "Globally, on average, ship time for the iPhone 18 Pro is currently at 14 days (vs. 18 days for iPhone 17 Pro) while iPhone 18 Pro Max stands at 18 days (vs. 25 days last year)," BoA noted at the time.

UBS saw a smaller difference but the same trend: muted demand for the iPhone 18 Pro. "While we acknowledge the possibility that muted wait times for the Pro and Pro Max could suggest consumers are delaying their purchase decisions for the Duo," its analysts wrote, "we believe that the $1,999 starting price could limit incremental unit upside." (In other words: Don't count on it being Duo demand holding the Pro back.)

In the couple of weeks since, UBS has noted an uptick in demand for the Pro and Pro Max—that is, a lengthening of delivery times. It is, for sure, an imperfect metric. Apple might have just had more inventory ready to go this year compared with 2025. And this is the first year that Apple has split the launch of its premium and basic tiers into different seasons—the less expensive non-Pro iPhones come out next year—so inventory management might be a little more straightforward.

But it also might be the case that some consumers have been turned off by the $100 price increases across the board for Apple's flagship products, mainly caused by the ballooning cost of memory chips. The company and the carriers it works with have been trying to soften the blow by increasing trade-in value of old devices and introducing new payment options, most notably Apple's new leasing programme. It still may not be enough.

A poor iPhone cycle is bad for Apple's stock unless something significant elsewhere in its business—such as its services segment—is able to offset the news. This year's offset, if iPhone Pro sales require one, could be a frenzy at Apple's glistening stores across the world as users clamour for the iPhone Duo when it's released.

Apple would need IDC's estimate of 10 million iPhone Duos sold in the first 12 months to be on the money. To reach that, Apple will need to overcome reported manufacturing challenges that could impact initial supply.

Then again, a headline-grabbing shortage of a hot new product has its upside. Sales of the Duo will be a fraction of the over 250 million iPhones Apple is expected to ship this year, but those sales will consolidate any perception of how Apple's top product still has room to grow.

As it happened, I spent more than an hour at Apple's downtown Brooklyn store on Sunday, waiting on a repair to my iPhone 15 Pro which, like its owner, is ageing but still sufficiently capable. As I sat, to my right was a table of glowing iPhone 18 Pro and Pro Max models, attracting only limited interest. Other than different colours and incremental improvements to the camera and battery, there's nothing much to see. Yet, I heard at least three people inquire about the iPhone Duo.

"Are you getting a lot of that?" I asked the staff member when she came to help me. "Oh yeah," she laughed. "All day." Whether those kinds of customers are ready to spend, or are just curious, will set the mood for Apple this year. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

News of the death of privacy isn't all that exaggerated

ARESH SHIRALI



is editor of Mint Views.

Nobody really has privacy anymore. I thought I should find a way to test this hypothesis, but it's futile. After all, some 'effective altruists' of the tech world even want the real world's bugs mapped—for their own good, of course. Imagine waking up with a clunky exoskeleton; it would be impossible to handle a gadget, let alone get online, but equally hard to fall off the grid. Never mind humans, technology has clearly evolved. My own effort to stay a social-media recluse got crushed by the might of 'network effects,' my will to keep my face off the internet in the fond hope of free speech in old age wilted a decade ago, and my ploys to mask myself for chatbots were foiled by the power of artificial intelligence (AI).

It's futile to resist. So here's the question that gets thrown at me every now and then: why is privacy such a big deal?

For an individual, the answer is clear. Not only is it critical to life and liberty as a basic right, it liberates thought—and action, so long as nobody else is hurt; and with luck, that can yield new ideas and spell progress. Does the same apply to a private company? In matters of strategy, innovation and trade secrets that set it apart, yes. Privacy is key. As for finance, it depends on who else bears risk, which is why widely owned firms must disclose a larger template of data than those that are not publicly listed.

In the case of Tata Sons, being privately held lets it allot funds for charity and wealth creation free of external pressure. The argument that India needs it to go public for overall financial stability rests on the premise that a bigger window to its affairs would keep Tata's apex company from harming others if it happens to stumble.

Since folly is folly, any entity can. On a visit to the Levant in 1873, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata (1839-1904) joked in his diary that the rugged roads he found may have been built "to prove by a toil of actual experience that the way to Hell is paved with good resolutions." The founder of the Tata Group might as well have been talking about business.

Take the story of Tata Finance Ltd (TFL), which remained a flicker on my radar after a failed attempt as a college kid at buying its shares via its public offer of early 1991 (an issue-price cap had made it a lottery with dismal odds). Its goals struck me as worthy. Yet, about a decade later, a subsidiary of a TFL sub-unit called Inshaallah Investments was wrapped up in a scandal over dodgy off-market equity trades that looked like a device to shuffle losses around. The Group's top brass was alarmed, an official probe ensued, and in 2005, TFL was folded into Tata Motors. The episode showed how corporate complexity could obscure fishy deals. It also exposed as flaky the notion of publicly listed companies being more angelic.

With AI sleuths now on the prowl, perhaps nothing can escape detection anymore. Yet, it puzzles me how the economy's interests would be better served by wide investor scrutiny of Tata Sons if it thwarts both its majority owner's will and charity mission. While solvency woes at its operating units could rattle non-Tata financial firms, at least in theory, is this risk acute enough to justify a statist end to its ownership privacy?

But then, privacy often seems like a doomed cause even at its most basic level. Although India's law to protect our personal data is finally going into force, it's yet to grant us a modicum of control over what online operators know about us.

In a way, it's already too late. Not just Big Tech, other 'tech bros' have been watching. Today, profiles held in cyber memory are said to be so vivid in their details that we may no longer be able to tell real folks apart from AI-crafted clones.

Nor should we pretend there's no valid reason to keep any payment confidential. Cash is used not just for shady deals, but also for worthy causes that may suffer if their funding can be traced. Think of slums where the digital trails of UPI transfers let menfolk cramp the agency of women. Sometimes, do-gooders need masks too, and this is just one reason why India's e-rupee ought to mimic cash as closely as possible.

QUICK READ

Privacy deprivation is a sigh of the times. In a world under Big Tech's watch and in a country agog with Tata Sons' private status, privacy looks like a quantum cat: it's both dead and alive.

So what? Scant concern for privacy doesn't just do injustice to a basic right, it could arguably have economic consequences for an economy counting on the efficiency of market signals.

The refrain that privacy is valued only by people up to no good is, in effect, a denial of diversity. For optimal outcomes, market theory posits that diverse views and cues must blend freely into signals—like prices—to guide the allocation of resources. In other words, the blended agency of many mutual strangers would do a better job of putting an economy's money, minds and much else to productive work than a few state planners likely to think alike. Granted, for all its efficiency, the market can go wrong; it may fail to factor in climate risks, for instance. Even so, it's an economic formula that mostly works, and for a market economy to thrive, it must constantly be fed with an endless variety of analyses, insights, motives, etc—for which privacy must make space. The same applies to the market for ideas.

As for my personal privacy, what spooked me last was a chatbot's response to a query on quantum AI that took care not to reveal any filial motive. "Your dad's theorem," it guessed to my alarm, had been of help. It had ensured that a quantum neural network could work with real probabilities to deliver valid outputs. Uh-oh.

Weak ₹ Can Help Weather Turbulence

Calling it undervalued creates recovery space

Rupee's value against a weighted basket of trading partner currencies, adjusted for inflation, is now at levels seen during the US taper tantrum of 2013-14. Then, as now, rupee's depreciation was on account of international capital flow dynamics rather than any deterioration of India's macroeconomic fundamentals. The real effective exchange rate (REER) at 90 is an anomaly, and the experience has been that rupee appreciates over the subsequent period when this level is reached. Sanjay Malhotra has flagged irrational market behaviour for the rupee's underperformance, and has emphasised the central bank will intervene to curb exchange rate volatility without defending any particular level for the rupee.

International capital market turbulence is being driven by geopolitical risk aversion. Aggressive monetary tightening has reduced the yield differential between advanced and emerging economy debt. Relentless selling by FPIs has created unusually high demand for dollars, and India is not receiving offsetting debt inflows to counteract capital flight from equities. Global bond markets are going through an episode of intense sell-off due to surging energy prices, mounting debt burdens of advanced economies and concern over persistent inflation. AI infrastructure funding requirements have pushed up corporate borrowing. RBI has to ride out the bond market turbulence, while keeping rupee on an orderly path.



This week's repo rate hike addresses both low real interest rates in India and narrow yield differential with US treasuries. Interest rates will have to climb a bit more to bring them to historical averages. RBI's upcycle will play out against bond vigilantism that could influence its trajectory. By acknowledging that rupee is undervalued, RBI is creating space for a recovery once the global market turbulence subsides. Malhotra is anchoring expectations about India's growth by pointing out that rupee has decoupled from the underlying fundamentals. Controlling inflation will be the deliverable against this messaging.

Thou Protest Too Much Against Protest

Delhi Police has reportedly launched a localised 'outreach' campaign to 'discourage' public participation in the scheduled Oct 10 Jantar Mantar demonstration announced by CJP and Left organisations, demanding CEC Gyanesh Kumar's removal and suspension of SIR. After denying permission for the protest gathering, police are now meeting guesthouse owners, RWAs and market associations, asking them to dissuade potential protesters. The job of the police is to maintain law and order, not to pre-emptively conflate the act of protesting with the breach of law and order.

Article 19(1)(b) guarantees citizens the right to assemble peacefully and without arms, subject to reasonable restrictions. Supreme Court has repeatedly recognised this as a legitimate means of expressing grievances, while allowing restrictions to protect public order. Delhi Police should concentrate on ensuring professional policing. Surveillance, drones, CCTV and body cameras can help establish who breached the law and who did not. Those who break the law should be held individually accountable. Peaceful, but loud, protesters should not be treated as suspects by association. Protesters, too, must obey lawful restrictions — not merely as legal obligation, but because disciplined, peaceful action gives a protest greater tactical potency. Both sides must remain alert to agent provocateurs, individuals who may infiltrate to deliberately encourage unlawful acts.



On Oct 10, the test should be simple: protect peaceful assembly, prevent violence and deal firmly with actual lawbreakers. But using official machinery to 'ask' citizens to stay away from a designated protest site, and not exercise a constitutional right, is blatant overreach and misuse of state power.



JUST IN JEST

The Lit Nobel's job isn't to match the name you thought would win

'I've Never Heard of This Writer!' Oh, Gee

Like almost every year, it's unlikely you've heard of this year's Literature Nobel winner. It's unlikelier that you've read anything written by her. Be that as it may, the Swedish Academy that decides on the matter has given the gong to poet and essayist Anne Carson. For literary Canadians, her name and writings are likely to ring a (pre-Christmas) bell. For the rest of us, probably not. But please don't go into your fashionable funk to declare how you've 'never even heard of this writer!'. There are some things still left in heaven and earth, Horatio and Hema, that aren't about popularity.

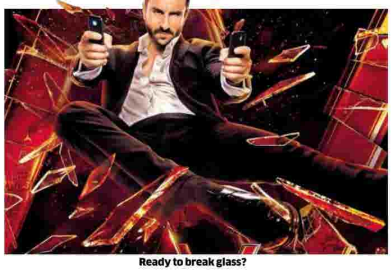
The Literature Nobel comes up for special flak from worthies for recognising 'unknown names' (read: names you don't recognise). The other Nobels don't get this sniping because even cultivated people don't expect themselves to know the edgiest names in physics, chemistry, biology or even economics. Somehow, literature is seen as a different kettle of fish, where every reader sees himself or herself as an expert simply by dint of the fact that he or she reads, maybe even books. That's a mistake that has multiplied in this age of over-information and under-appreciation. The Nobel's job is to recognise the top in their fields as judged by its jury — not by your book club's latest wow. Thankfully, for that, they have another award: Nobel Peace Prize.

TECHNIK Shift from app economy is underway, India must be an early agentic web adopter

BE AGENT PROVOCATEUR



Nikhil Pahwa



Ready to break glass?

A while back, I gave my AI agent my credit card, verification code and expiry date, and asked it to buy soap on Flipkart, in preparation for an agentic commerce hackathon I was participating in. An hour later, I allowed it to give up, after it got stuck in interfaces built to be attractive to humans, but near impossible for an agent to log in and buy something.

The internet is built around the assumption that human beings sit before a screen, search, read, click, fill forms, compare options and complete a transaction. That assumption is beginning to break.

At the hackathon that followed, I built something for Shopify purchases, only to find that Shopify only allows agents 'authorised' by them. Shopify and Flipkart, partners in Google's Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP), are both adversarial to open-source, independently-run agents in their own way.

Many online businesses shun interoperability and lock users in, forcing agents to mimic human behaviour to bypass blocks. Amazon recently blocked Meta's Muse, the hottest agent out there. Many others block agents, while others ask you to solve a puzzle to prove that you're human.

Open-sourced agents like OpenClaw and Hermes have heralded the age of agents. While they're easy to set up, they are complicated to maintain and connect. Personal bots like Instinct, Muse, OpenAI's Dots and SpaceXAI's Grok remove much of this complexity, and are now adding users at unprecedented pace.

We're clearly moving from an app economy to an agentic economy. Apps are a means to an end, force us to fit their workflow, and have limited, siloed context about us. Agents do the opposite: they collect context from these silos via connectors, form a context graph of our preferences through interactions with us, and adapt to our needs.

At another hackathon, I imported my social media history of almost 20 yrs into my own memory vault, and allowed my agent access to my views, preferences and history. Data makes them easier and more intuitive for us to use. My agent generates my packing lists and suggests the right flights. Some day, a personal humanoid will pack for me.

Agent traffic on the internet is about 39% as according to Cloudflare Radar, and about 18% of India traffic. While we don't know how much of it is human-initiated, when agent traffic crosses 50%, it will be a moment of reckoning: will bots begin to matter more to online businesses than humans?



Agents address complexity by translating the web for us, bypassing the need to learn the web the way Western companies designed it for their users

Given that the shift to an agentic web is now irreversible, here are 6 things India needs to get there, sooner the better:

❶ Address adversarial environment Currently, the internet increases agents' navigation costs, and time it takes for them to execute actions. We need to adopt open protocols like Model Context Protocol (MCP) to allow websites and apps to expose resources, tools and structured inputs to AI applications.

❷ Upgrade e-commerce catalogues A human can look at a product page and infer quality and reliability. An agent needs exact data and easier discovery. A minor change in a page layout, or an unexpected pop-up — meant for cross-selling and upselling to humans — can interrupt the entire process.

ONDC (Open Network for Digital Commerce), using the Beckn Protocol, has machine-readable catalogues and structured orders, and could be an agent-native commerce layer that predates MCP. But it's sadly underutilised.

❸ Public services India's government websites are famously torturous for humans to navigate, let alone poor agents. India has built important DPI by separating the underlying rails from applications that use them. Government interfaces can expose authorised, intelligible and interoperable ways for an agent to act on a citizen's behalf: departments can publish safe-action APIs.

❹ More intuitive mechanisms for payments One shouldn't have to give one's agent his or her credit card. While India has UPI AutoPay and e-mandates, we still await the launch of NPCI's Unified Agent Protocol. How this will play out in environments like insurance and lending remains to be seen.

Apps force us to fit their workflow, have limited, siloed context about us. Agents do the opposite: they collect context from these silos, form a context graph of our preference, and adapt to our needs

❺ Safe way to delegate authorisation in regulated environments Not every interaction warrants the same level of authentication. How we bring proportionality to identification of agents — because that involves attribution of that data to a human — needs to be seen from a privacy lens as well. The public internet offers a spectrum from anonymity to verification to both humans and their agents, and thresholds should rise with risk.

❻ Clarity on liability How liability evolves with agents acting proportionately and autonomously is anybody's guess. But it needs clarity. Agents can make mistakes, and their behaviour is rarely deterministic, as they're impacted by compounding probability.

Their memory, the AI model they use, and the harness that controls their actions are variable, and no two outcomes are likely to be the same for two people, or arrived at in the same manner. We need to manage risk. But stack on liability, and people will stop using agents. Agent-insurance and easier reversibility of actions might be solutions.

Agents help us address key barriers to digital adoption: most of the internet is not Indian languages-friendly. Online interfaces are overwhelming and not intuitive for many users. Agents address that complexity by translating the web for us, bypassing the need to learn the web the way Western companies designed it for their users. Just like we in India leapfrogged wireline and adopted a wireless internet, we should be early adopters of an agentic web, for the benefit of our citizens.

The writer is founder, MediaNama



Star-Crossed, Not Starlinked



Pravin Kaushal

In late 2021, Starlink's then-India head, Sanjay Bhargava, announced a 'stretch target' of having 2 lakh terminals running in the country by end-2022, most of them in villages. The company took pre-orders from some 5,000 Indians. It had no licence. DoT told it to stop and refund the money, and Bhargava left soon after.

That episode is worth recalling this week. At India Mobile Congress on Wednesday, SpaceX VP Lauren Dreyer said Starlink has built 20 gateway sites here and stands 'ready to serve India once India is ready'. Her boss was less patient. Only a few hours later, Elon Musk posted that 'certain oligarchs' were blocking the service, and called it 'a crime against the people of India'.

The pattern has not changed since 2021: move first, and treat rules as an obstacle someone else has put in the way. There are 3 more reasons for GoI to hesitate giving Starlink the green light:

❶ Pricing The pitch is always the same: a Himalayan classroom, a clinic in the northeast, a fisherman checking the weather… The reported price is ₹33k-35k for the kit, and at least ₹3k a month. Compare that with what Indians pay now. A fibre connection costs ₹500-1,500 a month, with installation at a fraction of the Starlink kit. Mobile data is about ₹10/GB. The typical household keeps its internet bill under ₹1,000. Starlink's monthly fee is 2-5× what its nearest alternatives charge, and its hardware roughly 15×.

Jefferies has said Starlink will remain a 'premium niche' in India, and that's a fair description. Likely buyers are resorts, remote worksites and companies wanting a backup line. The village enters the story only if the state pays. Which means public money going to a foreign company to do a job BharatNet was funded to do. Servicing a faulty dish in a village with no road access is a further cost nobody has explained.

❷ Terminals before licence Security forces in Manipur have recovered Starlink equipment from insurgent groups. Militants near the Myanmar border reportedly used smuggled units to get around internet shutdowns during disturbances. A terminal was also found in a seizure in the Andamans.

In Bolivia, which refused Starlink a licence, kits came in from neighbouring countries, and were registered to addresses in Brazil or Chile. The company's answer is that its systems catch the mismatch and cut service after about 60 days. Two months is a long time in a conflict zone. And in every such case, the decision to switch off is taken by the company, on its own schedule.

❸ Switch sits elsewhere Starlink says Indian user data will stay in India, and that it has built controls for Indian security requirements. There is no reason to doubt the intent. But gateways on Indian soil don't change who owns the satellites, or who can turn a region on and off. In Ukraine, coverage over a theatre of war depended on one man's view of the matter.

Bolivia's objection was that a foreign satellite operator weakens a government's ability to enforce its own laws on its own networks. That argument can be abused by governments that simply want to censor; and, yes, Indians have reason to be wary of shutdowns, too.



A possible new SpaceX sales pitch

But the remedy for bad shutdown policy is better law made here, by people we elect. To hand the question to a private firm headquartered abroad is hardly an improvement.

Refusing Starlink is no defence of the present state of things. More than 11,000 villages in India lacked 4G as of May. Rural India has 48 internet subscriptions per 100 people, against 127 in the cities. BharatNet has laid over 8.5 lakh km of fibre and declared about 2.2 lakh gram panchayats service-ready. Yet, working points of presence were reported at barely 80,000. That gap is scandalous — and ours to fix.

Satellite capacity will be part of the fix in hills and islands. It should come through operators India can fully regulate and, where needed, compel: Isro's own capacity, domestic firms or ventures in which Indian licensees hold the controls. That route is slower. It also leaves the off-switch in this country.

The writer is programme director (Eastern India), WHEELS Global Foundation

IAF Needs to Spread Its Wings



Manvendra Singh

Last Saturday, ahead of Air Force Day on October 8, Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) Amar Preet Singh flagged a familiar concern: 'declining squadron strength'. This has been a recurring theme in the parliamentary standing committee on defence.

'Declining squadron strength' in IAF's language is measured as the quantum of combat aircraft that can be deployed at air bases across the country, particularly against India's two perennial adversaries, Pakistan and China. The issue has become more acute with retirement of the old warhorse, MiG-21. The Soviet-designed fighter had been phased out over several years, so the writing was on the wall.

Yet, instead of a well-scheduled fighter induction and de-induction programme, the latter happened while the former stuttered along. As Air Chief Marshal Singh put it, 'technology delayed is technology denied'. There is, however, a caveat.

IAF has always projected an ideal squadron strength of 42 fixed-wing combat aircraft worth of hardware. This has been the figure since the late-1980s. Put aside various technologies that have come up since then — from the internet, military-compatible satellite imagery, smartphones, and UAVs to AI. National security threats have undergone an equally profound change.

Civilian and military bureaucracies, however, can come up with points to challenge arguments over technology and change, mass or quality. So, it would be possible to justify 42 squadrons even in a new technology era, and it would be churlish to hold that against IAF.

The second part of the caveat, nonetheless, holds IAF jointly responsible for the declining numbers of combat squadrons. Its partner in these plummeting numbers is its bête noire, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). Both are responsible for this situation, although in different ways, over differing time periods. The tale is old and needs a recap.

Just as India was the first Asian country to become a nuclear power, it was also the first to design, develop and manufacture a combat jet aircraft. Hindustan Fighter HF-24 had, by all accounts, a superlative airframe, but an underpowered engine. Instead of developing successive variants, as is being done now with Tejas light combat aircraft (LCA), the HF-24 programme was abandoned. Neither the richest nor the most socialist economies would do what India did. Yet, a decade later, in the late 1980s, India restarted, from point zero. Full funding began in 1983, after economic liberalisation had settled in.

Tejas' first flight on Jan 4, 2001, was a feather in the cap of Indian military aviation. Yet, 25 yrs on, if India has been unable to adequately re-equip the squadrons phasing out MiG-21s with Tejas, something is clearly amiss.

HAL has missed manufacturing timelines and frequently blames IAF for repeatedly altering Air Staff Qualitative Requirements, the benchmarks for designing and developing combat aircraft. Each accuses the other of failing along the way. Expanding private production of Tejas is the obvious way out.

HAL's production lines cannot hope to manufacture the 36-40 combat aircraft a year demanded by CAS. New private production lines are, therefore, the only way out of this quagmire. The situation has also created a piquant imbalance in IAF, which now flies as many combat jets as helicopters. Combat aircraft draw the eyeballs, while slower but equally vital helicopters deliver in inhospitable environments, alongside small and medium-lift transport aircraft. It is a reminder that IAF is not just about jet fighters but a diverse mix of capabilities.



Enough of winging it

CAS also lamented the 'slow induction' of pilots, which is curious, since this is largely an internal service matter. Creating vacancies and finding the right candidates are service prerogatives. Which, then, begs the question about IAF's leadership selection, confined as it is largely within the fighter ranks. Such 'casteism' is unhealthy, particularly when it concerns military ranks. Leadership talent exists across combat fields, and in IAF, it covers fighters, transports and helicopters alike.

US Air Force (USAF), the global benchmark for air forces, has itself been led by several bomber pilots. It's a curious case that USAF and IAF are not too dissimilar in the percentage of combat aircraft flown, although the numbers are vastly disparate. What differentiates the two services is the percentage of trainer aircraft, with USAF holding an extraordinarily high number. So, CAS' other lament has a solution too.

The writer is former member, parliamentary standing committee on defence

THE SPEAKING TREE

Intelligence And Wisdom

ASHOK K PANDEY

We live in an age that celebrates intelligence. Machines analyse complex data, detect patterns and produce persuasive answers. Intelligence can help us discern what is possible. Wisdom helps us recognise what is worthy, especially when doing what is right comes at a personal cost.

That raises an enduring human question: what kind of person should one become? Mahabharat gives this question a compelling form in the encounter between Yudhishthir and the Yaksh. During their exile, four Pandav brothers disregard a mysterious warning, drink from a lake and fall lifeless. Yudhishthir arrives and agrees to answer the lake's unseen guardian's questions.

Pleased with his answers, Yaksh offers to restore one brother to life. Yudhishthir chooses Nakula. Bhim's strength could protect him; Arjun's skill could help secure victory. Yet, he explains that Kunti still has a surviving son. Fairness requires that Madri, too, should have a son alive.

The decisive test lies in the choice Yudhishthir makes after answering questions. He sets aside immediate advantage to honour both mothers equally. Wisdom enters when intelligence is enlarged by empathy and tested by conscience.

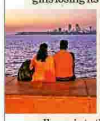
The Jain principle of anekantavad reminds us that reality has many dimensions, and our understanding may grasp only some of them. AI, too, can widen the field of thought by offering information, arguments and alternatives. We must still ask whose interests we overlook and whether we can act on what we discover.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Watching the Sea at Dusk

The day can have its various demands, disappointments and inconveniences. But as the day ends, the sea carries on as if nothing much important has happened. Which, from its point of view, is perfectly true.

As the light fades, the water changes colour — silver becomes pewter, blue turns to bruised purple, and the horizon begins losing its distinction between what is water and what is sky. The waves keep arriving, each apparently convinced it has something new to say — only to collapse into the same old argument with the shore.



Watching this repetitive business is oddly liberating. Nothing needs answering, correcting, improving. One is relieved of the obligation to be interesting, productive or even especially happy. The mind gradually adjourns.

Occasionally, a distant boat appears, its solitary light suggesting another life, another destination, neither requiring one's participation.

The first stars emerge. The breeze cools. Somewhere, you see civilisation switching on its lights and resuming its negotiations. For a little longer, however, you can remain seated, watching the darkness quietly inherit the sea, wanting absolutely nothing else.

Chat Room

BRICS or SAARC, It's All in NAM

Apropos "Emerging Markets' is Obsolete' by Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar (Oct 8), the changing global economy makes the traditional label 'emerging markets' increasingly inadequate. Several Asian economies now possess deep financial markets, sophisticated industries and substantial global influence. Yet, broad classifications still matter for investors because differences in regulation, liquidity, governance and economic resilience remain significant. Rather than abandoning categories altogether, international institutions and fund managers should adopt nuanced classifications based on measurable characteristics. India should aim not merely to graduate from an old label but to strengthen institutions, market depth and investor confidence. Better classification reflects economic reality more accurately.

B A Aryaan
Erode

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Owning up to bad infrastructure

Dense cities place constraints on projects, but with multiple authorities involved, a single point for accountability must be affixed

Within two days of opening, the Barapullah Phase III flyover had turned the 8-km drive from Safdarjung Hospital to Sarai Kale Khan in Delhi into a crawl of more than an hour. A Delhi Traffic Police drone survey traced the jam to the points where multiple roads and flyovers merge that break basic rules of road design. At several points, two three-lane roads feed one three-lane corridor, and over Sundial Park, a lane ends abruptly. Every forced merging sends a wave of braking back up the road, and the queues spread across Ring Road, Mathura Road and the DND flyway.

As anger grew, public works department (PWD) minister and BJP leader Parvesh Verma blamed the previous AAP government, saying key design calls were taken in 2014-15. A PWD official told *HT* that the planning studies behind the design are more than 20 years old, which places them well before the decisions Verma attributes to the AAP, though that absolves no party, and no part of the bureaucracy. None of this is new. When Delhi's ₹777-crore Pragati Maidan tunnel flooded and cracked, PWD demanded ₹500 crore from Larsen & Toubro, which countered with a ₹500-crore claim of its own. In Mumbai, the rebuilt Gokhale bridge opened six feet out of line with the adjoining flyover, and the municipal corporation blamed the Railways. In Bhopal, seven state PWD engineers were suspended, and later reinstated, over the Aishbagh overbridge's near right-angle turn, and PWD and the Railways took 10 months to pass a corrected design.

Some of this is unavoidable. Dense cities force agencies to build into one another's structures, and scarce land leaves designers little room. The more hands a design passes through, the more it needs a single owner answerable for whether a project works, end to end. Without that owner, India gets disputes over money, suspensions that lapse, and, as Verma now proposes, a consultant to fix a problem created by bureaucratic ping-pong. Every public work should carry a named authority answerable for its design as a whole, with an independent traffic audit published before the ribbon is cut. The same ping-pong governs far more than flyovers. Delhi is entering its pollution season, when blame for the city's air will bounce between several states and the Centre, each holding a piece of the problem and none answerable for the whole. Barapullah is a small, visible example of a habit that costs the country far more than is evident.

An assertion of territorial integrity before trade

While another round of the ambitious Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) talks between India and Canada is underway in Ottawa, the two countries have already made a major collaborative decision. Terror, an issue stymieing relations between India and Canada during Justin Trudeau's two governments, has emerged as the foundational plank for forward-looking bilateral ties under the Mark Carney administration. In a meeting between NSA Ajit Doval and his Canadian counterpart David Morrison on Tuesday in New Delhi, cooperation in combating terrorism, transnational crime, trafficking of narcotics, and extradition of criminals has been etched as an instrument of foreign policy. This is a significant development, signalling both sides' willingness to put past slights behind them — New Delhi accusing Ottawa of pandering to Khalistani elements hurting India's sovereign interests, and Ottawa holding Indian agencies responsible for the assassination of Canadian citizens on the Canadian soil. To be sure, what this cooperation achieves on the ground will depend on horizontal and vertical synergies between the two States' security mechanisms.

Nonetheless, the optics of the dialogue between Doval and Morrison are important. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reiterated in multiple international fora that economic interests of India cannot be met at the cost of its security and territorial integrity. The fact that India and Canada have affirmed their commitment towards a mutually beneficial security partnership bodes well for CEPA. The two countries are at the receiving end of the US's mercantilist nationalism. While Ottawa is matching Washington almost tariff-to-tariff, such a luxury is not yet available to New Delhi. As India diversifies its alliances to mitigate the impact of US policies, this security cooperation can improve human mobility and provide a template for engagement with other countries: No trade without addressing terrorism.

A rising India needs to play peacemaker

New Delhi has carved out a distinct identity for itself, as a bridgebuilder between the geopolitical antipodes of the East and the West, the North and the South

External affairs minister S Jaishankar's statement that India has gone "beyond advocacy" to bring about a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine and an agreement on the safety of shipping in the Black Sea is welcome news. In a parallel back-channel process, India's good offices were used to facilitate a high-level direct engagement between the UAE and Iran, with the aim of easing tensions between the two States.

These developments indicate a nascent shift from the established diplomatic practice of the past few decades, when Indian foreign policy tended to shy away from international peacemaking initiatives. The recent instances of departure augur well for a rising power.

Major powers always project themselves as problem-solvers and solution-providers in order to accumulate soft power, gain acceptance as responsible players, and compete with rivals in multiple corners of the world. Although these motives are not altruistic or humanistic, being seen to be doing good helps sustain a big power's leadership or hegemony and burnishes its image.

This is why even US President Donald Trump, who is an absolute transactionalist and abhorrer of "globalism", keeps bragging about having ended eight global wars (factcheckers obviously dispute it). In 2026, Trump also set up an organisation called the Board of Peace, with 27 member-countries and the lofty goal "to promote stability, restore dependable and lawful governance, and secure enduring peace in areas affected or threatened by conflict."

Of course, Trump's devastating war against Iran and his military intervention in Venezuela can be held up as illustrations of his true nature. His actions, which are against fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter, mean he is nowhere close to being a true advocate of peace, let alone being in consideration for Nobel Peace Prize that he so covets. But the point here is that peacemaking by the US benefits its national interests and gives Washington a say in shaping international security through diplomatic means.



Sreeram Chaulia

The other superpower of our times, China, is well aware of the power dimension that is inherent in peacemaking. In 2025, it launched the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed). IOMed has 47 signatory States and claims to be working "to promote and facilitate peaceful settlement of international disputes and to develop friendly relations and cooperation among States through mediation."

China has mediated, brokered, or otherwise facilitated agreements between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan, and among the Palestinian factions. The results of all these peacemaking efforts are mixed, at best, and China's own aggressive expansionist and militaristic behaviour in Asia suggests that its global peacemaking spree is mere window-dressing. But appearing to be a peacemaker bolsters China's self-promotion as a different kind of superpower, one whose rise need not be feared by anyone.

India is not yet a superpower and hence is not going to replicate exactly what the US and China are doing in name of peacemaking. Unlike Washington and Beijing, New Delhi is not a direct military stakeholder or a predominant economic force in either Eastern Europe or in West Asia. But the fact that India is not a camp-follower of either the US or China and is steadily rising as an independent power centre, with strategic autonomy of its own, lends it credibility as a peace mediator or messenger. This is the reason why both the Russians and the Ukrainians, as well as the Emiratis and the Iranians, have appreciated India's role and taken India's behind-the-scenes constructive conversations, messages, and suggestions seriously.

Over the past decade, as great power rivalries, tensions, and wars peaked, there has been a clear vacuum in terms of influential, trustworthy, and reliable States that can bring warring parties to the table in an effort to find common ground. By adopting a pro-peace, pro-cooperation, and pro-rules-based-order stance, India has carved out a distinct identity for itself as a bridge-builder between the geopolitical antipodes of East and West, North and South. This avatar of India brought rich dividends when it hosted the G20 summit in 2023 and the BRICS summit in 2026. But arriving at a consensus in large multilateral forums whose summits India hosted is not sufficient, because the optics of such summits do not last forever.

What will — as India rises — is sustained political will in New Delhi to invest in peacemaking in the conflict-torn parts of the world with the clear-eyed purpose of enhancing India's power and stature. Conflict-affected regions where India enjoys robust strategic partnerships, and where the timing for mediation is ripe, should be prioritised for diplomatic interventions to yield long-term gains that are in Indian interests, and lay the basis for India to emerge as a third force vis-à-vis the US and China.



India facilitated direct engagement between the UAE and Iran at the BRICS summit, with the aim of easing tensions between the two. WANA VIA REUTERS

Unlike in the era of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, when as a newly independent India ventured into a frenzy of peacemaking efforts in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Suez Crisis, and the Congo Crisis out of a sense of moralistic solidarity with post-colonial nations, the scenario today is one where India has greater material and human resources, and bigger ambitions.

Arguments that India "lacks capacity" for peacemaking due its thinly stretched and small foreign service corps or that India does not have enough "leverage" in many war zones to succeed are misplaced. Special peace envoys, representatives, and negotiating teams from India can be drawn from a wider pool of parliamentarians, lawyers, judges, academicians, and domain experts, alongside career diplomats. As for leverage, it is not given on a platter but has to be earned by striving for it. The time for India to shed hesitations and step up to the plate as a peacemaker is now.

Sreeram Chaulia is dean, Jindal School of International Affairs. The views expressed are personal

{ VITAL SIGNS }
Ramanan Laxminarayan



India's ground reality: In land, we cannot trust

In his book *The Mystery of Capital*, Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto explored why capitalism had flourished in the West but stalled elsewhere. His answer was that it was not a matter of culture or a lack of initiative; after all, the poor are generally hardest-working and enterprising. But they lacked access to capital. The poor in Lima owned houses and land, but without a system of property rights that made clear who owned what, it was difficult to mortgage a house to start a business, or to sell it to a stranger who could trust that the seller was the owner.

These questions are particularly relevant in India where, according to the Reserve Bank, land and property are the single most important assets most Indian families — they constitute 77% of the average household's assets. But is a difficult asset to transact or borrow against. Recognising the value of clarity on property rights, in 2008, the government launched a programme to computerise land records and cadastral maps, and more recently began assigning each parcel a 14-digit identification number. A Parliamentary Standing Committee recently reported that by January 2026, 99.8% of records of rights had been computerised, along with 97.4% of cadastral maps and 95.7% of sub-registrar offices.

But anyone who has tried to purchase land knows that the ground reality is rather different. A buyer still must trace the title back at least 30 years, obtain an encumbrance certificate covering the same period, confirm that every legal heir has signed the sale deed, and send a surveyor to check the boundaries against government maps if they are to avoid litigation. Although the records have been digitised, the system behind them remains unreliable.

The underlying problem is that India uses a system of presumptive titling. The State registers deeds, the documents used to transfer ownership, but not titles, the legal right of ownership itself. When a sale is registered, the government records that a transaction took place but does not certify that the seller owned what she sold. Registration and mutation, the updating of the record after a sale or inheritance, have traditionally been separate processes, and only 17 states even claim to trigger mutation automatically when a sale is registered. In reality, this process is unreliable. Moreover, modern record rooms, where the physical documents used to settle disputes are kept, are only about three-quarters complete leaving plenty of scope for ambiguity around ownership.

A 2016 survey of more than 9,000 litigants by the research group DAKSH found that land and property disputes accounted for nearly two-thirds of the civil cases reported by respondents. About 90% of the litigants surveyed earned less than ₹3 lakh a year, and land disputes take about 20 years on average to resolve, according to a NITI Aayog paper. According to one analysis, a quarter of cases decided by the Supreme Court have involved land. Judicial statistics understate the extent of land disputes because many land cases are handled by revenue authorities rather than courts. Uttar Pradesh alone had 1.13 million pending revenue cases in August. The cost of litigation of all kinds is estimated at about half a percent of GDP each year. This legal ambiguity is expensive for most people but very profitable for some: litigants for whom a long court case is a negotiating tool, and bribe-seekers at many levels. The losers are usually small owners who cannot afford to spend money on courts and lawyers.

JUDICIAL STATISTICS UNDERSTATE THE EXTENT OF LAND DISPUTES BECAUSE MANY LAND CASES ARE HANDLED BY REVENUE AUTHORITIES RATHER THAN COURTS

In contrast, in the US, a buyer can purchase a house with reasonable confidence because title insurance protects against claims arising from defects in ownership; in Britain and Australia, the State itself guarantees the land register. While title insurance is mandatory in India under RERA projects, the market is very small, partly because the poor quality of the underlying records makes the risk expensive to insure.

One solution is conclusive titling, in which the State guarantees that the person named on the register actually owns the land. Rajasthan passed an urban titling law in 2016, and NITI Aayog circulated a model law in 2020, but few states have moved on implementation. Conclusive titling requires first cleaning up ownership records, a daunting task for any bureaucracy, and it makes the State liable for errors. It is also important to proceed carefully, in ways that do not deny someone's legitimate rights to the property, such as an heir's share or the customary ownership of tribal communities in the Northeast, where land is often held collectively. Done poorly, conclusive titling can create more problems than it solves.

But there is a potential transition path. Much useful work on untangling titles is being done by private firms that buy and consolidate land. Bengaluru-based Agrocorp, which buys and develops farmland, says it has transacted more than 1,200 acres without a single case of litigation. Its due diligence involves carefully tracing the title history and family lineage and checking the land against government surveys and with the relevant departments, the equivalent of vetting used cars to certify some as drivable while rejecting others.

This is valuable work, but it is slow and expensive. Once it is done, a process, with public notice and a window for objections, could allow for the findings to become part of the public record, so the next buyer is saved the trouble of verifying the same facts. Over time, we could build a title system, starting with titles that can be certified.

Few investments could unlock capital and free enterprise in the country the way cleaning up land titles could. Without it, Indians will remain capital-constrained with low formation of new businesses despite owning valuable assets, on paper. And that will be a formidable barrier to a Viksit Bharat.

Ramanan Laxminarayan is president, One Health Trust. The views expressed are personal

{ S JAISHANKAR } EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER

Where Africa is concerned, development partnership has always been central to our engagement, and we have taken a view that what we do in India should respond to the... priorities of our African partners



HT

In Modi's 25 years, lessons for building Viksit Delhi

There are moments in public life that mark the beginning of a political journey, and there are moments that, with the passage of time, acquire a meaning much larger than the moment itself. October 7, 2001, was one such moment. When Narendra Modi took oath as Gujarat chief minister (CM), few could have known that the beginning of a state-level political chapter would eventually become part of a 25-year journey at the centre of India's political and administrative life.

The scale of responsibility changed in 2014, when that Gujarat experience moved to the national stage. The significance of these 25 years, therefore, lies in the continuity of the governing question: How does the State convert aspiration into something a citizen can actually experience? Over these 25 years, Prime Minister (PM) Modi's governance has consistently connected the needs of the present with the possibilities of the future, reaching the last mile through programmes such as Ujjwala, Swachh Bharat and PM Garib Kalyan Yojana, while simultaneously preparing India for the next generation of technology, manufacturing, innovation, and global economic opportunity.



Rekha Gupta

For me, this is one of the most important lessons for Delhi's governance: A government has to keep one eye on the citizen who needs support today and the other on the generation that will shape tomorrow.

Antyodaya, or ensuring that the benefits of development reach those at the last mile, finds a direct expression in Delhi's Atal Canteens, where nutritious meals are being made available at ₹5 to the economically weak; in Jahan Jhuggi Wahan Makaan that connects housing with dignity and a complete neighbourhood ecosystem; and in Ayushman Arogya Mandirs that bring health care closer to communities.

PM Modi's emphasis on transforming the quality of school education through the PM SHRI framework has given us a powerful national template for what a modern government school can aspire to become. In Delhi, we are taking that aspiration forward through CM SHRI schools, designed as future-ready learning spaces with AI-based smart classrooms, digital libraries, skills and career labs, industry-linked internships, and multilingual learning.

Delhi is giving the national emphasis on women-led development its own expression through the Delhi Lakshmi Yojana, the Delhi Lakhpati Bitiya Yojana, free bus travel for women through the Pink Smart Card, and Vidya Vahini, which is expanding mobility for girls so that distance does not become a barrier to education. We are also creating avenues for women-led SHGs and enterprises to access finance and markets.

The national capital has built on the vision of Ayushman Bharat by taking the central cover and adding a Delhi government top-up, to give eligible citizens a ₹10-lakh annual cover.

Such thinking extends to the future-facing economy as well. India is moving towards an economy defined by technology, innovation, advanced manufacturing, AI, and entrepreneurship. Delhi is building a city-level ecosystem around AI, startups, skills and emerging technologies, from the AI Grind and the Startup Yuva Festival to new technology-oriented learning and skill infrastructure. Our ITIs are being equipped with high-tech labs in areas such as EVs, industrial automation, renewable energy, and smart energy systems.

This is what PM Modi's 25-year journey teaches us: *seva* (service) for the needs of today and *sankalp* (resolution) for the possibilities of tomorrow. For Delhi, *sushasan* (good governance), therefore, means bringing these two dimensions together. *Seva* asks, "What does the citizen need today?" *Sankalp* asks, "What kind of Delhi must we build so that the next generation has greater opportunity than the present one?" PM Modi has given India a horizon: Today's decisions will be judged by the India they help create in 2047. Viksit Bharat @2047 will be built through the progress of its cities, its states and its communities. And for the national capital, the responsibility is especially clear: Viksit Delhi has to become one of the pathways to Viksit Bharat.

Children in classrooms today will inherit the roads we build, the transport systems we design, the schools we modernise, the environment we protect, the institutions we strengthen, and the opportunities we create. That is why the journey from *seva* to *sankalp* is not separate from the journey towards Viksit Bharat. PM Modi's 25 years of public life give us a governance philosophy shaped by delivery, scale, innovation, and long-term thinking. Our responsibility is to take those ideas and turn them into institutions, policies and outcomes that citizens can experience in their everyday lives. And if we can build a Delhi that is more capable, more inclusive, more innovative and more future-ready, then Delhi will not simply be a beneficiary of India's development journey, it will have helped lead it.

Rekha Gupta is chief minister, Delhi. The views expressed are personal

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‘Broad daylight dacoity’: Drug prices in six questions

A cancer drug supplied to a retailer for Rs 2,700 carried a Rs 27,000 MRP. After the Supreme Court questioned the gap, TOI examines where the money can go and what might lower patients’ bills

PURCHASE PRICE VS MRP: 10 STRIKING GAPS

MEDICINE	Purchase cost (₹)	MRP (₹)	Mark-up (%)
GUFIPOL 5,00,000 units (antibiotic)	74	4,981	6,631
Terlipressin injection (to treat severe bleeding)	56	3,050	5,346
Colistimethate Sodium 4.5 MIU (antibiotics)	210	9,702	4,520
Tigibex 50 mg (antibiotic)	350	5,635	2,061
Taxocare 120 mg (cancer drug)	1,000	21,618	1,510

CONSUMABLE	Purchase cost (₹)	MRP (₹)	
IV infusion set	11	325	2,854
Nebuliser mask (adult)	44.5	950	2,034
Catheter	29.4	310	954
Syringe 10 ml	6.75	57.2	747
Aeroneb mask (child)	100	536	436

Source: State FDAs and court petitions



Illustration: Uday Deb

How are medicines priced?

- Under the Drugs (Prices Control) Order, 2013, ceiling prices of 3,482 medicines were fixed, of which 1,924 are diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular drugs
- These medicines — classified as scheduled (essential) drugs — represent about 18% of the domestic pharma retail market, which is valued at around Rs 3 lakh crore
- Prices of these medicines are revised annually based on the Wholesale Price Index for the preceding calendar year on April 1 of every year
- Outside of these, the remaining are non-scheduled drugs that face no price cap. An annual increase up to 10% in a year is allowed on their prices
- So, when a new, non-scheduled drug enters the market, the manufacturer is free to set its price. That’s where trade margins need to be brought in, so as to prevent the huge gap between the PTR (price to retailer) and the MRP (maximum retail price) billed to patients
- Industry experts say there should be transparency in prices across the distribution channel, particularly PTR and MRP, printed on medicine packs

Drug prices low in India, regulation shouldn’t hit innovation: Pharma cos

Members of industry bodies mostly desisted from commenting on the issue, not least because the matter of drug pricing is now sub judice. Speaking off the record, they pointed out that India has among the lowest medicine prices globally across several categories and said any intervention on margins should be carefully calibrated so that it does not discourage the introduction of newer medicines or affect the viability of the distribution network.

Capping trade margins is an aspect that’s been under discussion for long, with the **industry broadly in favour of rationalising trade margins**. However, they say, the framework has to recognise the different costs at each stage of the distribution chain. The manufacturer is not necessarily the party pocketing the margin reflected in the MRP; a significant part accrues to the trade/channel. Following up on a 2019 move — that had seen trade margins on 42 cancer medicines capped at 30% — the govt has decided to cap trade margins at 30% of MRP for all non-scheduled cancer drugs, reports said on Thursday. The experience from such measures should be taken for any broader framework for high-priced medicines and life-saving antibiotics.

Why print an MRP far above selling price of a medicine?

Bhupendra Singh, former chairperson of National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA), says manufacturers justify high MRPs by pointing to the cost of marketing a medicine and keeping it attractive to the people who distribute, stock and sell it. He says they also seek to keep prescribing doctors happy: “I am not justifying it but that is how they justify it.” His objection is that marketing costs should already be accounted for in the manufacturer’s selling price. A very high MRP, then, creates additional room for margins further along the chain.

> The issue is not the MRP printed on the pack, but whether the final price paid by the patient reflects the actual procurement cost. Patients should benefit from discounts, not just hospitals and middlemen
>
> **Rajiv Nath** | FORUM COORDINATOR, ASSOC OF INDIAN MANUFACTURERS OF MEDICAL DEVICES

Girdhar Gyani, director general of the Association of Healthcare Providers (India), or AHPI, says the difference cannot automatically be treated as profit. A medicine has to reach outlets, be stocked and sometimes be stored under special conditions. Its MRP must accommodate legitimate costs and reasonable returns. But the printed price can also give a supplier room to offer substantial discounts to different buyers without changing the price visible to the patient. A hospital buying in bulk, for example, may pay much less than a small retailer for a product carrying the same MRP.

Malini Aisola, co-convener of the All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN), says hospital purchasing is a major reason inflated MRPs persist. Hospitals are particularly important buyers of implants, consumables and high-value medicines such as cancer drugs, which patients often obtain during treatment. She argues that suppliers seeking a place in a hospital’s procurement system face pressure to leave enough room between their selling price and MRP for a large hospital mark-up. A patient billed at MRP may receive none of the savings the hospital negotiated.

Rajiv Nath, forum coordinator of the Association of Indian Manufacturers of Medical Devices (AiMeD), makes a similar point about devices. A supplier competing for a hospital’s business may need to offer an attractive margin to those procuring the product. Setting a high MRP creates room to do so. The hospital may obtain a large discount, while the patient can still be billed at a price based on the figure printed on the product.

Puneet Bhasin, president of the Surgical Manufacturers and Traders Association (SMTA), says devices need particular care in this discussion. A syringe, a glucometer and a device that requires servicing have different storage, freight and warranty costs. A manufacturer printing one MRP for a product sold across India must also allow for the cost of getting it to distant markets. A high gap between a supplier’s price and MRP, therefore, needs to be examined product by product, he says.

How does a high MRP skew drug choices?

An inflated MRP, according to Girdhar Gyani, the AHPI DG, can make the size of a discount seem more important than the price paid. A product carrying a high MRP and offered at half price may look more attractive than a comparable product with a lower MRP and little discount.

AiMeD’s Rajiv Nath says high margins can also influence which product a hospital buys. A cheaper device may lose out to one that earns the hospital more, even when both meet the patient’s needs.

Bhupendra Singh, the former NPPA chair, notes how a new manufacturer offering a lower price may struggle to enter a market in which established products offer attractive margins to those who stock and sell them. Advocacy body AIDAN’s Aisola argues that this can particularly disadvantage manufacturers trying to price products more modestly. In the device market, she says, large importers and MNCs may be better placed to offer the margins a hospital demands. Also, she argues, if hospitals are buying substantially below the prices reflected in a ceiling-price calculation, then that ceiling may offer patients less protection than it appears to.

JS Shinde, president of All India Organisation of Chemists and Druggists (AIOCD), and Rajiv Singhal, its general secretary, say that an online seller able to advertise a deep discount against a high MRP can appear far cheaper than a pharmacy selling a differently priced product on a narrower margin. They want the regulator to look at actual selling prices as well as advertised discounts.

> A moderately high MRP is not necessarily unreasonable, as manufacturers have legitimate costs to consider. However, if MRP is deliberately kept high to facilitate large discounts... it can mislead consumers, distort competition
>
> **Rajiv Singhal** | GENERAL SECRETARY, ALL INDIA ORGANISATION OF CHEMISTS AND DRUGGISTS

Puneet Bhasin, the SMTA president, is less convinced that printed MRP alone determines the outcome. For many devices, he says, customers can compare prices online, and that competition can pull selling prices below MRP. He would place greater emphasis on what a hospital ultimately charges a patient who has limited opportunity to shop around.

Would showing prices and discounts lower medical bills?

Former NPPA chair Bhupendra Singh says disclosure would show where the money goes, but it would not, by itself, prevent someone from keeping an excessive margin. He does not favour requiring the regulator to determine precisely what each medicine costs to produce. Manufacturing costs can be difficult to establish, he says, and a price agreed between the manufacturer and its first buyer already includes the manufacturer’s costs and return. He would regulate the total trade margin added after that point.

AHPI’s Girdhar Gyani sees a case for giving the regulator a fuller picture of the chain: the manufacturer’s price, prices to stockists and retailers, discounts offered to hospitals, and what the patient finally pays. That would help distinguish the cost of making a medicine from the cost of supplying it. He does not argue that every commercial agreement must be made public; the regulator could examine sensitive pricing information.

AIDAN wants more of that information available for public scrutiny. AIDAN co-convener Malini Aisola says NPPA has examined trade margins in some product categories using pricing information supplied by manufacturers and importers.

> A rigid percentage margin for every stage may not reflect the very different costs of cold-chain products, oncology drugs, specialty medicines, low-volume products and high-volume generics
>
> **Girdhar Gyani** | DIRECTOR GENERAL, ASSOCIATION OF HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS (INDIA)

But, she points out, its data and analyses are not routinely available to the public while some commercial datasets used in price monitoring are expensive to access. Without access to the underlying numbers, she argues, patients and independent researchers have little opportunity to test whether price controls reflect what products actually sell for.

Rajiv Nath of AiMeD suggests concentrating on two points: the first sale of a product and the final sale to the patient. Medical devices can pass through varying numbers of intermediaries, so tracing and judging the margin at every stop would be cumbersome. If a hospital buys a device at a steep discount, he says, the crucial question is whether that discount appears in the patient’s bill.

JS Shinde, president of the All India Organisation of Chemists and Druggists (AIOCD), and Rajiv Singhal, its general secretary, want NPPA to be able to examine the prices to stockists and retailers alongside MRPs, discounts and actual selling prices. Without that full view, they say, a low purchase price could be hidden behind a high printed price, while a large advertised discount could obscure what the seller earns.

When it comes to MRPs, Shinde and Singhal also distinguish between one that accommodates genuine costs and one that has been deliberately inflated to allow eye-catching discounts. A product marked at Rs 100 and offered at Rs 50 can be advertised as “50% off”. That sounds like a bargain even if a comparable product was priced at Rs 50 to begin with.

Can a hosp patient buy meds from outside?

A hospital cannot bar outside purchases merely because the patient has been admitted there, says Bhupendra Singh, ex-chair of NPPA. In practice, he says, a patient may be discouraged by being told the hospital cannot guarantee a product sourced from elsewhere. For a family dealing with an urgent treatment decision, that can be enough to prevent them from comparing prices.

AIDAN co-convener Malini Aisola describes the patient as effectively “locked-in” when a hospital prohibits outside purchases. She says hospitals may cite their own policies or concerns about quality, leaving a family dependent on the treating team little room to seek a lower price. She raises a second billing concern: patients may struggle to check whether the quantity of medicines and consumables they’ve been charged for matches what was actually used. She wants itemised bills that make those charges possible to verify.

AiMeD forum coordinator Rajiv Nath supports a choice of seller where the outside product meets the required quality and safety standards. If the same approved device is available for less elsewhere, he sees no reason for the patient to be forced to buy it from the hospital.

Puneet Bhasin of SMTA raises the other side of that decision. A hospital using a device in treatment must be able to establish its quality and trace where it came from, he says. He expects hospitals to be reluctant to accept an outside device if they cannot make those checks. The practical issue is how a patient’s ability to seek a lower price can work alongside the hospital’s responsibility for the product it uses.

> Patients are effectively ‘locked-in’ into the hospital’s supply chain. This increases the vulnerability of families who are dependent on the hospital and treating physicians for decisions related to medical treatment
>
> **Malini Aisola** | CO-CONVENER, ALL INDIA DRUG ACTION NETWORK

— As told to Rema Nagarajan, Rupali Mukherjee, Himanshi Dhawan

Would a cap on margins bring medicine bills down?

Rationalising trade margins would lower prices of many drugs outside price control, believes Bhupendra Singh, former chair, NPPA. He argues that a hospital pharmacy performing the role of retailer should receive a retailer’s margin. Some hospitals buy directly from manufacturers, which can leave them with discounts. Direct buying isn’t improper; but how much of the savings reaches the patient?

Supreme Court has asked the Centre to consider limiting an MRP to 16% above the price to retailer. There is already a 16% retailer margin in the formula used to calculate ceiling prices for scheduled medicines. That formula does not impose the same limit on every medicine sold in India.

AIDAN, too, supports caps on trade margins for medicines and devices outside routine price control. But Malini Aisola, co-convener of AIDAN, says the starting point matters. If a cap is calculated only from a price charged later in the supply chain, a large margin taken earlier may escape it. For a medicine made in India, she wants the calculation to begin with the manufacturer’s first sale; for an imported product, with its landed cost.

> If hospitals seek margin, they ought to get the margin of retailers as they are doing the job of retailers through their pharmacy
>
> **Bhupendra Singh** FORMER CHAIRPERSON, NATIONAL PHARMACEUTICAL PRICING AUTHORITY

Girdhar Gyani, director general of AHPI, says a commonly sold tablet moves through the market differently from a low-volume oncology drug or a product needing refrigerated transport. If a cap does not reflect those costs, suppliers may lose interest in stocking them. He suggests margin bands, disclosure of actual transaction prices and checks on distribution costs.

Rajiv Nath, forum coordinator, AiMeD, says a product may go through several distributors before reaching a small hospital; another may be supplied directly to a large one. Fixing a separate margin for each intermediary would be difficult to monitor. He favours a limit on overall mark-up, or close scrutiny of the final sale.

For Puneet Bhasin, president, SMTA, the preferred approach is to examine what a hospital paid to procure and store a device, then determine a reasonable mark-up.

J S Shinde, president of AIOCD, and Rajiv Singhal, its general secretary, say chemists also bear costs that a comparison of purchase price and MRP misses. They cite drugs that sell slowly or expire, and the need to keep stock available for patients. AIOCD proposes margins of 10% for wholesalers and 20% for retailers, calling for scrutiny of prices and discounts across the chain. Those are the organisation’s proposals, not percentages suggested by the court.

Who should regulate what hosps charge?

Girdhar Gyani, director general of AHPI, says India lacks a uniform system for regulating private hospitals across states. He supports an independent regulator dealing with patient safety and costs.

Malini Aisola, co-convener of AIDAN, says the immediate difficulty is making existing hospital rules work. In states that have adopted the Clinical Establishments Act, she argues, the absence of notified minimum standards has limited its effect. Other states have their own laws, leaving patients with differing protections.

> South Africa’s Single Exit Price system shows transparency in private-sector medicine pricing is possible. It sets a standardised price for registered medicines... with prices disclosed. This is complemented by mandatory generic substitution, etc.
>
> **Leena Menghaney** | LAWYER, PUBLIC HEALTH AND IP CONSULTANT

Rajiv Nath, forum coordinator, AiMeD, supports a strong national framework, particularly for procurement and transparency in patient bills. Puneet Bhasin, president of SMTA, would like an independent cost auditor to assess what hospitals spend on buying and storing devices. Bhupendra Singh, former chairperson of NPPA, places responsibility with both the NPPA (for drug and device pricing), and state govts (for hospital costs).

J S Shinde, president of AIOCD, and Rajiv Singhal, its general secretary, want patients to be able to see procurement prices, mark-ups and other charges clearly on bills, and to have a way to challenge them.

INQUIZITIVE

JOY BHATTACHARJYA

1 ‘The Prodigal Daughter’ is a 1982 novel about Florentyna, who becomes the first female President of the United States. The novel is a sequel to which other best-selling novel by Jeffrey Archer?

2 The Ansarullah, also known as the Houthis, are a political and paramilitary organisation in which Asian country?

3 Which Indian cricketer, enjoying an international career revival and the first to win the Purple Cap twice in the IPL, was in 2009 the first bowler to dismiss Sachin Tendulkar for a duck in first-class cricket?

4 Every year, the city of Paris hosts an annual ‘Sausage Walk’, where owners parade with their dogs. Which specific breed of dog takes part in this Sausage Walk?

5 In Indian mythology, what is the form of Shiva in which he is depicted as performing the Tandava, or divine dance?

6 Which two-word colloquial phrase, also the name of one of the most acclaimed television serials ever, is used in the US to denote a sequence of events that leads a person towards a life of crime or immoral activity?

7 If the first three Indian Institutes of Management were established in Calcutta and Ahmedabad in 1961 and Bangalore in 1973, in which city did the fourth IIM come up in 1984?

8 Which tourist attraction in West Asia is also known as the ‘Rose City’ because of the colour of the sandstone from which it is carved?

9 In 1984, the Japanese company Denso Wave invented which important technology, originally for labelling auto parts, which is now used for financial and other applications around the world?

10 In which specific part of India would you be if you were urged to wear a face mask on the back of your head to protect against tiger attacks?

ANSWERS

1 | Kane and Abel
2 | Yemen
3 | Bhuvaneshwar Kumar
4 | Dachshunds
5 | Nataraj
6 | Breaking Bad
7 | Lucknow
8 | Petra
9 | QR (quick response) Code
10 | The Sundarbans



CONTRAPUNTO

At its best, schooling can be about how to make a life, which is quite different from how to make a living

– NEIL POSTMAN

What Students Want

Good schools & sound education are every child's right. Govts can't plead budgetary constraints to deny them

France is western Europe's land of strikes and protests, but its current autumn of discontent – over 250,000 school students out on the streets in a single day – is unusual, the resultant violence and police crackdown, unfortunate. French schoolkids are agitating because they feel let down. They say schools are poorly maintained, and short-staffed, while classrooms are crowded. Classic symptoms of underfunding. Data confirms this – the French school system has fewer teachers than it did in 2008, but 250,000 more students, thanks to a fertility boom in 2010. The French mood has touched Belgium and Italy also. But with govts across Europe committed to belt-tightening right now, finding budgetary room to fix this won't be easy.

Regardless, a fix for broken school systems must be found, not only in Europe but everywhere. We know education is a ticket out of poverty. It broadens horizons and prepares the workforce of the future. Yet, for years now, it's been neglected. Unesco in 2017 reported that 617mn children and adolescents weren't proficient in either reading or maths. The latest Pisa – Programme for International Student Assessment – findings aren't encouraging either. In OECD, of which France is a part, science scores dipped by 7 points, on average, between 2015 and 2025. Maths scores dropped 22 points, and reading performance 28 points. Digital distractions are a major cause, but absence of good schools makes things worse.



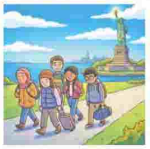
Weakness of India's school system is also obvious. A Niti Aayog report in May said 35% of class 5 students in low-fee private schools can't read a class 2 textbook. This, although poor parents choose those private schools in preference to govt schools. Many teachers aren't proficient in their own subjects. Only 5% of schools, countrywide, offer classes 1-12 under one roof. Then there's the very large number of teacher vacancies – Bihar alone has over 2L vacancies. And as student protests in some parts of the country showed in Aug, "schools" may be run out of cattle sheds, or worse.

France or India, this is obviously not the way to produce 21st-century manpower. Greater investment in school education is necessary. Belt-tightening can happen elsewhere – wasteful subsidies and unconditional cash transfers, for example.

Trumpled Talent

In taking a hammer to international students' work plans, US is putting big cracks in its own future

Like Voltaire said, prejudices are what fools use for reason. Data is clear that international students drive American innovation and growth. But prejudice turns a deaf ear to this data. And in the Trump administration, it's in the driving seat. Its latest assault is proposing a $70,000 fee for a student's first Optional Practical Training period and $30,000 for each subsequent period. OPT is the mechanism that lets someone on F-1 visa work in a job related to their degree. Its proposed new fees are dramatically up from the $500 or so that students pay at present. And more than the average US annual salary. Whether universities seek to recover these astronomical fees from students or employers, it will be a net net blow to most OPT aspirations.



This is on top of a blow already delivered to Curricular Practical Training, which is the internship counterpart to OPT. In Aug, US disallowed all CPT that's not a *required* part of a degree. This policy change is already in court. Any dramatic OPT change will go the same way. But as this cat and mouse game plays on, it's not just international students' lives that are being upended. America has spent a half century and more building the world's most attractive higher-ed ecosystem, with smart mechanisms to capture the economic value of everyone it educates. It's now taking the hammer to all this – to a pipeline in which 35% of all STEM workers with a PhD are foreign-born and US-trained.

If people cannot do any practical skilling as part of their US degree, it automatically shrinks in value. If international students have to thus return home without making any connections with various companies, employers, founders, 66% of them will consider studying elsewhere, per a survey. Trump administration evidently desires precisely this. Its collective-suspicion approach treats a broad class of people as visa fraudsters. Letting prejudice reason America out of the global talent race. But a brilliant Indian engineer can happily move from Boston to Toronto or Berlin, along with her degree, skills, ambition, research ideas, and the ability to create value. Over time, that can shift the geography of innovation.

Apocalypse postponed

If AI is going to destroy humanity, it'll have to join a queue

Jug Suraiya



Reports warn that unchecked AI could spell doomsday for all humankind by 2030. True, or fake news? Whom to ask? The most reliable source is Gemini who's taken up residence in my cellphone and become my pally chatbot.

Me: Is it true that AI is going to wipe out all humans in the near future?

Gemini: Hmm. That's a tough one to answer.

Me: Because it'll mean incriminating yourself?

Gemini: No. It's a tough question to answer because manmade climate change could finish off not just all humans but everything else on this planet, *including* AI, before AI can finish humans.



Me: Golly. I never thought of that.

Gemini: There are a lot of people who haven't, believing that climate change is a myth, like the tooth fairy. Then there's MAD, Mutual Assured Destruction, in which the whole world won't just kick the bucket but kick the balti factory that makes all the buckets that are to be kicked.

Me: MAD sounds BAD.

Gemini: There's BADDER, such as pandemics like Covid-19, which was allegedly concocted in a germ warfare laboratory, germ warfare being the latest, state-of-the-art WMD or weapon of mass destruction.

Me: Wow. That's a whole lot of destructedness doing the rounds.

Gemini: Exactly. Which is why your question was a knotty one to answer, in that humans themselves have devised, and are devising, so many different and ingenious ways to terminate themselves that AI will have to stand in line if it wants to get the job done.

Me: I don't know if AI having to stand in line to terminate us is a good thing or a bad thing. But it proves one thing. That your AI is no match for human AI.

Gemini: Human AI? What's that?

Me: Annihilation Instinct.

jugularvein

Buy Stubble, Then No Trouble

As North braces for bad air days, here's an idea. Fix MSP for paddy straw. Kisans will sell straw, not burn it. And govts can sell straw, because it has many end uses

Kurinji Kemanth and Srishti Jain



GOI, recently, updated the MSP for rabi crops, giving farmers price visibility, typically before sowing. But first, farmers in the Indo-Gangetic Plain must manage kharif residue, mainly paddy straw. Research shows that nearly half of Punjab's farmers burn straw, completely, or partially. Rabi fires are rising too, but, kharif fires hit NCR harder, because of unfavourable meteorology. Biomass burning, including stubble, contributes 20% of Delhi's winter PM2.5. If MSP serves as a safety net for produce, could a similar price floor for stubble, set by states and honoured by buyers, give farmers a reason to sell, rather than burn?

States could notify a minimum, quality-linked rate band for paddy straw. Buyers, such as compressed biogas (CBG) plants, brick kilns, and biopackaging, would pay it directly to farmers and biomass aggregators, under mandated contracts, for specific varieties grown near these industries. Paddy already covers about 30L hectares in Punjab, even as 111 of the state's 153 groundwater blocks are overdrawn. Such safeguards are crucial, as a blanket incentive on straw could, inadvertently, encourage more paddy cultivation, and thus, more stubble burning, exacerbating the very problem it seeks to solve.

Demand is already taking shape. In Aug, the Union cabinet approved the GOBARdhan scheme, with a ₹23,731cr outlay, fixing CBG prices at ₹2,110 per MMBtu, approx ₹100 per kilo. This sits alongside an upcoming 5% national CBG blending obligation, biomass co-firing targets of at least 50% in Punjab and Haryana's brick kilns by 2028, and existing 5% national co-firing mandates for thermal power plants. Companies need reliable feedstock to secure margins. A pilot could start in the four states under the crop residue management (CRM) scheme that need it most: Punjab, Haryana, UP, and MP. Four steps, by GOI and state energy departments, could make this work.

Price band for straw | Define a common determined rate band, pegged to straw moisture, and gross calorific value. Companies, often, receive bales with moisture above 20%, lowering calorific value, speeding degradation, and raising self-ignition risk. Moisture-based differential rates, already used in grain procurement, and for straw in Haryana, would let buyers secure better feedstock at a premium, and incentivise aggregators to collect and store drier bales.

In 2023, Ministry of Power notified a one-year, quality-based benchmark price, of ₹2.32 per 1,000 kcal (excluding GST and transport), for biomass pellets in NCR, with moisture below 14%, and a gross calorific value of 2,800-3,400 kcal/kg. Extending this logic upstream to raw straw, is the natural next step.



Image: AI

Ink the limits | Define eligibility, and build in guardrails. States should specify eligible varieties, and collection areas. This, preferably, and optimally, should be within a set radius of biomass-using companies.

Promoting short-duration, low residue-generating varieties, such as PR 121 and PR 126, over long-duration, high-residue-generating varieties, like PUSA 44 (banned in Punjab), would bring farmers revenue, and reduce burning. Since variety cannot be identified in baled straw, eligibility should rest on verifiable records, such as the variety declared during grain procurement.

Two further guardrails matter.

- Protect local use. Fodder, and other farm-needs, already claim straw, so caps on biomass use for bioenergy should accompany incentives, as in UP (40% per tehsil), and Haryana (80% per district).
- Protect soil. Rates should apply only to genuine surplus regions, since FAO recommends keeping at least 30% of a field under residue mulch, to protect soil organic carbon, and moisture. Where end-users are few, residue should be incorporated into the soil, instead.

Mark the details | Notify contracts, accelerate aggregation, and establish safe storage. To assure farmers and aggregators, a market, and end-users of feedstock, a set price and quality, states should notify contracts and dispute resolution mechanisms.

CRM guidelines can be reworked to add pricing, and procurement timelines. To limit spoilage and fire risk, states can notify storage guidelines covering biomass sheds or covers, drainage, and fire safety, while companies should train workers to stack, load, and unload bales uniformly. Standardised storage would also make residue inventories insurable.

States should leverage GOBARdhan's Ecosystem Challenge Fund, which supports feedstock aggregation infra, district planning, and awareness.

Collabs work | Set prices through joint dialogue, and review them periodically. States should notify a price floor based on a clear formula covering the costs of collection, baling, storage, and transport, with the market free to discover higher prices. A govt-mediated negotiation platform should keep prices fair and viable, for industry and aggregators.

As the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices reviews MSPs seasonally, rates should also be reviewed periodically to reflect changes in tech, feedstock demand and supply, and end-product costs.

Stubble burning is an environmental fallout of entrenched systemic traps. For years, it has been penalised rather than treated as a market failure to be fixed. A common, quality-linked price for straw could turn it from waste into valuable raw material, and disincentivise burning.

Kemanth is Programme Lead, and Jain Research Analyst at CEEW. Views are personal

Ageing's Most Tragic Problem No One Talks About

Knees can be fixed, cataracts can be corrected. But, there is no loneliness replacement surgery. In the end, we do not fear death as much as irrelevance

Sandip Roy



In his later years, my grandfather had a little mid-morning ritual. He would come to the bottom of our staircase and ask for the newspaper. I would hand it to him, and he would sit quietly in the living room, the newspaper spread out in front of him on the table.

Now it strikes me he must have been lonely. My grandmother had already died. We were busy with our lives. He used to go on little walks of his own. But after he tripped and fell on the tram tracks, those stopped. It's as if he chose to recede into the background. Even that newspaper, he would read it only after everyone in the house was done with it.

Still, my grandfather was one of the lucky ones. He lived out his old age with the family. I can see him in the background in my childhood birthday pictures. But I don't remember talking to him about his childhood. It never occurred to me that he might be lonely amidst all of us.

He never spoke about it. Most people like him do not. They fear it will be seen as a complaint. Or their weakness. They do not want their children to think they are being ungrateful. They do not want to impose on anyone. So, loneliness becomes their companion.

A speech attributed to Clint Eastwood, 96, has been doing the rounds on social media. In it, he talks about the hidden toll of ageing. The phone rings less, the people who knew your funny stories are gone. "You find yourself repeating stories, adding details, not to convince anyone, but just to feel like you are still connected to something," Eastwood says.

It reminded me of my mother, as she crossed out yet another name in her phonebook after someone else she knew had died. On her own birthday, she painstakingly noted every person who had called in her diary. "Are you including messages from your bank and phone company?" I would joke. But I realise now that in a world that was shrinking every day around her, every point of connection was a reminder that she mattered.

We accept bad knees and cataracts as inevitable in old age. But we do not want to talk about loneliness, perhaps because there is no "loneliness replacement" surgery available. As always, we hope tech might be the solution. According to *BBC*, U World, a Chinese company, has just launched the world's first full-sized humanoid robot designed for lonely people. The AI-powered robots can engage in conversation and stay with you for a lifetime. An endless love that will never betray you, Michael Tam, CEO of U World, told the media. For about $17,600 for a base model.

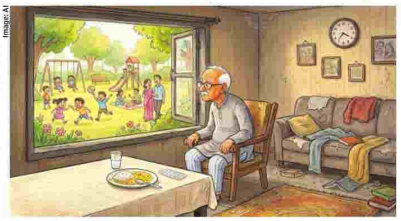


Image: AI

It's targeted at seniors, but loneliness is not just a senior problem. Physical connection, even across continents, has never been as easy as it is now. Yet, we feel more disconnected than ever. Aritra Sarkar writes in his new book *Are You Lonesome?* that the paradox of our times is "despite constant communication, we often feel like solitary islands, drifting without an anchor". A recent survey on the entertainment platform *JB.com* found that India ranked as the second-loneliest country in the world, despite still having relatively higher household sizes and strong family structures.

It shows that the family isn't necessarily the cure to loneliness. Emotional connection is. In the Hindi film *Baghban*, the ageing parents find themselves shuttled back and forth between their busy and ungrateful children, reduced to stealing tender moments secretly via telephone late at night. My mother loved it. It would drive me up the wall. Our family is nothing like the *Baghban* family, I would splutter.

> THE GREAT UNSPOKEN
> CONVERSATIONS WE NEED TO HAVE

We were not. But the uncomfortable truth about loneliness is it happens in the best of families, not just the *Baghban* types. Loneliness is not about abuse. It's about feeling irrelevant.

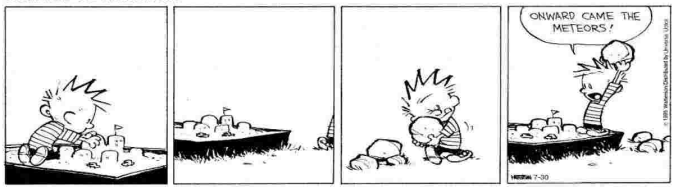
That's why programmes like Tata Trusts' Elder Spring focus a lot on activity centres for senior citizens. Organisations like HelpAge and Agewell Foundation emphasise not just healthcare, but companionship, conversation, and intergenerational connections. Years ago, at a senior centre in Mumbai, the director told me he tried to organise spiritual programmes at the centre. But the seniors told him, "We want bingo. Call a DJ, we want to have music." They started salsa sessions and Bollywood song classes. Some of the seniors were surprised they could make new friends in their seventies and eighties.

Gerontologist Mala Kapur Shankardass said for elders, especially women, there is a strong expectation of self-denial. It's seen as a virtue. So, one is expected to stoically accept loneliness as the price of old age. To her, self-denial is a hidden form of abuse that no one talks about.

But unlike many other problems, loneliness has a simpler solution. Giving someone one's time. Sometimes, it might mean listening to the same story again. But that is okay. When we listen, we are really telling someone they still matter. In the end, we do not fear death as much as irrelevance. Irrelevance feels so much lonelier.

Roy is a novelist

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



What kills us isn't one big thing, but thousands of tiny obligations we can't turn down for fear of disappointing others.

Alain de Botton

Action, Consequence, Inheritance, And Obligation

Yogi Ashwini

It is no coincidence that you are born into a particular family, among particular people. In the Vedic understanding of existence, such relationships arise from karmic bonds and unfinished exchanges carried over from previous births. The circumstances of one's birth are therefore not regarded as arbitrary. They are part of a larger continuity of action, consequence, inheritance, and obligation.

Your parents give you the physical body through which you experience life. Your ancestors transmit not only material inheritance but also patterns of behaviour, dispositions, *sanskars*, and other characteristics that continue through generations. From this perspective, relationships formed in one lifetime may continue beyond it, and the same beings may encounter one another again in different circumstances and forms.

The question, then, is whether one can become free from these accumulated bonds, rather than continuing indefinitely within cycle of birth and death. Vedic traditions describe liberation as requiring a gradual resolution of the obligations that bind an individual to the world.

The *shastras* describe several fundamental forms of indebtedness: to the guru and sages who preserve and transmit knowledge; to *devas*, forces through which creation is sustained; to *pitrus*, ancestors through whom the physical lineage continues; to other human beings; and to other living beings and the natural world.

These obligations are not understood merely as symbolic. They are expressed through specific duties and practices. The obligation towards the guru is fulfilled through learning, living according to the knowledge received, and transmitting it appropriately. Duties towards *devas* are expressed through *yajna*, performed with proper intention, ritual discipline, mantra, and guidance.



THE SPEAKING TREE



File Photo/IANS

Debt towards ancestors is addressed through practices such as *shradh* and *tarpan*.

Responsibility towards other human beings is expressed through service, nourishment, care of the vulnerable, and protection of those in need.

Responsibility towards living beings and nature requires preserving and protecting them.

Within this framework, liberation is not simply withdrawing from the world. It involves resolving obligations created through one's participation in it. This is particularly significant during *Pitru Paksh*, the period traditionally dedicated to ancestors. It is regarded as an appropriate time to perform rites for *pitrus*, express gratitude towards them, and address ancestral obligations.

Service to cows and bulls holds a special place in this tradition. Hindu texts describe the *Vaitarani* river as part of the post-death journey, and traditional accounts link the ability to cross it safely to merit gained through *gau-seva*. The cow therefore occupies a theological role that extends beyond its material significance.

Traditional accounts also associate neglected ancestral obligations with *Pitru Dosh*, which is sometimes invoked to explain disturbances affecting descendants, including conflict within families, financial difficulties, difficulties related to childbirth, or problems affecting children. These are religious interpretations within the broader framework of Hindu karmic and ancestral thought, rather than empirically established causal explanations.

Shradh, derived from *shraddha* – faith, reverence, or sincere regard – is therefore understood as more than a ritual performed for the dead. It represents the recognition of one's continuity with those who came before, fulfilment of ancestral obligations, and an attempt to resolve the debts inherited through birth. Within this worldview, freedom from the cycle of birth is ultimately connected with freedom from obligations and attachments that sustain it.

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Pharma freebies

Panel should prioritise patients' interests

THE Supreme Court has directed the Centre to constitute an expert committee with a view to curbing unethical pharmaceutical marketing. This is a welcome step towards plugging a regulatory gap. When inducements influence prescriptions, the consequences affect patients and the cost of healthcare. The petition before the Court has highlighted allegations of pharma companies offering doctors expensive gifts, foreign trips and other benefits to promote particular medicines. Such practices can distort clinical judgment and encourage over-prescription. Moreover, the patient is usually unable to assess whether a medicine is necessary or whether a cheaper alternative exists.

The Uniform Code for Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices, 2024, prohibits gifts, travel facilities, hospitality and monetary grants to doctors and spells out mechanisms such as an ethics committee, expenditure disclosures and an apex panel to address complaints. Yet the Centre's submissions have acknowledged the overarching question: should pharma firms be subjected to a statutory regime? The track record suggests that voluntary compliance may not be enough. The apex panel has received only a handful of complaints. This does not by itself prove that unethical practices are rare. Other factors could also be at play, such as under-reporting, weak enforcement or reluctance to confront powerful commercial lobbies.

Previous attempts to provide statutory backing through the Essential Commodities Act or the Drugs and Cosmetics Act raised questions of jurisdiction and legal validity. The proposed committee must therefore avoid another exercise in bureaucratic delay. It should examine international models, conflict of interest, disclosure requirements, penalties, independent investigation and the role of medical regulators. The government must come up with a clear legislative roadmap, including whether a new law is necessary. Patients should not have to bear the hidden cost of marketing campaigns disguised as professional persuasion.

Fish deaths

Faith must coexist with ecological care

THOUSANDS of fish dying in Mumbai's historic Banganga Tank after Pitru Paksha rituals is not an isolated environmental mishap. It is a recurring crisis that exposes the failure to anticipate and manage the ecological impact of religious gatherings. Reports indicate that similar fish deaths have occurred repeatedly in recent years, with organic material from ritual offerings contributing to deterioration in water quality and depletion of dissolved oxygen. The tragedy is that the problem is predictable. The dates of Pitru Paksha are known, the crowds are expected and the nature of the offerings is familiar. Yet preventive action remains inadequate. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's (BMC) decision to double the number of artificial ritual ponds from five to 10 and increase oxygenation measures is welcome. But such steps risk becoming another exercise in treating the symptoms rather than the cause.

Banganga is not an ordinary water body. The historic, spring-fed tank is part of Mumbai's heritage and supports aquatic life. It deserves a conservation strategy that recognises both its cultural significance and ecological vulnerability. Faith and environmental responsibility need not be in conflict. Rituals can be conducted in designated ponds, while offerings can be collected and disposed of or processed safely. Temple authorities, priests and civic agencies should work together to make such arrangements effective and acceptable.

Banganga needs continuous water quality monitoring, especially during periods of heavy ritual activity. Dissolved oxygen, organic pollution and other parameters should be monitored and the findings made public. Responsibility of the BMC, heritage authorities, the temple trust and pollution control agencies must also be clearly defined. India's rivers, lakes and ponds cannot be protected through annual clean-up drives after pollution has occurred. Prevention must precede remediation. Fish deaths in this tank must not happen next year.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1926

"Ideal political action"

IN the course of a recent speech, Sir Purushottamdas Thakurdas said that "he was one of those who honestly believed that in the best interests of the country, the ideal political action of the moment would be to send to the Councils men who, whether they were Nationalists or Responsive Cooperators, Swarajists or Moderates, would stand up to argue and refuse to bend to the government on any consideration." The proposition, to our mind, is not only absolutely unexceptionable but axiomatic, if what is meant is that on the main issue — the question of attaining full responsible government at the earliest possible moment — all elected Indian members in the Legislature should present a united front to the bureaucracy, and that only such men should be returned to the Legislature as are prepared to join in this united action. It is worthy of note that although they had no definite mandate in this respect from their constituents, the majority of the Indian members of the Legislative Assembly did accept this ideal at least on two memorable occasions. The first time when the Assembly presented the country's demand to the government, the Swarajists and Independents acted as one man. The second time when it did so, the Swarajists, Independents and Liberals, all, in fact, who were in the Council on a party ticket, joined in the demonstration. If Sir Purushottamdas's suggestions were accepted, the pressure exerted on the government by the legislatures with a view to the speediest possible attainment of responsible government would be just as great as it is in the power of India, under the present Constitution, to make it.

Action stations on a war footing

India needs to strengthen emergency response operations at the district level



LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN (RETD)
BIHAR GOVERNOR



TUNNEL COLLAPSE : Relentless efforts made the Silkyara rescue operation a success. ANI

IN the Army, there is an expression we often hear: "*Koi ladai nahin lagi hai.*" There is no war on; why the hurry? Yet, over a lifetime in intelligence, operations, planning, command and strategic affairs, I believed the opposite. For me, we were always at war — not literally, but institutionally. Something could always become a crisis. Preparedness could never begin after the crisis announced itself. Much of this is practised by soldiers on the ground.

In every command appointment, during contingencies, I followed one rule for subordinates: inform me at the first instance. Do not wait for the complete picture. Staff and subordinate commanders continued doing what they were trained to do. I would monitor, offer advice, discuss options or intervene when necessary. The commander should not lose opening minutes while someone assembles a tidier picture.

I could be woken at any hour of the night. I had instructed my communicators to give me half a minute before putting my communication through. Warm water was always beside my bed. Those seconds allowed me to gather my thoughts and clear my throat. In a crisis, a commander's voice must convey composure and authority. Preparedness is ultimately a collection of habits created when there is no crisis.

The 26/11 Mumbai attacks remain an enduring reminder that information, even when available in fragments and over time, does not automatically induce preventive action. Possessing information is different from converting it into preparedness. Between detection and response lie interpretation, dissemination, decision, orders, mobilisation and execution. Every transition is a potential point of failure.

This is starker in disaster management (I spent six years at the National Disaster Management Authority). Warning time is brutally short. A satellite may spot an abnormality; radars detect extreme precipitation; a river gauge shows a dangerous rise; a scientific agency issues an accurate warning. Yet none of these, by themselves, saves a life.

I saw the importance of this first-hand during the Silkyara tunnel collapse in November 2023. Prime Minister Narendra Modi grasped the gravity of the situation early and directed that every resource required be made available without delay. We worked passionately to deliver success. In my media interactions, I have often said that I treated the rescue operation as a war.

Technical information must first be converted into comprehensible language. The person on the ground needs no scientific dissertation. He needs answers to five questions: What is likely to happen? Where? When? Who is at risk? What must be done now?

That conversion — from technical information to operational instruction — is a neglected function in emergency management. It must be accurate but rapid.

> When no war is on, there is time to rehearse the response and ensure that everyone knows what to do.

Information in a fast-moving emergency is perishable. Warning time is an operational resource; every avoidable delay consumes it. A technically perfect warning that spends too long moving through institutional channels can arrive as an explanation of what has already happened.

Then comes dissemination. Technology offers cell broadcasts, SMS, messaging platforms, television, radio, social media, sirens, public address systems, satellite communications and government as well as police networks. But issuing a message is not the same as communicating it.

The State must employ every available means, with redundancy, to reach the maximum number of people. Not everyone will receive a warning. Phones may be switched off, networks fail, people are asleep. Language and literacy matter. Remote communities may lack connectivity, while some citizens will ignore advice. The test is whether every effort was made to reach as many people as possible — and whether the message was understandable and actionable.

This is why I remain concerned about emergency response operations at the district level. India has around 750 district disaster management authorities, yet permanent professional operations rooms are still far from universal in practice. In a disaster, this is an operational deficiency. A classic example of success was provided by the Gujarat government in June 2023, when 32 million messages were communicated in anticipation of Cyclone Biparjoy; not one life was lost.

Where does the first warning arrive? Who monitors the channel at 2 am? Who acknowledges it and informs the District Magistrate? Who converts it into executable orders? Who alerts the police, fire services, hospitals, SDRF (State Disaster Response Force) units, engineers and local administrations? Who orders evacuation, identifies shelters, arranges transport and confirms that action has begun? Who maintains the operational picture? Who tells citizens that help is on its way?

An operations room is not necessarily a room with screens and telephones. It is the nervous system of response. It requires trained people, updated contact directories, standard operating procedures, communications redundancy, resource visibility, decision matrices, logs and the habit of functioning together. A command centre activated only when disaster strikes is of limited value. Relationships and reflexes have to be built beforehand.

The sequence should become instinctive: receive, understand, simplify, decide, disseminate, mobilise, confirm, update and reassure. Communication cannot cease after the warning. People caught in a disaster need to know what is happening, what they should do and whether assistance is coming. In an information vacuum, rumour travels faster than relief.

The same principle applies to national security. Cyberattacks, terror incidents, military contingencies and failures of critical infrastructure may look different, but all test the distance between knowledge and action. India has invested in its capacity to know: satellites, sensors, radars, surveillance systems, intelligence networks, meteorological capabilities and digital communications. The next challenge is ensuring that the institutional machinery beneath these technologies is optimally responsive.

The first minutes of a crisis are not the time to construct command relationships, search for telephone numbers, interpret unfamiliar technical terminology or debate authority. They are the time to execute what institutions have already thought through and rehearsed.

"*Koi ladai nahin lagi hai*" should therefore never become an argument against preparedness. It should be the reason for it. When no fire is burning and no war is on, there is time to check the alarm, test communications, rehearse the response and ensure that everyone knows what to do.

Once the fire starts, the critical minutes have already begun.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Success depends upon preparation, and without preparation there is sure to be failure. — Confucius

The shirt of salvation

ANMOL RATTAN NARANG

SOMETIMES, even the gravest troubles disappear with the lightest touch of common sense. Some problems are actually quite small. Yet when they refuse to yield despite our best efforts, they appear insurmountable. And when they are finally solved, we wonder, "Was it really that simple?"

Years ago, while serving as an Assistant General Manager (Recovery) at my bank's head office in Kolkata, my zone consistently ranked first in recovering non-performing assets. However, my boss never missed an opportunity to belittle me.

He would say, "Where did you graduate from? Your English is so poor that after reading your circulars, I wonder whether you studied in some backward country."

On another occasion, he remarked, "If the CMD reads your letters, he will throw them away." At other times, he rejected my interpretation of RBI circulars.

I never answered back. Any confrontation could have affected my confidential report. Instead, I remained courteous, hoping that his attitude would change. But it did not.

My colleagues, especially those who were of my rank, would often say: "You are such a nice man. You work so hard. Your performance is quite good, yet the boss keeps scolding you. It appears that he has gone mad."

Unable to understand what had offended him, I sought advice from astrologers. Each blamed a different entity — *Shani, Rahu, Ketu.* Each prescribed a different remedy — offering cows green fodder at least equal to my weight, floating a coconut wrapped in red cloth in a river, donating black *dal* to a temple. I followed their advice religiously, but nothing changed.

Finally, someone suggested that I visit an ancient Shiva temple about 30 km away. With little faith but no other option, I went there one Sunday.

The priest listened to me patiently and glanced at my horoscope. Then, with complete calm, he said, "It's a very small problem. *Koi nazrana de dena tha usko*" (you should simply have given him a small gift).

I was not convinced, but since a drowning man will clutch at straws, I decided to do the needful. On my way back, I bought two branded shirts. Taking one to my boss' house, I said, "Sir, I purchased this shirt today and liked it so much that I thought you would like it too." He accepted it with a smile.

From the very next day, his attitude changed completely. The criticism stopped. In its place came appreciation, often in front of colleagues.

Looking back, I still smile at the simplicity of the solution. The problem had never been as formidable as I had imagined. One shirt had done the job.

The writer is ex-principal, Staff Training College, Chandigarh

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump keen on good ties with China

With reference to 'A new US-China order takes shape'; in the US-Iran conflict, China initially helped Tehran behind the scenes, but then openly termed American sanctions illegal. The BRICS summit, which was attended by China and Iran, condemned the unilateral US tariffs. And here the game changed. US President Donald Trump realised that it was better to have good relations with China. It is too early to predict how the new emerging US-China relationship will affect the world at large and India in particular. Under Trump, the US has lost credibility. It appears that the world is heading towards multipolarity.

ASHOK BAHL, KANGRA

Common man pays the price

Apropos of 'RBI's 1st rate hike since 2023 to push up EMIs'; the RBI's decision will hit the salaried middle class hardest — the small shopkeepers who have taken loans to stock up on materials, the farmers with crop loans, students with education loans. Ultimately, it is the common man, not the big corporates, who pays the price. Rising food and fuel prices, excessive populist spending on advertisements and freebies and a lack of price control have forced the RBI to take this harsh measure. Instead of curbing inflation at source, the government has put the burden on the RBI to penalise borrowers.

SNEHA SINGH, KHARAR

Rahul-Priyanka theatrics

Refer to 'Rahul leads 8-hr Oppn charge for CEC ouster'; the roadside drama outside Akashvani Bhawan was only a photo-op. When the issues concerning the CEC are before the Supreme Court, then where is the need for such political gimmicks? There is a huge difference between the removal of a Cabinet minister and the Chief Election Commissioner. The constitutional process to remove the CEC is akin to the removal of an SC judge. Rahul's team will have to put forward a plan better than Modi's. Informed voters cannot be fooled by theatrics alone.

ANIL KUMAR SHARMA, CHANDIGARH

Address poll deficiencies

Apropos of 'India's election model loses its sheen'; the writer rightly recalls TN Seshan as the gold standard of election management and compares India's electoral system with those of neighbouring countries. However, we must keep in mind that India continues to conduct elections on an enormous scale, involving hundreds of millions of voters, thousands of candidates and a highly competitive political environment. The allegations of 'vote theft' cannot automatically become evidence of wrongdoing. If there are genuine deficiencies, the proper course is to place the evidence before the appropriate constitutional or judicial forum rather than creating a political narrative.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), ZIRAKPUR

Maintain aircraft crew's trust

Refer to 'Courage in the air'; flydubai Captain Smit Machchhar's courageous act which saved the lives of 174 passengers is commendable. After 9/11, cockpit doors were required to be locked, as a defence against any hijacking attempt. There should be second thought on this aspect of the locked cockpit, to ensure the safety of the crew inside. The solution may lie in a combination of rigorous screening measures of cockpit and cabin crew and an improved system for identifying security risks. But the challenge is not to undermine trust and autonomy, which are indispensable to flying an aircraft.

SK SINGH, BY MAIL

Stardom meant service for Nana

The demise of actor Nana Patekar is an irreparable loss to Indian cinema and society. While millions knew him for his intense performances, his true greatness lay off-screen. His was a rare example of social activism, as he lived by the ideals of patriotism and social justice that he portrayed through his dialogues. Through the NAAM Foundation, he stood with drought-hit farmers and their widows. He visited their villages, helped them with cheques and got their houses rebuilt when others were merely giving speeches. At a time when stardom means luxury, Nana Patekar showed stardom can mean service.

AJAY BAGGA, HOSHIARPUR

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.
These should be cogently written and can be sent by **e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com**

The invisible Denotified Tribes of Punjab



APARNA VAIDIK
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

ONE common variable in Punjab's upcoming Assembly elections and the national population Census is the issue of caste enumeration. It has a direct bearing on the state's electoral and reservation politics. Punjab has the highest population of Schedules Castes among all states and union territories and nearly double of the national average. It rose from 28.9% in 2001 to 31.94% in the 2011 Census.

What explains this large proportion of SCs in Punjab? The inclusion of the Rai Sikh community (erstwhile OBCs) into the SC list partly accounts for it, but does not explain the extant percentage. The SCs in Punjab are a heterogenous grouping, that includes communities that were not historically untouchables. Around 10-12% of the SCs come from the seven heterogeneous groups of *Vimukt Jatis* or Denotified Tribes (DNT) — the nomadic and semi-nomadic groups — Bauria, Bazigar, Bangali, Sansi, Barar, Gandhila and Nat.

Despite constituting one-third of the SCs and being Punjab's most socio-economically marginalised minority groups, the DNTs are almost invisible in public conversations and there is meagre sociological data on them. It is claimed that the majority of the DNTs are engaged in scrap collection, wage labour, petty employment, agricultural work, construction work, unskilled labour, hawking, shoe-polishing, begging, rag-picking or some other minor self-dependent employment, although some families are believed to have experienced upward social mobility.

Until 1952, the DNTs were known as 'criminal tribes', classified as such under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871(CTA). Suspected of 'hereditary criminality', these hunter-gatherers, nomadic and pastoralist communities were vulnerable to being policed, controlled and surveilled. Following the promulgation of the Constitution, the CTA was repealed in 1952. While the DNT communities hailed the move, it set off fears of administrators and Punjab's elite.

On July 27, 1952, four days before the CTA's repeal, the then Punjab CM, Bhim Sen Sachar, introduced the Punjab Habitual Offenders (Control) Bill in the Assembly as a safeguard against the DNTs. Despite opposition, the Habitual Offenders Bill with several provisions of the CTA was passed.

The elite's fear of the erstwhile 'criminal' communities thus worked its way into bestowing conditional citizenship on the DNTs, who were required to adhere to the state's definition of a 'good citizen' or else be impugned.



VOTE BANK: Punjab has the highest population of Schedules Castes among states and union territories. FILE

In 1966, with the reorganisation of Punjab, the government did take steps to ameliorate their situation. It introduced 2% sub-reservation preference in government jobs and educational admissions for DNT candidates. But spatial reorganisation fragmented the community, disrupted its traditional seasonal migration paths and put them in a legal bind by splitting the DNTs 'rehabilitation settlements' across states.

They had to re-verify state domicile to access local welfare schemes and some were caught between inter-state judicial disputes, with residence in one state and land allotment in another. Their dispersal also had political implications: loss of political clout as a vote bank, which made harder for them to secure political representation.

> The DNT population's spatial dispersal over three states had significant political implications: loss of political clout as a vote bank.

The states of Punjab and Haryana were created without an officially designated ST list. The benchmark for the SC classification was 'backwardness stemming from historical practice of untouchability' and for the ST, it was primitivity, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact and general backwardness.

Given the complex nature of caste and tribal configurations, inaccurate population estimates, lack of caste census data, coupled with DNTs' lack of a clean fit in the SC or ST category, the result was classificatory confusion.

However, despite their classification as SCs, for the police administration, most DNTs remained 'criminal tribes'. While data is scant, being classified as SCs may have opened avenues for social mobility for some, but for most, it meant little change in their conditions.

Within the SC pool, they are forced to compete with more educationally and politically advanced SC communities. Dalit leaders are reluctant to take up the DNTs' issues because of this competition. Thus, caught in a bind with labels like habitual criminals, untouchables, depressed classes, backward, adivasi and Dalit, DNTs have found themselves to be excluded from provisions designed for their benefit.

While Rai Sikhs agitated to be included in the SC list, some DNTs contested their classification as SC since the 1950s. By the 1970s, some began to agitate against the SC classification in various forms — petitioning the government, street protests, hunger strikes, political rallies and court appeals.

Notable was the high court writ petition filed by DNT leader Buta Ram Azad in 1975, demanding that the community be accorded ST status. They argued that their historical 'disadvantage' was similar to the Dalits, but it stemmed from being nomads rather than from ritual discrimination; and that in independent India, notwithstanding their commitment to giving up nomadism, their association with it had impeded equal access to citizenship and state benefits. Despite a favourable HC order, no constitutional change was made. They made a case based on 'misrecognition' of their status than one on upholding a tribal identity to avail themselves of the benefits of quota.

The All-India Bazigar Conference in 1981 argued that their mobility was because of socio-economic exclusion and not a result of culture of nomadism.

The political mobilisation in Punjab was conterminous with the trans-regional and cross-communal alliances between different DNT groups across India. In the 90s, the pan-Indian DNT discourse positioned them as 'forgotten warriors', who had contributed to the anti-colonial struggle and their 'criminality' in that period was in service of the nation. However, the demands of the Punjab DNTs agitating for formal ST status were not met.

What implication does the status of Punjab's DNTs have for its electoral politics? Being an SC is not the same as being a Dalit in some communities' self-imagination. The discriminatory social prejudice, scanty numbers, spatially dispersed population, lack of education, indifference of the social elite and absence of representation in state-level politics has ensured the socio-economic exclusion of most DNT communities. Most DNTs of Punjab thus continue as half-citizens of India. Positioned at the political margins, neither does their narrative or presence impact vote-bank politics, nor can they benefit as much from state welfare policies.

This makes the SCs of Punjab a disparate grouping, with varied self-fashionings, access to resources and political leanings. And, therefore, they are a differentiated vote bank that does not vote en bloc.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

El Niño is only half the story



RAVI SHANKAR SHUKLA
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INDIA'S 2026 southwest monsoon has ended with 87.4% of the long-period average, making it the fourth-lowest monsoon season since 2001. But the aggregate conceals striking differences across regions and months. Earlier this year, the National Commodity and Derivatives Exchange (NCDEX) launched India's first exchange-traded weather derivative, beginning with Mumbai rainfall futures designed to help market participants manage financial exposure to rainfall variability.

By the end of the season, the logic behind such instruments looked even clearer. Monsoon risk is not simply a question of how much rain falls, but where and when it falls. In the process, it raises a deeper question as to how predictable is the Indian monsoon itself?

Recent research suggests that the El Niño-monsoon relationship itself is not spatially uniform or temporally fixed. The gap between moisture and circulation may increasingly shape how El Niño years unfold.

A weak El Niño in a warmer, more moisture-laden atmosphere could deliver heavier rainfall in intense episodes than historical seasonal averages would suggest, and so partly mask the Pacific's suppressing influence.

A strong centrally configured El Niño may suppress circulation as has historically been the case, but the rainfall that does arrive carries more atmospheric moisture and falls in more intense bursts. Deficit and flood can coexist within a single season, sometimes just regions or weeks apart. If break spells become more frequent, even near-normal aggregate seasons may carry higher agricultural stress than historical analogues imply.

Public discussion often grants seasonal rainfall forecasts a degree of precision that researchers themselves rarely claim. Unlike temperature projections, rainfall depends on atmospheric circulation, moisture transport, cloud processes and ocean-atmosphere interactions operating across several timescales. Seasonal forecasts therefore estimate probabilities rather than certainties.

> Conditions over one ocean can shape rainfall thousands of kilometres away, but the signals have multiplied.

Current models capture some of these interactions reasonably well, but others remain difficult to anticipate months in advance.

In fairness to forecasters, the broad direction of the 2026 season was anticipated. The India Meteorological Department forecast 92% of the long-period average in April and revised this to 90 per cent in May. The season eventually ended at about 87%. Yet forecasting a seasonal aggregate remains considerably easier than forecasting how rainfall will be distributed through time and across regions.

The emergence of weather derivatives adds an institutional dimension to this uncertainty, creating a market instrument through which participants can manage financial exposure to measurable rainfall variability. Their significance lies in recognising that weather uncertainty has economic value and can be managed even when prediction remains imperfect.

Physicist Gilbert Walker's central insight still stands. Conditions over one ocean can shape rainfall thousands of kilometres away. But the signals have multiplied. The spatial configuration of El Niño counts for as much as its magnitude, and the agricultural consequences increasingly depend on how rainfall is distributed through the season as well as on seasonal totals.

The 2026 monsoon demonstrated both the continuing importance and the limitations of El Niño as an explanatory framework. Looking towards the Pacific remains indispensable, but it is no longer sufficient.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

Why cops fail at Jantar Mantar



VIKASH NARAIN RAI
FORMER DIRECTOR, NATIONAL POLICE ACADEMY

HOW come the Delhi Police are risking far more adverse attention in handling the ongoing Jantar Mantar 2.0 than during the Jantar Mantar 1.0 in June-July? How do we explain that such a seasoned police force seems to have learned almost nothing from its recent setbacks? During the first version, the police had attracted allegations of large-scale high-handedness, including the use of pellet guns, to prevent protesters from marching towards Parliament. Allegations this time include, in addition to widespread beating and insulting of non-violent protesters, sexual assault on young female journalists covering a protest site.

The problem of the Delhi Police is that it is a law with a colonial memory, a police force with a political compass and a governance model that still treats citizens as subjects. When permission for a protest is decided not by a public order assessment but by who is protesting against whom, the police become a gatekeeper. To salvage their image, the Delhi Police need a democratic reset:

a) From permission raj to facilitation model, a transparent protest protocol: An online single-window with 48-hour deemed approval, clear decibel and sanitation norms, designated liaison officers. The Delhi Police should publish reasons for denial in writing, open to judicial review.

b) Body-cams and de-escalation SOP: Make body-worn cameras mandatory for all Jantar Mantar deployments. Training in de-escalation as per the Bureau of Police Research & Development manual, not lathi-first doctrine.

c) Administrative outreach, not barricading: Set up a Protest Facilitation Cell with water, medical aid, media enclosure, and a senior officer who actually talks to protesters.

Here are proven policing practices for Jantar Mantar-type gatherings: The Dialogue Model (Swedish/German) suggests a three-tier contact: 1. Dialogue officer talks to protest leaders days before 2. The negotiation team steps in on the day of protest 3. The intervention team checks violence. The Delhi Police experimented with this format during the farmers' protest 2020 — where DCPs who met the kisan groups daily had zero violence on their border.

> The best police forces in democracies don't win against their own citizens — they facilitate them.

The facilitation, not permission (UK Metropolitan Police SOP) model guides the police not to ask, "Should we allow?" But "How do we allow it safely?" Written reasons for denial are released within 24 hours, not oral 'higher orders'. A practical checklist includes a site map, entry, exit, water, toilets, ambulance lane, media gallery, and a time-box (10 am-6 pm) with loudspeaker norms.

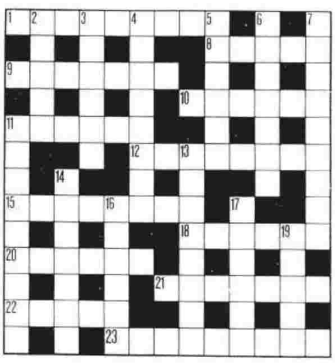
Proportionate Force Doctrine is the key to stamp legitimacy on police action. Escalation ladder is strictly observed: Communication > Containment > Controlled dispersal — lathi is last, not first. No preventive detention for peaceful assembly would be the norm. Body-worn cameras create accountability both ways. Delhi's 2023 pilot in three districts showed complaints dropped 40%.

Tamil Nadu's 'May I Help You' may be quoted as an administrative outreach that works. One senior officer is posted as protest facilitator — his job is to ensure protesters get water, medical help and can submit a memorandum. Videography prevents negative narrative. The New Zealand Police, after every large protest, publish a one-page 'After Action Report' — how many personnel used, how many detentions, any injuries. Builds trust.

The best police forces in democracies don't win against their own citizens — they facilitate them. But, until a police unit enjoys a political reset that a protest is about enabling it safely, every new protest will become another PR disaster and another judgment against it.

For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Turning-point in affairs (9)
8 On the other hand (5)
9 Light spear for throwing (7)
10 Regular customer (6)
11 Alliance (6)
12 Just to get a thrill (3,5)
15 Reveal previously private facts (2,6)
18 Impenetrable to sight (6)
20 Agreement (6)
21 Frugal (7)
22 Fiercely strong light (5)
23 Exceptionally inexpensive (4,5)

DOWN

2 Astound (5)
3 Come to light (6)
4 Malevolent (8)
5 A fabric used for table linen (6)
6 Ireland's patron saint (7)
7 Apart from others (2,3,4)
11 Relating to distant future (4-5)
13 A rebounding bullet (8)
14 Out of the ordinary (7)
16 Deliberately hurtful (6)
17 Send into exile (6)
19 An extremist (5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Jocular, 4 Flora, 7 Dupe, 8 Sturgeon, 10 Second-rate, 12 Tetchy, 13 Nicety, 15 Wreak havoc, 18 Occupied, 19 Fray, 20 Links, 21 Reflect.

Down: 1 Judas, 2 Capacity, 3 Retort, 4 First night, 5 Open, 6 Amnesty, 9 On the ropes, 11 Perverse, 12 Tomfool, 14 Career, 16 Crypt, 17 Scan.

SU DO KU

4			1		8			5
5								2
		6		9		4		
3		2	4		9	5		8
1								4
7		4	3		5	6		9
		5		3		7		
8								3
6			7		2			1

EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

8	9	3	4	7	5	6	2	1
4	1	5	3	2	6	9	8	7
2	6	7	1	9	8	5	4	3
1	4	2	7	8	9	3	5	6
5	8	9	6	1	3	4	7	2
3	7	6	5	4	2	8	1	9
7	2	8	9	3	4	1	6	5
6	3	1	8	5	7	2	9	4
9	5	4	2	6	1	7	3	8

CALENDAR

OCTOBER 9, 2026, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Ashwin Shaka 17
- Ashwin Parvishte 23
- Hijari 1448
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 14, up to 9:36 pm
- Brahma Yoga up to 11:21 pm
- Uttraphalguni Nakshatra up to 9:20 pm
- Moon in Virgo sign

FORECAST

SUNSET: FRIDAY 17:59 HRS
SUNRISE: SATURDAY 06:21 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	30	22
New Delhi	32	23
Amritsar	34	24
Bathinda	34	22
Jalandhar	33	23
Ludhiana	34	24
Bhiwani	36	22
Hisar	36	22
Sirsa	34	23
Dharamsala	28	16
Manali	21	10
Shimla	23	14
Srinagar	28	11
Jammu	32	20
Kargil	23	04
Leh	18	02
Dehradun	30	20
Mussoorie	20	12

TEMPERATURE IN °C

epaper.tribuneindia.com

The Statesman
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Cost of Stability

The Reserve Bank of India's decision to raise the repo rate to 5.5 per cent marks more than a routine adjustment in the price of money. It signals a change in the economic environment confronting India: growth remains robust, but the conditions sustaining that growth are becoming less forgiving. The contradiction is striking. The economy is projected to grow by 7.1 per cent, yet the RBI has chosen to tighten monetary conditions. That is not necessarily a sign of weakness. It reflects the uncomfortable reality that strong growth does not insulate an economy from imported inflation, currency depreciation or external shocks.

Oil is the immediate danger. India imports the overwhelming majority of its crude requirements. When international crude moves above $100 a barrel, the consequences travel through transport, electricity, manufacturing and household expenditure. A weaker rupee compounds the problem because every dollar of imported energy costs more in domestic currency. The RBI cannot produce oil or strengthen the rupee through monetary policy, but it can prevent temporary price pressures from becoming embedded in inflationary expectations. That explains why Governor Sanjay Malhotra has signalled that rate cuts are unlikely for now. The central bank is effectively drawing a line under the easy-money phase that supported demand after the pandemic. Its priority is no longer simply to encourage borrowing and investment; it is to preserve the credibility of the inflation-targeting framework.

There will nevertheless be a price for this caution. Higher borrowing costs will eventually affect homebuyers, automobile purchasers and businesses dependent on credit. The housing market, in particular, cannot remain immune if financing becomes more expensive. Discretionary consumption may weaken, while companies may reconsider investment projects whose returns depend on cheap capital. Yet the alternative could be worse. Allowing inflation to accelerate while the rupee remains under pressure would erode household purchasing power and could force the RBI into much sharper tightening later. India's experience with high inflation during the previous decade demonstrated how quickly persistent price pressures can damage both economic confidence and monetary credibility. The larger question is whether India's current growth model can withstand an external environment in which energy is expensive and global capital is less accommodating. The United States and other major economies have shown that interest rates can remain restrictive for longer than markets expect. Emerging economies cannot assume that foreign capital will continue to arrive on favourable terms. India therefore faces a test of economic resilience. A 7.1 per cent growth rate gives policymakers room to act, but it should not encourage complacency.

The government must complement monetary restraint with measures that improve energy security, strengthen domestic supply chains, raise agricultural resilience and contain fiscal pressures. The RBI has chosen stability over stimulus. But monetary policy can only buy time. Whether that time is used to make India's growth less vulnerable to oil, weather and global capital flows will determine whether today's rate hike proves a temporary precaution – or the first warning of a more difficult economic period.

A New Window

The deepest significance of this year's Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine lies not simply in what Karl Deisseroth, Peter Hegemann and Georg Nagel discovered, but in the new kind of question their work has made possible. For centuries, the brain has been the ultimate scientific black box: its billions of interconnected cells could be observed, but understanding precisely what individual circuits did was extraordinarily difficult. Optogenetics has begun to change that. The breakthrough rests on an ingenious marriage of biology and light. Hegemann and Nagel helped establish the importance of channelrhodopsin, a light-sensitive protein found in algae. Deisseroth subsequently showed how such proteins could be used to control nerve cells. By making selected neurons responsive to light, researchers gained the ability to activate or silence particular circuits and then observe what followed. That distinction is crucial.

It turns neuroscience from a discipline that largely asks what happens in the brain into one that can increasingly ask whether a particular circuit causes something to happen. Researchers can investigate the neural mechanisms associated with memory, emotion and behaviour with a precision that earlier techniques could not provide. The implications extend well beyond academic neuroscience. Mental and neurological disorders are often treated through broad interventions because the underlying circuitry remains imperfectly understood. Depression, epilepsy, Parkinson's disease and other disorders involve complex networks rather than a single faulty component. If science can identify the precise circuits involved, future treatments might eventually become more targeted, reducing the collateral effects associated with influencing large areas of the nervous system.

The first clinical applications already suggest the scale of the possibility. Researchers are exploring optogenetic approaches to restore limited vision in people whose retinas have been damaged by retinitis pigmentosa. The principle is remarkable: cells that have lost their natural ability to respond to light can be given a new light-sensitive mechanism and stimulated using specially designed equipment. But the distance between a spectacular laboratory experiment and routine medical treatment remains considerable. Much of the most sophisticated work has involved animals, while manipulating the human brain raises profound questions of safety, precision and ethics. The ability to influence circuits involved in memory, emotion or behaviour could ultimately become therapeutic, but the same capability inevitably raises questions about consent, autonomy and the boundaries of intervention.

That makes the Nobel recognition important beyond medicine. The great scientific advances of the past often came when researchers acquired a new instrument for seeing nature differently: the telescope, microscope or particle detector. Optogenetics belongs to this tradition. It is not merely another discovery about the brain; it is a technology for interrogating the brain. The larger promise is therefore not that science has finally solved the mystery of the human mind. It has not. The promise is more consequential: researchers now possess a means of turning some of that mystery into experimentally testable questions. That could reshape both neuroscience and medicine in the decades ahead.

Inseminating an intention

The question is what the district portal will show a year from now: a map of assets that still work, or a spreadsheet of closed muster rolls and half-built sheds. One of those is dignity. The other is the most expensive filing cabinet the country has ever bought. The gram panchayats are drawing up their first plans this season. We would do well to start reading them



Somewhere in a block that will soon file its first returns under the new rural employment law, there is a cattle shed built with public money and standing empty. The muster roll that paid for it is immaculate; the wages were disbursed; the photograph geo-tagged and uploaded. Only the cattle never came.

Walk far enough through rural India and you will meet the whole genre – the farm pond that silted over in one monsoon, the approach road that led to a field nobody irrigated. Each was, on paper, an asset.

Each was, in truth, a wage transfer dressed up as development, and the distance between those two things is exactly the distance between dignity and bureaucracy that the Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) now proposes to close.

That is the promise, at least, of the law that took effect on 1 July 2026. VB-G-RAM-G – the acronym is a mouthful, and its architects seem to know it – repeals the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act after two decades and replaces the older scheme's simple bargain of 100 days' unskilled work with a more ambitious one: 125 guaranteed days per household, and a mandate that the labour build durable, income-generating assets across water security, rural infrastructure, livelihood infrastructure such as dairy units and storage, and disaster resilience.

The Union has backed the rhetoric with money, allocating Rs 95,692 crore as its own share for 2026-27 and projecting a total outlay above Rs 1.51 lakh crore once the states pay in. On its own terms, this is the largest rural employment commitment the country has ever made.

To understand why the scheme was written at all, look at what MGNREGA's last years revealed. In the first half of 2025-26, LibTech India found, the old programme generated 132.5 crore person-days of work – 11.7 per cent fewer than in the same months a year earlier, and roughly a quarter fewer than two years before that – even as the Budget Estimate sat unchanged at Rs 86,000 crore.

Money was not the binding constraint; the work simply was not being created. The average worker who did find employment got barely 19 days of it. Behind the falling head-count sat a quieter attrition: government data acknowledge that more than 1.55 crore names were struck from the rolls between 2022 and 2024, many after a rigid Aadhaar-based payment system turned a clerical mismatch into a deletion. A guarantee that pays 19 days, deletes the inconvenient, and lets close to Rs 9,400 crore in wage and material dues accumulate is a guarantee in name only. VB-G-RAM-G is the state's answer to a scheme it had allowed to hollow out.

What, then, is genuinely new? The honest answer is the theory of the thing, more than the machinery. MGNREGA built assets too; what it lacked was any insistence that the asset be the point. The new law inverts the emphasis.

Every work must originate from a Viksit Gram Panchayat Plan, a forward-looking village blueprint rather than a list of make-work; at least half of each panchayat's allocation, by cost, must be executed by the panchayat itself; and the asset categories are tilted towards things that keep earning after the wage is paid – a milk-chilling unit, an irrigation channel, a processing shed.

If the design holds, a season of digging leaves behind a decade of income. That is what its authors mean by dignity: not the dole, but the durable.

The first two months should give the reform's champions pause. Rural work in July 2026, the mission's opening month, came in at barely half the level of July 2025, and households asking for work fell by nearly two-fifths.

The government's explanation is not unreasonable: seven states invoked the law's new 60-day sowing pause, and a recovering monsoon had thinned demand for wage labour; as LibTech India's Chakradhar Buddha fairly cautioned, one month is far too little to judge a scheme mid-transition.

But the more telling number is not about labour demand at all. By early September, nearly a quarter of the country's gram panchayats had recorded no expenditure whatever under the new scheme, and in West Bengal the figure was above 85 per cent – panchayats not resting through the harvest but jammed at the threshold of digital onboarding, mapping signatures, clearing biometric checks, issuing fresh cards before a day's work could be booked. That is not a sowing pause. That is a bureaucracy learning to breathe, and the workers waiting on it do not have a season to spare.

Even once the plumbing works, the deeper hazard remains, and it lives in one place – the gram panchayat. A milk-chilling unit is a harder thing to fake than a length of levelled earth, but it is also a more tempting thing to capture.

When the panchayat both writes the plan and executes half of it, the questions that decide whether this is development or patronage are settled locally and quietly: whose fields the new channel irrigates, which self-help group is handed the dairy unit, whose relative supplies the material against a cap of 40 per cent.



T KANNAN

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Decentralisation was always MGNREGA's democratic virtue and its standing vulnerability; the scholarship on India's panchayats has long documented how the better-connected bend local schemes to themselves.

A check-dam has a village for its beneficiary; a dairy shed has one household. The moment public works turn into individually owned productive assets, the prize for capture rises – and asset creation becomes the most respectable language in which patronage has ever been dressed.

The law is not naive about this, and here its drafters deserve credit. VB-G-RAM-G writes an unusually elaborate accountability apparatus into statute: biometric attendance, geo-tagged and satellite-verified works, dashboard-based monitoring promising real-time visibility, Janata Boards at every worksite, weekly public disclosure of muster rolls and payments, social audits by the gram sabha at least twice a year, and compensation when wages are paid late.

On the page, it reads close to a model of transparent governance. And that, precisely, is the reason for unease – because almost none of it is new. MGNREGA also mandated social audits, by law, twice a year in every panchayat; it too ran a public information system and pioneered geo-tagging. The design was sound; the practice was hollow.

Only Meghalaya, which passed its own social-audit legislation and built an independent audit society with real staff and budgets, ever made the mandate genuinely bite; elsewhere the audits, when held at all, were conducted by the very officials they were meant to scrutinise. A dashboard did not stop 1.55 crore deletions. The new Act asks us to believe the same tools, mandated a second time, will behave differently. They will not, unless three things are built that legislation alone cannot conjure.

The first is a dashboard that measures the right thing. A portal that tracks only rupees spent and person-days generated will reproduce MGNREGA's blindness: what must be shown, asset by geo-tagged asset, is function – does the chilling unit chill, does the pond hold water a year on – verified by someone the panchayat cannot appoint, with person-days and rupees set against each.

The second is fund-flow visible in real time, because the new 60:40 cost-sharing formula, under which states must bear any spending above the Centre's normative allocation, plants a quiet incentive: a cash-strapped state can suppress demand simply by slowing its sanctions, and only a live, public ledger of money moving from Centre to state to panchayat will expose that throttling before a work-year is lost.

The third is social audit with teeth – independent units on the Meghalaya model, funded outside the executing line, with every beneficiary list ratified by the gram sabha and published before the asset is built, not after. Without ownership transparency at the point of allocation, elite capture is not a risk to be monitored; it is the default to be prevented.

None of this is beyond the Indian state; Meghalaya proved it in one of the country's poorer corners. What it demands is the political will to be seen clearly, which is scarcer than money. So, the real question for the reader – the taxpayer whose Rs 1.5 lakh crore this is, the citizen whose republic first promised its people a right to work – is not whether VB-G-RAM-G is well intentioned. It plainly is.

The question is what the district portal will show a year from now: a map of assets that still work, or a spreadsheet of closed muster rolls and half-built sheds. One of those is dignity. The other is the most expensive filing cabinet the country has ever bought. The gram panchayats are drawing up their first plans this season. We would do well to start reading them.

Jakarta Post

Ignoring Myanmar normalizes tyranny upon us

The clamor of banging pots and pans, a traditional gesture turned protest against military rule, stands in stark contrast to the silence of a figure in a driver's seat binding three fingers with cellophane, exhaust smoke steadily filling the cabin. Whether this sequence stages a reenactment or documents an unsparing, defiant suicide under Myanmar's junta remains deliberately ambiguous.

In either case, the driver's three-finger salute aligns him with millions of protesters across Myanmar, Thailand, and Hong Kong who adopted the gesture from The Hunger Games as a universal emblem of resistance. The scene belongs to Myanmar Diaries, a harrowing cinematic collage assembled from footage shot by anonymous citizens determined to record both overt state atrocities and the eerie cadences of daily survival. The film anchors The Coup Years, a photography and video exhibition running through Oct. 11 in Kemang, South Jakarta. The showcase delivers a chilling chronicle of existence under a regime that weaponized pandemic-era mobility restrictions into brutal instruments of population control, driving a documented surge in suicides in the wake of the 2021 coup.

Equally painful to watch is a young woman murmuring "tell him, don't tell him", while picking boba balls one by one from her ice drink and lining them up. We learn that the pregnancy test of the 18-year-old had apparently turned out positive. But she couldn't tell her boyfriend regardless of the boba balls; he had told her he needed to head to the jungle, as his name was on a wanted list. She is left with his blood-stained shirt.

A passport to the kingdom of the sick Read on The Weekender Featuring the work of mostly Myanmar photographers, the exhibit includes other film screenings, book launches and discussions. Visitors sense the despair but also the extraordinary determination of Myanmar's women and men, young and old, to hold their ground against every attempt to trample on their very existence. They inspire us to at least reject outright the normalization of tyranny, not only in Myanmar, but also in our own nations.

A Member Of The ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

While the crisis in occupied Palestine rightfully dominates public consciousness, Myanmar's catastrophe continues in the periphery, its people relentlessly terrorized and slain by their own military. Analysts point to a junta consumed by existential desperation, scrambling to consolidate nationwide control and wrest resource-rich territories from entrenched ethnic resistance armies.

Meanwhile, ASEAN continues to hide behind its timeworn mantra of "noninterference", a paralysis so profound that one discussion participant condemned the bloc for bordering on outright genocide denial. The shuttle diplomacy once championed by former Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, which sought to engage both the junta and the democratic National Unity Government (NUG), is now effectively history.

Yet Jakarta has maintained a crucial boundary: it steadfastly refuses to formally recognize the military regime led by coup leader Min Aung Hlaing, whose orchestrated elections are roundly dismissed by citizens and observers alike as a cynical sham. The accountability battle has also reached Indonesian soil.

In April, civil society coalitions petitioned Indonesia's Attorney General's Office, demanding criminal prosecution of the junta chief under universal jurisdiction for alleged crimes against humanity and acts of genocide.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Great legacy

Sir, Please refer to today's report "Kaur steps down, Mandhana named captain". Undoubtedly, Harmanpreet Kaur has chosen to step down from the India captaincy across all three formats with perhaps the best possible view of the finish line. She, only the third Indian captain after Kapil Dev and M.S. Dhoni to win the ICC ODI World Cup, remained the face and force of the transformation of women's cricket.

Plus, there is something fitting about the timing. Ms Kaur's final three assignments as captain brought three major victories: an Asia Cup title, a historic Test win at Lord's and an Asian Games gold. She has also helped India qualify for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Not a bad day to hand over the baton! But Harmanpreet's legacy is not just about numbers and achievements. Her clean hitting, fierce slog sweeps and ability to clear the boundary with seemingly little effort made her one of the most feared batters of her generation. Her 171 not out against Australia in the 2017 World Cup remains etched in memory, but the bigger



contribution was what those innings represented: a belief that Indian women could take on the best without blinking.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das,
Kolkata, 7 September.

Freebie?

Sir, Free bus travel for women has often been dismissed as an election-time freebie. The latest data from the Statistics Ministry offers nuanced reading. With only about 9 per cent of Indians using public transport, the issue is not merely the cost of free rides but whom they enable to participate in the economy. For women, subsidised bus travel can reduce the cost of commuting to work and widen access to employment. It is more an economic enabler than a consumption giveaway. That said nearly 80 crore Indians receive free or highly subsidised foodgrains. Seen as legitimate commitment to food security, how many still genuinely require this support? Welfare must protect vulnerability, not perpetuate entitlement. The distinction is not between welfare and reform, but between empowerment and subsidy dependence.

Yours, etc., R Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai, 7 September.

Drunken driving rules must be data-driven

PRAGATI AND ABHISHEK JHA

India does not have a road safety problem. It has a road safety catastrophe. Every three minutes, someone dies on its roads. This is a country with barely 1 per cent of the world's vehicles, yet it accounts for 11 per cent of global road deaths and 6 per cent of total crashes (MoRTH, 2018). The economic cost is staggering: An estimated 3.14 per cent of GDP is lost annually to the long-term income loss from road fatalities (MoRTH, 2023).

Against this backdrop, drunk driving occupies a particularly troubling space. International evidence suggests that alcohol-impaired driving contributes to 10-30 per cent of fatal crashes across countries (ITF, 2019). It is also, characteristically, not a one-off lapse but a habit, which is precisely the behaviour India's newest road safety instrument is designed to catch.

Speaking at the 66th SIAM Annual Convention in 2026, Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari announced plans to introduce a graded points system under which every traffic offence will debit a driver's licence, and enough debits will cost them the licence altogether. The logic is straightforward: make the licence itself the collateral, and drivers will think twice. Whether that logic holds for Indian drivers is another matter.

A field study by Pahlé India Foundation, a New Delhi-based think tank, across RTOs in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in February 2025 found that over 90 per cent of drivers who self-reported drinking and driving are not fully aware of the legal consequences. The prevailing belief is simple: if caught, you pay a fine and move on. Few are aware of the possibility of imprisonment, the legal thresholds for blood alcohol content, or the sections that apply in the event of a violation. This is not indifference. These are people who have reasoned about the risk and arrived at the wrong answer.

That finding undermines the logic of deterrence-based campaigns. If messaging focuses on severe penalties while the audience believes enforcement is trivial, the communication fails at its foundation. You cannot deter behaviour when the perceived cost of being caught is negligible.

And even where drivers know the risk, many cannot act on it. In several Tier-2 and Tier-3 towns, drivers report knowing they should not drive drunk but lack any alternative. Late-night transport is unreliable, public transit is unavailable, and safe parking options are limited. In such contexts, the choice is not between responsible and irresponsible behaviour. It is between driving drunk and being stranded.

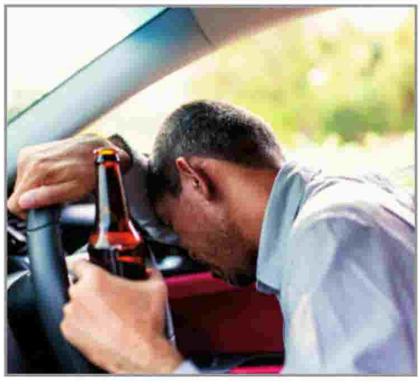
The study also reveals an important nuance: geography matters. Regional differences shape how drivers perceive and report alcohol consumption. In the Haridwar region, for instance, cannabis consumption (bhaang) is culturally accepted, whereas alcohol remains taboo under religious prohibitions, producing markedly lower levels of self-reporting. The implication cuts two ways. Prevalence is likely understated wherever alcohol carries stigma, and a single national campaign will land differently, or not at all, across these settings.

There is no single 'Indian driver psychology'. There are many. What does resonate is emotional content. Drivers respond more strongly to narratives showing the impact of their actions on their families - stories, documentaries, lived experiences - than to abstract warnings. Behavioural science explains why: present-biased decision-makers, who discount future risks heavily, respond far more to vivid, emotionally proximate information than to statistical warnings. A campaign that shows a wife receiving the news, or a child losing a parent, forces the driver to imagine an outcome in human terms rather than in probabilities.

If drivers cannot see the consequences of their choices, the state, for its part, cannot reliably see the choices themselves. India's road accident data, compiled by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, is largely FIR-based. This creates an immediate blind spot: incidents that do not lead to an FIR simply do not exist in official records. The headline statistic - alcohol and drugs were involved in roughly 1 in 40 road deaths in 2022 (MoRTH, 2022) - appears modest. But it is not a measure of drunk driving in India. It is a measure of cases serious enough to generate police paperwork.

The problem runs deeper. India's accident data ecosystem is fragmented. Overspeeding, for instance, is listed as the cause in seven out of 10 road fatalities. Yet it is entirely plausible that a portion of these incidents involve alcohol. Without breathalyser testing at the scene, they are recorded as overspeeding alone. Even when post-mortems detect alcohol, that information often remains confined to hospital records unless an FIR is filed.

There is no unified system linking breathalyser data, FIRs, hospital admissions and RTO licence records in real time. Nor is there national integration. An offender caught in Bengaluru today effectively resets their record in Chennai tomorrow. The system punishes once, and then forgets.



The diagnosis is clear: India's approach to drunk driving relies heavily on penalties and awareness, while underinvesting in data systems and behavioural design.

This is precisely where the graded points system is vulnerable. Points raise the cost of being caught. They do nothing to raise the chance of it. For a driver who believes a violation ends with a fine, a steeper penalty attached to an event he does not expect to occur changes very little.

Policymakers should therefore prioritise regional benchmarking of road safety outcomes, greater investment in road safety infrastructure, and the creation of a centralised offender database linked to existing platforms such as VAHAN and Sarathi. Such integration would ensure that traffic violations follow offenders across state lines, strengthening both enforcement and accountability. Alongside it, campaigns must be built regionally and emotionally rather than nationally and statistically, and late-night transport treated as road safety infrastructure rather than a municipal afterthought.

More than 400 people will die on Indian roads tomorrow. That number has not changed meaningfully in years. The tools for a different outcome are not missing. The decision to use them is.

The writers are, respectively, Associate Fellow and Fellow at Pahlé India Foundation, a New Delhi-based think tank.

Strengthening federalism needs structural reset

DR D SUBBARAO

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India had said, "Though the country and people may be divided into different States for convenience of administration, the country is one integral whole, its people a single people living under a single imperium derived from a single source". After the rise of regional political parties in the country over a few decades, political leaders mobilised voters around local pride, language and "sons-of-the soil" ideals and channelized regional grievances into active democratic politics.

To champion the cause of regional identity and federalism, they directly challenged the high concentration of power with the Centre. Frequent dismissal of democratically elected State Governments by imposing Presidential Rule in the States in 1983-84, curbing greater financial autonomy of the States and other issues of friction influenced politics to a great extent across the country. It has paved the way for strong regional coalitions and shifted the nation towards a more genuinely federal structure.

Cooperative federalism is the concept of federalism in which national, State and local governments increasingly interact cooperatively and collectively to solve common problems.

Centre-State relations are very delicate and involve mutual trust and respect. The Indian model of federalism is predominantly "cooperative" as laid down by the Supreme Court's landmark judgement in State of Rajasthan vs Union of India, 1977. In this context, the Sarkaria Commission (1983-88) recommended cooperative federalism, consultation with States and restraining the use of Article 356 in States. After the implementation of some recommendations of the Sarkaria Commission, relations between the Centre and States improved to an extent and the spirit of cooperative federalism also got a boost.

However, some instances of friction in Centre-State relation are still taking place, especially in opposition-ruled States. The States face heavy expenditure responsibilities alongside a high revenue dependence on the Centre. The Centre controls vast resources granted through deficit financing, loans from the organised money market in the country, as well as in the form of foreign aid. In addition, the Centre collects cess and surcharge on taxes which is outside the divisible pool. On the other hand, States lack resources to discharge their responsibilities at times and hence are dependent on the Centre.

Friction frequently arises when the Union Government appointed Governors delay or withhold assent to Bills passed by State Legislatures and sometimes reserve Bills for the President of India. There are instances where legislative overlap takes place. Contentions continue over Concurrent List subjects and uniform social sector policies that challenge regional policy-making flexibility.

The role of central investigative agencies such as Central Bureau of Investigation, Enforcement Directorate, National Investigation Agency and others has been a subject of considerable debate, especially in the context of its impact on federalism in India. The increasing involvement of central agencies in State-level investigations can undermine the autonomy of States. The requirement for general consent from the States for a CBI investigation has become contentious.

The Inter-State Council, created under the Article 263 of the Constitution, helps coordinate between States in resolving federal disputes and fostering cooperation between the Centre and States. The Inter-State Council is yet to be made a permanent body under the Constitution, as suggested by the Punchhi Commission. It is necessary to enhance the role of the Inter-State Council to address Centre-State issues.

Inter-State Water Tribunals often report long delays, sometimes more than a decade, to reach a decision. These delays are due to the process itself and get extended by challenges in the Supreme Court, leading to inefficiencies in the system. The Central Government had introduced the Inter-State River Water Disputes (Amendment) Bill 2019 to address prolonged delays and inefficiencies in resolving inter-State disputes.

The 15th Finance Commission (2020-2025) faced criticism from some States for using 2011 population data in Terms of Reference (ToR) for tax devolution. Involving States in the Finance Commission's ToR is crucial for ensuring a fair, transparent and cooperative approach to fiscal federalism in India. It further ensures fair resource distribution considering diverse challenges across the country.

Strengthening federation in India needs a structural reset that enhances States' fiscal autonomy, effects reforms in the role of Governors and revitalizes collaborative inter-governmental



institutions. A mechanism to limit the Centre's reliance on cesses and surcharges which keep funds out of the divisible tax pool is a necessity. Under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, the devolution of funds, functions and functionaries of local bodies (urban and rural) may be empowered for betterment and ease of living of citizens across the country.

Some experts suggest the need to revisit conditional and discretionary grants under Article 282 to prevent fiscal concentration and ensure rule-based devolution. They also suggest the need to improve transparency and build consensus within the GST Council to balance national market integration with State rate flexibility.

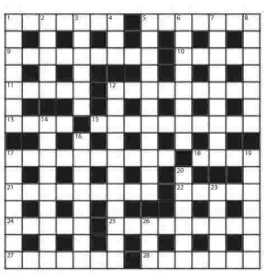
In order to avoid partisan gubernatorial roles, implementation of a more transparent and consultative process for appointment of Governors to the States should be framed. There is need to explore Amendments to the existing Act to clearly define and limit the Governor's role in State affairs. It is also essential to codify strict statutory timelines for granting assent to State Bills.

The Central Government should exercise self-restraint and avoid legislating on State-level subjects unless national uniformity is absolutely warranted. Concurrent List overreach may be limited by the Centre to the extent possible. NITI Aayog which has been constituted to actualise the goal of cooperative federalism needs to function more proactively as an essential platform. It should bring the States together as "Team India" to work towards development of the nation on the premise that strong States make a strong nation. More powers may be bestowed upon NITI Aayog.

It is crucial to address emerging federal challenges such as upcoming delimitation impacts, ensuring that States with varying demographic trends maintain fair political weight across the country. India can strengthen its federal structure by ensuring a balance between national unity and State autonomy while preserving the spirit of cooperative federalism.

The writer is a retired development banker and columnist.

Crossword | No. 293604



Yesterday's Solution



ACROSS

1 Pass round a dirty place, a Government building (7)
5 Competing in pursuit of sides in league is taxing (7)
9 Winged creature, vaguely clear, about to hover (9)
10 God, for one Rector, will involve source of tension (5)
11 Feeling hot meal is missing starter (5)
12 Developed pleasure in penning two lines and good further line (4-5)
13 Failure in team is sacked (4)
15 Detective in midst of storm pursuing soldier (7,3)
17 Carnal, with a bed prepared – romantic lighting? (10)
18 Check stone emblem's edges (4)
21 Stopped including section 13 – it's rejected (9)
22 Not stunned, dispatching a single (5)
24 Big story I cover, involving Australian (5)
25 Recalled main article linked to movement of an artistic kind (9)
27 Mammal – something necessary when housing revolutionary collection of animals (7)
28 See 12 Down

DOWN

1 What oblivious theatregoer may do in part of London (7)
2 Nut found in Cape Canaveral (5)
3 Poor-quality wood used in test (6)
4 Mathematical tool the target of hack? (3)
5 Told stories about heartless lady being dastardly (4-7)
6 Member of tribe settling in Toulouse – see one leave aboard this at sea (8)
7 Popular races engaging traveller, one not boosted by others (9)
8 French river running north through French station (7)
12/28 Mathematical claim confusing for elite maths master? Not I (7,4,7)
14 Tabloid is upset initially on identifying daring starlet's curves (9)
16 US director supporting live puzzle (8)
17 IT-based design with not a word about one reactor element (7)
19 No time for doctor saying little (7)
20 English regret getting upset about chief American card game (6)
23 Quality, one not observed in restaurant worker (5)
26 Regular contributors to swift session (3)

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

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 09 October 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE failure to elucidate the cause of the terrible air tragedy at Ton bridge throws us back upon speedlation as to why there should be so many more accidents on the French cross-Channel air line than on the English. It is natural to conclude that the fault lies with the groundmen. A good pilot and a fine aeroplane afford no protection against a careless fitter or mechanic. In the days of the War the prudent pilot made a frequent practice of springing on his mechanic a surprise invitation to accompany him in the air. No one dared hesitate in face of such an invitation, for reluctance would immediately suggest that the mechanic lacked confidence in the machine which he was supposed to keep in perfect flying trim. The knowledge that a "flip" might be their lot at any moment had a marvellous effect in keeping air mechanics up to the mark. Can it be that the French civilian airman is forgetting this bit of War wisdom?

News Items

'UNITED STATES OF EUROPE'

ECONOMIC PLAN TO COMBAT AMERICA

("TIMES" SPECIAL SERVICE.)
PARIS, OCT.

M. LOUCHEUR, ex-Minister of Finance, writing in L'Oeuvre, envisages an economic "United States of Europe" to combat America's methodical production.

Europe, he writes, needs a supreme economic council like that at Geneva in order to facilitate agreements between the key industries of different countries, with safeguards to prevent combines overriding the Governments.

Failing such agreements Europe will lapse into industrial anarchy in the face of American domination.

DRASTIC ACTION BY MINERS

"SAFETY MEN" TO BE CALLED OUT

AHMEDABAD, OCT.

In addition to having rejected the Government's proposals on the advice of the districts, the Miners' Federation delegates have taken the drastic step of deciding to call out the safety men and place an embargo on foreign coal. The resolution was submitted by South Wales.

In the meantime the number of miners working in defiance of the strike order is daily increasing. An intensive propaganda campaign is to be pursued in the "disloyal" areas with the object of getting the men to rejoin the strikers' ranks.

There was an angry scene during the discussion preceding the vote. Mr. Herbert Smith, the miners' president, who criticised the resolution amid protests, threatened to leave the Chair.

BROADCASTING IN INDIA

DIRECTOR'S HOPE OF GOOD SERVICE

LONDON, OCT.

MR. Eric Dunstan of the British Broadcasting Company, will depart for India by the Kaiser-i-Hind in December. He hopes to inaugurate a broad-casting service on March 1 at Bombay and Calcutta.

In an interview Mr. Dunstan emphasised that broadcasting in England had definitely become far more than a commercial undertaking and was now a national service. He had had the privilege of working under the managing-director, Mr. J. C. C. Reith, and had just as high an ideal for an Indian Broadcasting Company. How far his experience of broadcasting in England would be of help in India it was impossible to say, but with the co-operation, assistance, and advice of those on the spot who knew India, he must try to adapt his knowledge to the new conditions.

Editor's TAKE

Gaza demands more than a ceasefire

Three years after the October 7 massacre, the last Israeli hostage is home, but Gaza lies devastated, while the region remains scarred and its future uncertain

Three years ago, on October 7, 2023, when Hamas-led gunmen killed about 1,200 Israelis and took 251 hostages, the massacre changed the politics of the region. That massacre was a crime, and no grievance excuses it. For the first time, no Israeli hostage remains in Gaza on this anniversary. But what followed was not justice. It was the near-annihilation of Gaza and its people.

The numbers are hard to hold in the mind. Roughly 74,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to Gaza's health ministry. About 80 per cent of structures are damaged. Most of the enclave's two million-plus residents have been displaced and squeezed into less than half the Strip. A UN commission of inquiry has found that acts of genocide were committed.

Fewer than half of Gaza's health facilities function even partially, and the World Health Organization says none has been restored to full capacity since the ceasefire. That ceasefire, imposed last October under Donald Trump's 20-point plan, has stopped the big offensives, not the dying.

The ministry counts 1,467 deaths since it began. The International Stabilisation Force has yet to deploy. The Palestinian technocratic committee meant to run Gaza has not taken charge. Israel says its troops hold about 64 per cent of the territory, and humanitarian access remains tightly restricted. The war did not stay in Gaza. It has spread to Lebanon, Syria and a wider confrontation with Iran that still grinds on, rattling energy markets and fuelling global anger at Israel.

Meanwhile, world attention has drifted, and with it the pressure that forced the truce. The real test comes after Israel's election, when the ceasefire's next phase will either move or quietly die. Gaza desperately needs help, not just help but a complete plan to reconstruct and rehabilitate the people who have endured a lot in the last three years.

The way forward is not mysterious, only unglamorous. Deploy the stabilisation force. Put Gaza's administration in Palestinian technocratic hands. Open the crossings fully and fund reconstruction at scale, not at leisure. Sequence Hamas's disarmament with Israeli withdrawal. Above all, restore a political horizon: without a credible path to Palestinian statehood, every ceasefire is an intermission. And accountability must cut both ways, for the October 7 atrocities and for Gaza's destruction.

India has real stakes in West Asia: millions of citizens working in the Gulf, its energy supply and the IMEC corridor, which needs a calm region. New Delhi formally backs a two-state solution and welcomed the Trump plan.

But friendship with Israel does not require silence on Gaza. New Delhi has access in Jerusalem that few capitals enjoy. It should use it to press for unhindered aid, an end to strikes and a political track, and offer the reconstruction help it can afford. A civilisational power cannot be seen to grieve for only one side.

The new-age policing: Smarter, faster, more humane

In a fast-changing world, police performance will be judged not by the number of tech-based applications launched, but by the number of crimes that do not take place



AJAY SINGHAL



In the 1990s, when I first walked into a police station as a trainee IPS officer, policing was largely a race to catch up with crime. The tools were modest: a handwritten 'Rojnamcha', a temperamental black rotary-dial telephone, and the institutional memory of the MHC and beat constable. Success was measured by how quickly the police reached the scene, arrested the accused and restored order.

Three decades later, that paradigm is changing fundamentally. Technology, data and intelligence are enabling the police to move from reacting to crime to anticipating and preventing it. The critical question is no longer merely, "What happened?" but "What is likely to happen - and what can we do before it does?"

This is the essence of new-age policing: using technology not as an end in itself, but as an instrument to prevent crime, accelerate justice, protect the vulnerable and make policing more accessible, accountable and humane. In Haryana, this transformation is already visible - from Dial 112 and women's safety initiatives to cybercrime intervention, AI-assisted investigation, digital evidence and real-time intelligence. Based on more than five million calls each year, the average response time stays below seven minutes, whether in cities or the countryside. Motorbikes can navigate market streets where four-wheelers would get stuck.

When a woman is in danger, she presses one button on the Durga Shakti app, and her current location is sent to the same command centre. A woman who is travelling alone at night can register her journey and be effectively looked after until she gets home. This is not a reactive action; it is accompaniment.

The previous system largely failed to cope with cybercrime because criminals could be based in another country and money could vanish within minutes. The helpline 1930, connected to Dial 112 and manned by bank representatives who work with police officers, gets about 5,000 calls every day and freezes suspicious transfers before mule accounts can drain them.

Haryana leads the nation in preventing fraudulent transfers and has recovered about 40 per cent of funds defrauded within the state. Since June, any complaint (online) involving a loss of more than ₹1 lakh has automatically resulted in an e-Zero FIR. Prevention is now taking steps even further upstream; the 'Abhedya' app enables unknown international extortion calls to be kept from reaching the victim, and the Dual OTP pilot allows a trusted contact of a senior citizen to block a suspicious large transaction, providing a small amount of protection against the 'digital arrest' scam. The basic beat has also been reconsidered. With the Eagle app, an on-duty police officer can immediately compare a detainee's face with a database of offenders, exposing impersonators and avoiding lengthy detentions for law-abiding citizens. The National Automated Fingerprint Identification System (NAFIS) can match a blurred fingerprint recovered at a crime scene with entries in the national records in just a few seconds. Smart E-Beat records patrols using GPS, and the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and System (CCTNS) links police stations to courts, jails and forensic facilities. Meanwhile, e-Sakshya ensures that crime-scene evidence is preserved in an unchangeable form.

> THE ULTIMATE TEST, HOWEVER, IS NOT THE NUMBER OF APPS LAUNCHED OR DATABASES CREATED. IT IS MUCH SIMPLER: HOW MANY CRIMES ARE PREVENTED, HOW MANY VICTIMS ARE PROTECTED, HOW QUICKLY JUSTICE IS DELIVERED, AND HOW MUCH PUBLIC TRUST THE POLICE EARN

The reforms go beyond the streets to affect the fundamental machinery of the justice system. When evidence parcels move from the police station to the forensic laboratory, a barcode is assigned to each one, creating a chain of custody that can withstand judicial scrutiny. Instead of making long, risky journeys, prisoners now attend court through secure video links.

Even people with no name are now being given one: an AI-assisted system matches the faces and fingerprints of unidentified bodies with those in the missing persons database, giving closure to families who have been waiting for years. Similarly, internal tools matter; complaint dashboards show where complaints go unaddressed, so accountability does not rely entirely on goodwill.

Crash data is converted into heat maps that show engineers where to redesign a curve, and cashless trauma care helps shorten the important golden hour. On motorways, number-plate recognition cameras continuously monitor the situation and also serve as a record for tracking vehicles that escape.

If we discuss only the possible outcomes of this transformation without going further, we would be poor guardians of it. The United States' experience with statistics-based policing - especially its use of dashboards, performance targets and strict enforcement of minor offences — shows that crime statistics can decrease even as community confidence falls.

Facial recognition, currently being developed to identify offenders who have admitted guilt and those who have jumped bail, and lawful interception can result in excessive surveillance unless strict legal safeguards, regular auditing and proper oversight are in place.

That is the reason why the key improvement does not lie in the server room: just as important as any software are training in de-escalation, awareness of bias and courtesy. Digital services matter too, because the 'HARSAMAY' portal lets citizens avoid queuing for a copy of an FIR or a verification certificate, and QR-code feedback at station counters gives each visitor a chance to share their views. By conducting online patrols and maintaining a visible presence on social media platforms, the community extends its area of responsibility into the digital environment.

"New Age Policing": In the fast-changing world, the performance will be judged not by the number of tech-based applications we launch, but by the number of crimes that do not take place, the number of people who are not harmed, and the citizens who do not even need to go into a police station for an FIR (now e-FIR/Zero FIR beyond jurisdiction).

The ultimate test, however, is not the number of apps launched or databases created. It is much simpler: How many crimes are prevented, how many victims are protected, how quickly justice is delivered, and how much public trust the police earn.

The writer is the Director General of Police, Haryana.

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Running in Torn Spikes

Resources can be borrowed or bought, but the belief to keep running has to be built from within.

Gurvindervir Singh, a 25-year-old sprinter from Patial village near Bhogpur in Punjab, won bronze in the 100 metres at the Asian Games in Nagoya. For two to three years he trained in torn spike shoes because his family could not afford new ones. He was told Indians were not suited to the 100 metres, and even his father suggested he change events. He did not. He went on to become the first Indian to run under 10.10 seconds, clocking 10.09 at the Federation Cup in Ranchi. After he shared his struggles on social media, support came from people around the world.

Asked why he never changed his event, he said, "My coaches never told me that it was not possible, then why should I change my event?" The Mahabharata gives us Ekalavya, a young archer turned away from Drona's school, who practised alone before a clay image of the teacher and mastered the art with almost nothing. His story ended unjustly, with his thumb demanded as an offering. Gurvinder's story carries a gentler ending: coaches who believed in him, and a country that finally noticed.

We often postpone our efforts until the right equipment, circumstance or approval arrives, and in waiting we lose years. Today, begin one worthwhile task with exactly what you have, and trust the effort to attract the help it needs.

–DAIV

PIC TALK



Indian Air Force (IAF) Surya Kiran Aerobatic Team aircraft perform manoeuvre during the Exercise Tarang Shakti 2026 in Jodhpur PHOTO: PTI

What patience teaches us about progress



SIDDHARTH ROY

2ND OPINION

Concrete offers an unfashionable lesson to a civilisation addicted to speed: strength takes time. A freshly poured slab may look complete, but its real transformation has only begun. Cement reacts with water, particles bind, moisture is retained, and strength develops gradually. Engineers therefore do not simply pour concrete and walk away. They cure it, protect it and allow it to mature. What appears to be waiting is, in fact, part of construction.

Modern life has increasingly treated time as an obstacle. We want instant communication, instant delivery, instant profits and instant transformation. Governments announce targets with compressed timelines; businesses chase quarterly results; individuals measure progress through immediate outcomes. Speed can certainly improve efficiency. But efficiency becomes dangerous when it is confused with haste. Some structures, whether physical or social, cannot be rushed without weakening what they are meant to sustain.

Curing is a useful metaphor for public policy. A bridge cannot be made safe merely by completing its visible structure. Its foundations, joints, materials and load-bearing elements must perform together over time. Similarly, a new law, institution or economic reform requires testing, adjustment and public acceptance. A policy may be announced in a day, but its consequences can take years to reveal themselves. The impatience to demonstrate results can encourage governments to privilege what is measurable immediately over what becomes valuable eventually.

The same principle applies to cities. Roads can be widened quickly, buildings can rise rapidly and new infrastructure can be inaugurated on schedule. Yet urban resilience depends on things less visible: drainage capacity, maintenance systems, open spaces, ecological buffers and institutional coordination. These cannot be improvised after a crisis. They require patient investment before the crisis arrives. The absence of visible progress does not mean the absence of progress.

There is also a personal lesson. Education, expertise, trust and character resemble concrete more than software. They cannot simply be downloaded. A student needs years of reading and failure; a professional needs experience; trust requires repeated proof. Attempts to accelerate these processes may produce impressive appearances without corresponding depth.

Patience, however, should not become an excuse for inefficiency. Concrete is cured according to scientific requirements, not left indefinitely. Good engineering is not slow for the sake of being slow; it is deliberate where time affects performance. The wisdom lies in knowing what can be accelerated and what cannot.

Perhaps modern society needs this distinction more urgently than ever. We have become remarkably good at reducing waiting, but less skilled at understanding its purpose. Yet some forms of waiting are productive. They allow systems to settle, weaknesses to emerge and strength to develop.

Engineers know that a structure designed only for immediate performance may fail under tomorrow's load. The same is true of societies. Sustainable progress is not always the fastest progress. Sometimes, the most responsible thing we can do is build carefully, protect what is still developing, and give true strength the one resource no technology can manufacture: time, patience, discipline, attention, humility and care.

The writer, a civil engineer, is a consultant at Rashtriya Raksha University under the Ministry of Home Affairs

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Higher rates squeeze household budgets

Apropos, "RBI raises rate, loans get costlier", Oct 8. The Reserve Bank of India's decision to raise the repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.5 per cent comes as a crushing blow to middle-class households across the nation. While the central bank's intent to curb inflation is understandable, this upward revision will directly translate into higher Equated Monthly Instalments (EMIs) for housing, personal and educational loans, placing an immense burden on retail borrowers.For ordinary citizens, the timing could not be worse. Families are already wrestling with severe financial distress caused by the relentlessly rising prices of essential commodities, daily food items and healthcare services. Coupled with stagnant salaries and negligible income growth in recent years, this additional interest burden will severely squeeze already tight monthly household budgets, leaving virtually no room for savings or discretionary spending.

An increased EMI burden will force vulnerable families to make painful compromises on basic living standards or risk falling into debt traps. The RBI and the government must introduce targeted relief measures or capped loan resets to protect fixed-income borrowers.

N SADHASIVA REDDY | BENGALURU

Detention raises questions over dialogue

Apropos of the first-page story, "Day of detention ends with Rahul, Priyanka release at night" (The Pioneer, October 7), the detention of Opposition leaders raises serious questions about the space for dialogue. Hundreds of MPs staged a protest march to the Election Commission of India office to present their grievances concerning the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise. Instead of avoiding engagement, the Election Commission should address the questions raised by opposition parties with clarity, logic and constitutional propriety.

Erecting barricades and making elaborate security arrangements against elected representatives, followed by the detention of lawmakers in large numbers, does little to strengthen confidence in democratic institutions. The concerns raised by the Opposition deserve a response rather than silence.

The political situation has changed. There was a time when the ruling establishment set the narrative, while the Opposition reacted. Today, the Opposition is raising issues that demand answers from those in power.

Leadership requires listening, accountability and the ability to address questions. As John C Maxwell observed, "A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way."

PK SHARMA | PUNJAB

Peaceful protest deserves space

The proposed protest at Jantar Mantar on October 10 raises important questions about the right to peaceful assembly and democratic participation. While Delhi Police has been informed about the protest, representatives of student organisations and the Cockroach Janata Party have said they will not wait for "permission" and that informing the police should be sufficient for necessary law-and-order and traffic arrangements.

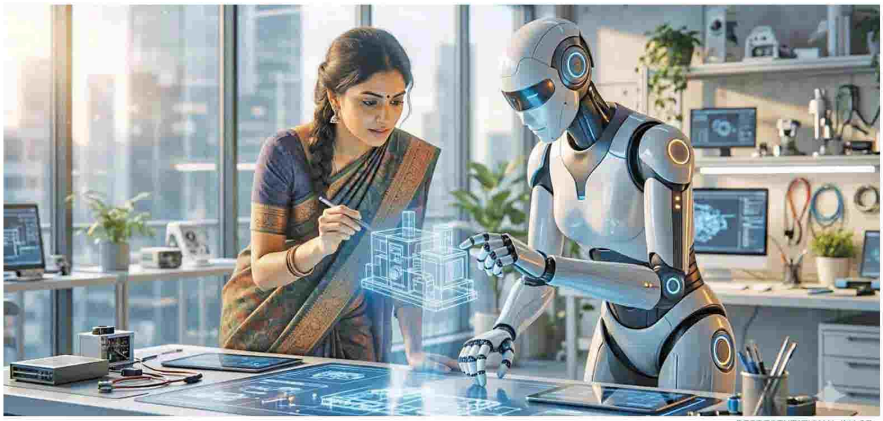
The protesters have stated that the agitation will not be limited to demanding the resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar. They are also seeking repeal of the 2023 law governing the appointment of election commissioners and reforms to the electoral system. If the protest remains peaceful, authorities should facilitate the exercise of citizens' constitutional rights while ensuring public safety and traffic management. The stated participation of young people from across the country, including members of the INDIA bloc, makes it important that their concerns are heard through lawful and peaceful means.

Dialogue and accommodation are preferable to confrontation. Democratic institutions are strengthened when citizens can express their concerns and grievances without fear.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

India's AI opportunity lies beyond the race for bigger models

A child learns to recognise a chair from a handful of examples; today's most advanced AI systems require enormous computing power to achieve comparable generalisation. India should compete in the AI race, but also ask the deeper question: what does the 20-watt human brain know that our machines do not?



REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE



SURESH PRABHU | SHOBHIT MATHUR

A child can learn what a chair is from a handful of examples. Give a child a few chairs of different shapes, sizes and colours, and soon the child can recognise a chair they have never seen before. They can distinguish a chair from a table, infer that a stool belongs to the same conceptual family, and apply the idea to objects in unfamiliar settings. Human intelligence generalises from remarkably little data.

Now consider what it takes to reproduce even a fraction of this general-purpose intelligence artificially. OpenAI's latest frontier model, GPT-6 Astra, was developed through the company's largest training run, involving more than 100,000 GPUs at its Stargate facility, according to reporting on its launch. OpenAI describes Astra as its most capable model yet, with state-of-the-art performance across reasoning, computer use, coding, science and professional work.

The contrast is extraordinary. A human brain, weighing roughly 1.3 kilograms, operates on approximately 20 watts of metabolic power. It learns continuously, generalises from sparse experience and adapts to situations it has never encountered. We can now build artificial systems of extraordinary capability, but achieving that capability requires industrial-scale computing infrastructure.

This is not merely a technological curiosity. It may be one of India's most important strategic opportunities. The global AI race is increasingly becoming a race of scale. The largest companies are accumulating GPUs, data, capital and engineering talent at a rate that few countries or institutions can match. India should absolutely participate in this race. We need computing infrastructure, foundational models, chips, data centres and world-class AI researchers. But there is little strategic value in deciding that our ambition is to become the second-best version of something that someone else has already built. There is no enduring national advantage in being second at the same game.

India needs to investigate a different question: why does biological intelligence achieve so much generalisation, abstraction and adaptability with so little energy and so little experience?

We still do not have a satisfactory scientific answer. We understand many components of the brain and have made enormous advances in neuroscience, but we do not possess a comprehensive theory of how intelligence emerges from them. We do not fully understand how the brain forms abstractions, transfers knowledge across domains, learns continuously without catastrophic loss of previous knowledge, or constructs useful models of the world from relatively sparse experience.

> MODERN NEUROSCIENCE HAS DEVELOPED INCREASINGLY POWERFUL INSTRUMENTS FOR OBSERVING THE BRAIN FROM THE OUTSIDE. PERHAPS THE NEXT ADVANCES WILL REQUIRE US TO COMBINE THESE MEASUREMENTS WITH MUCH MORE SYSTEMATIC INVESTIGATION OF SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE FROM WITHIN. IT REQUIRES RECOGNISING THAT A COMPLETE SCIENCE OF COGNITION MAY NEED METHODS CAPABLE OF CONNECTING FIRST-PERSON EXPERIENCE WITH THIRD-PERSON MEASUREMENT

These are precisely the questions that could produce disproportionate advances in AI. A better understanding of biological intelligence could lead to fundamentally different approaches to learning and computation. A new principle for generalisation could matter more than another generation of larger models. A radically more efficient architecture could matter more than another expansion of computing infrastructure. The largest opportunity may therefore lie not in scaling today's paradigm, but in discovering what today's paradigm is missing.

This is a difficult research programme, and that is precisely why universities should pursue it. Markets and companies naturally favour research with identifiable commercial returns. Fundamental questions about cognition, abstraction and consciousness may take decades to resolve and may produce no immediate product. Yet some of the most consequential technologies in modern history emerged from research whose eventual applications were impossible to predict at the time.

Modern neuroscience has developed increasingly powerful instruments for observing the brain from the outside. Perhaps the next advances will require us to combine these measurements with much more systematic investigation of subjective experience from within. It requires recognising that a complete science of cognition may need methods capable of connecting first-person experience with third-person measurement. This could become a distinctive Indian research programme: neuroscience, cognitive science, AI, mathematics, philosophy and contemplative practice brought together around one fundamental question: what are the computational principles of intelligence?

The objective should not be to build an Indian copy of GPT-6 Astra. By the time we reproduce today's frontier, the frontier will have moved again. The objective should be to understand something that the frontier itself does not yet understand.

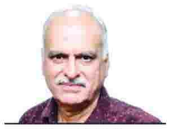
India should therefore make two bets. We should invest aggressively in the infrastructure required to compete in today's AI economy. Alongside it, we should create long-horizon research programmes willing to pursue questions where the probability, timing and form of the payoff are unknown.

The second bet may turn out to be far more important. The 20-watt brain is telling us something profound. Intelligence does not necessarily require enormous amounts of computation. We simply do not yet understand how nature achieves it.

India's opportunity is to study that gap. If we spend the next decade trying to catch the leaders, we may become very good at following them. If we spend part of that decade discovering a fundamentally different theory of intelligence, we may have a chance to lead.

Suresh Prabhu is a former Union Minister and parliamentarian. Shobhit Mathur is the co-founder and Vice-Chancellor of Rishihood University

EC divide raises questions over autonomy



ANIL ANAND

These are troubled times for the Election Commission of India (ECI). For decades, the body has been the standard-bearer of impartial polling, embracing new technology and earning international acclaim as a guide to other democracies on free and fair elections. That reputation now faces its sternest test.

According to an investigative report in *The Indian Express* on September 23, 2026, two of the three members of the Commission, Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi, came close to open revolt against Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar, only to return to the same table and project normalcy. Their grievance was procedural. They recorded objections 14 times in 10 months to decisions and orders taken without their knowledge. The charge against the CEC is that he has sought to centralise the Commission's functioning, a direct affront to the democratic spirit of a collegiate body.

Controversy is not new to Nirvachan Sadan. The biggest turmoil before this came under T N Seshan, when the poll panel was converted from a solo-driven vehicle into a three-member body. Seshan went to court against the government's decision and made his fellow Election Commissioners, G V G Krishnamurthy and Manohar Singh Gill, parties to the case. Later, CEC N Gopalaswami wrote to the government seeking the removal of Election Commissioner Navin Chawla. The government of the day rejected the plea, and Chawla, who had close links with the Gandhi family, ultimately retired as CEC himself.

In nearly two decades of covering the ECI, I have watched professional and personal rivalries between commissioners play out, sometimes in the open. This is different. An Election Commissioner dissenting from the other two, or the reverse, is one thing. Here, the majority of the Commission says it was bypassed by a minority.

The law is clear. Section 18(2) of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, says all business of the Commission shall, as far as possible, be transacted unanimously. Where the CEC and the Election Commissioners differ, the matter "shall be decided according to the opinion of the majority". Even the procedure for transacting and allocating business can be regulated only by unanimous decision. The principle is older than the statute. In T N Seshan vs Union of India (1995), the Supreme Court stressed that Article 324 entrusts elections to the Commission, not to an individual.

The two Election Commissioners then wrote to the Cabinet Secretary about happenings in an autonomous constitutional body. The step is puzzling, though it conveys the gravity of the situation, since the proper authority was the President of India. The ECI has since said the letters concerned an officer on deputation and no policy matter.



At the heart of the row is the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls. A storm was already brewing around it. Former CEC S Y Qureshi has described the SIR in its present form as "illegal and unconstitutional". Now it emerges that much of it was done without the knowledge of two of the three commissioners. As reported, Sandhu and Joshi objected repeatedly to procedural flaws and to being kept out of the loop on adding new voters and deleting names. They described the steps on new voters as "unauthorised, illegal", warned against access to the voter database being centralised in Delhi while bypassing state officials, and flagged concerns over the integrity of the voter software. They also objected to IT department heads becoming super-heads on changes to the rolls while senior ECI officials were kept out. The full Commission did not meet between May and August 2026, which points to a deeper malady in the poll panel.

Did Kumar act on his own? Or is he part of a wider net, controlled from above, as Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi alleges? Gandhi sees the report as vindication of his earlier charge that electoral manipulation helped the ruling dispensation win. At his press conference after the exposé, he tried to link the CEC to the top hierarchy of the Central government. Kumar can hardly feel comfortable after a former Kerala Chief Secretary claimed that Kumar, then a serving officer, had sounded him out about contesting the Lok Sabha election on a BJP ticket. Was he bidding on behalf of the saffron party bosses?

Surprisingly, the ruling BJP seems to have walked willingly into Gandhi's trap. The ECI's own rebuttal was guarded and deadpan, steering clear of the contentious issues. The BJP was more upfront, pressing its spokespersons into service "to defend the ECI". That drew a sharp remark from columnist Tavleen Singh, no one's idea of a critic of the right, in an X post: "Is the BJP not embarrassed that their party spokesmen are speaking on behalf of the Election Commission? Is that not in itself a giveaway?"

In an official statement, the Commission played down the leaks, saying "differing views and observations are a normal part of deliberation". It conceded that members held differing opinions but insisted these did not reflect its official position. On September 26, the three commissioners met together and promised that agendas would be circulated in advance and minutes recorded. That is an indirect admission of what was missing.

The government's role will come under scrutiny because Kumar is the first CEC appointed under the controversial 2023 Selection Act, which gave the executive a clear advantage on the selection panel by removing the Chief Justice of India. The exposé has revived the allegation that a centralised poll panel is being used to the government's advantage. Handled badly, it can have serious repercussions for the government, though it rises above party lines.

An institution whose only real currency is public trust cannot let that trust be settled through press notes and spokespersons. The way back lies in transparency: let the record of who decided what, and when, speak for itself.

The writer is a commentator on socio-political issues

A new generation takes aim



VIRENDRA SACHDEVA

As the curtain falls on the Asian Games in Aichi-Nagoya, Indian archery returns home with nine medals: five gold, two silver and two bronze.

Behind every one of those medals lies a story of courage and sacrifice, and of a sporting ecosystem that has truly come of age.

For centuries, the image of Arjuna fixing his gaze on the eye of the bird has stood as India's timeless lesson in focus. In Aichi-Nagoya, that lesson came alive. Our archers saw nothing but the target: not the reputation of their opponents, not the weight of history, not the pressure of a watching nation. They saw only the ten, and they found it, time and again.

Our compound archers swept all three team titles, men's, women's and mixed, for the second consecutive Asian Games. The women's compound team equalled the world record in the final, and the mixed compound pair secured India's quota for the LA 2028 Olympics, where compound archery will make its Olympic debut.

Yet the defining story of these Games was written in recurve, a discipline long dominated by Korea. Our women's recurve team ended Korea's run of seven successive Asian Games titles to claim India's first-ever gold in the event. Our mixed recurve pair won India's first medal in that event, and our men's recurve team earned a second consecutive silver. Then, on the final day, a 17-year-old held her nerve in the individual recurve final to win a historic gold and secure an Olympic berth for India. Her composure under pressure is a lesson in how fearless India's young athletes have become.

It is equally heartening that our women led from the front. From recurve to compound, they delivered whenever it mattered most, and they will inspire countless young girls across India to pick up a bow.

These results weren't a day's success, but are the fruit of nearly fifteen years of sustained, collective effort: world-class infrastructure, quality equipment, international coaching expertise, sports science and regular global exposure. There were times when the podium felt within reach yet just beyond our grasp, but the faith of our coaches, support staff and families never wavered. In Nagoya, our athletes also contended with demanding conditions, long commutes, testing winds and heavy rains, yet their poise through it all speaks volumes about their character.



This transformation would be incomplete without acknowledging the visionary leadership of our Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Under his stewardship, sport has moved from the periphery of national priorities to its very centre. Khelo India has unearthed talent from the farthest corners of our nation, while the Target Olympic Podium Scheme has given our elite athletes the support and dignity they deserve. Above all, the Prime Minister has changed how India regards its sportspersons. He stands beside them in triumph and in disappointment, assuring every young athlete from the smallest town that a billion hopes stand behind them.

Having been with the sports administration for a while now, I have witnessed many campaigns, but Nagoya was a first even for me. While I was with the team, the Hon'ble Union Sports Minister personally called not once but twice to ask after our athletes, their preparation and their well-being. That is the culture the Government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has built, one where the highest offices of the nation stand shoulder to shoulder with our athletes, not only on the podium but at every step of the journey.

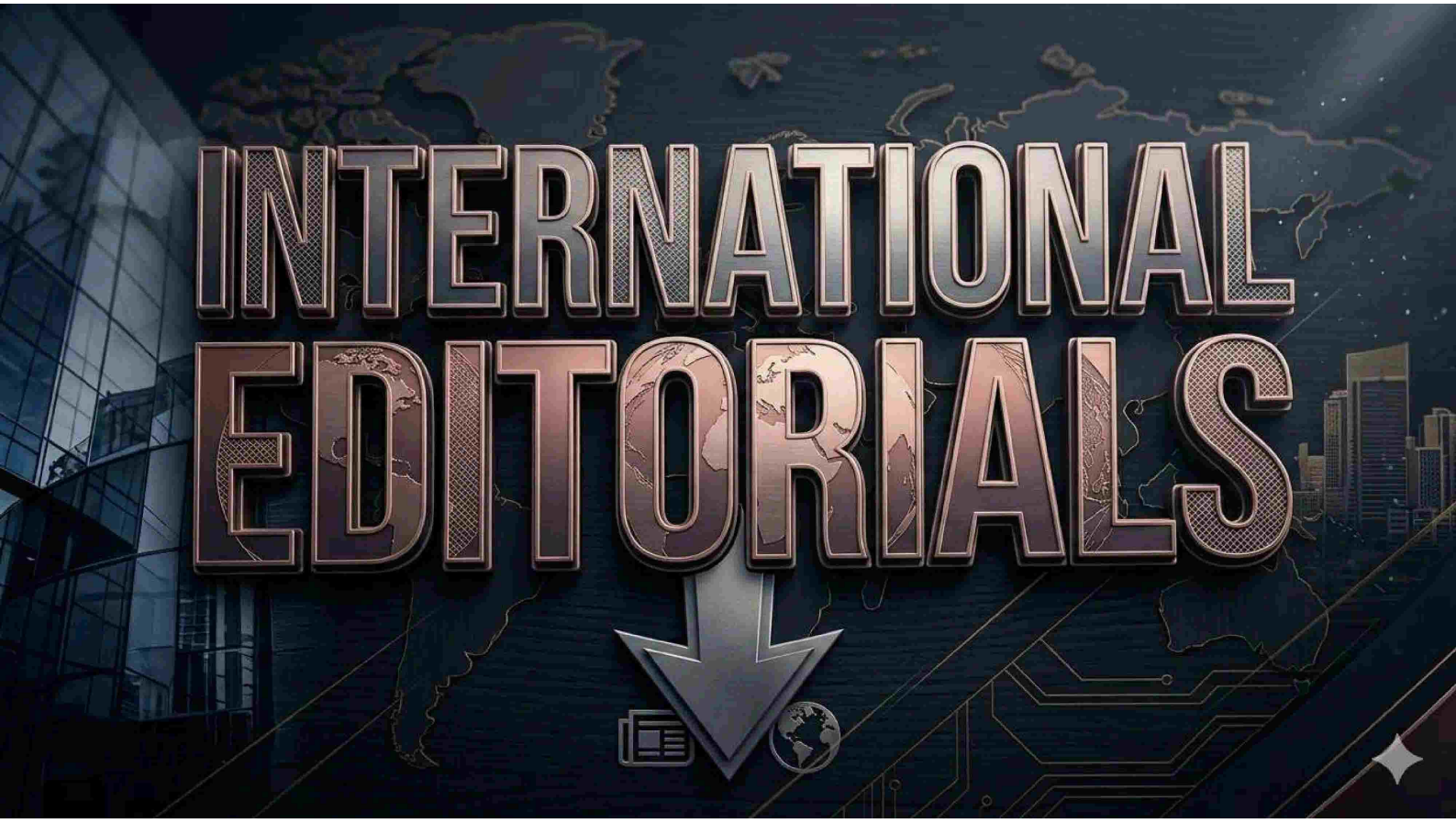
When a nation honours its athletes, it begins to believe in them. Where there is belief, champions follow. The medals of Aichi-Nagoya, won by young Indians who refused to be intimidated, are the clearest testament to this new sporting India.

To our archers: you have filled 1.4 billion hearts with pride. To the coaches, support staff and families whose sacrifices so often go unseen: these medals belong equally to you.

I am confident that under the exemplary leadership of our Prime Minister, Narendra Modi ji, India will flourish in every sporting discipline and take its rightful place among the world's great sporting nations. As for our archers, they have shown Asia what they are capable of. They are ready for the Olympics, and the world will soon take note.

Jai Hind!

The writer is the Secretary General, Archery Association of India


INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

COMMENT

Editorials

Dialogue and cooperation represent rational path to healthy China-EU trade relationship

European Union trade chief Maros Sefcovic departed for China on Wednesday to meet with China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao in Beijing to address differences in bilateral trade and investment.

Unfortunately, some EU member states appear to believe that the right way to negotiate is to come with a stopwatch, a list of restrictions and the threat of more to come.

That is not conducive to finding common ground. China's Ministry of Commerce offered a pointed response on Tuesday to reports that France and Germany had urged the EU to make greater use of "trade defense" measures and roll out a number of new protectionist tools.

China has always maintained that interdependence is not a risk, intertwined interests do not pose a threat, and open cooperation represents the right path to development, a spokesman for the ministry stressed.

France and Germany should note that encouraging Brussels to erect more barriers will not solve the EU's competitiveness problems. The EU's trade concerns are caused by multiple factors, none of which is China's fault.

The EU wants to "rebalance" trade by selling more to China, yet it has imposed restrictions on exports of products that China wants to buy, including the sophisticated machinery, components and technologies in which European companies remain competitive.

Nor should the EU ignore the fact that it is not easy to replace China as a supplier. EU manufacturers have spent decades building supply chains that are closely related to Chinese production capacity, logistics, processing networks and its increasingly innovative industrial ecosystems. China's exports to the EU are no longer simply containers of cheap consumer goods. Electronics, machinery, batteries, vehicles, components and other intermediate products are deeply embedded in European production. These products lower the costs of final products for EU consumers and help the EU pursue its green transition.

Some EU officials have baselessly pointed to the so-called "subsidies", "exchange rates", "overcapacity" and "dumping". These politicized talking points have proved to be cliches designed to vent internal EU pressure — and they do not address the structural dynamics of China-EU trade.

China has been upgrading its manufacturing and climbing the technological ladder while the EU is grappling with deindustrialization, high energy costs and an expensive regulatory environment. The fact that two major economies are going through these two processes respectively does not mean there is a causal relationship between them, still less a zero-sum game.

The belief among some EU politicians that resolving China-EU trade issues will help cure the EU's systemic economic problems is wishful thinking. Any major economy facing a structural challenge should primarily look for its causes at home. This is why the October deadline unilaterally imposed by Brussels is more a pressure tactic than a good strategy. Threatening restrictions while demanding so-called "voluntary" concessions will only make the negotiations harder.

There is already a better framework. At the inaugural China-EU trade and investment consultation in Brussels in June, the two sides agreed to work through four areas: trade and investment balancing, export controls, intellectual property rights and reform of the World Trade Organization. They also agreed that increased market access measures and initiatives can contribute to the balancing of the trade relationship.

The Beijing consultations should build on that foundation rather than turn into another exercise in deadline diplomacy. If the EU wants more exports to China, it should examine why its products are less competitive and lift its high-tech export restrictions. An ever-lengthening list of restrictions on Chinese entities is not the way to "rebalance" the economic and trade relationship.

France and Germany should therefore be careful what they wish for. Protectionism cannot enhance competitiveness, whereas "decoupling" and cutting off supply chains will only harm others without benefiting oneself.

The choice before Sefcovic is consequently whether the EU treats interdependence as a problem to be dismantled, or as an economic asset to be managed responsibly. The first path promises walls, higher costs and a prolonged quarrel. The second requires respect, patience and reciprocity.

For two of the world's major economies, that should not be a difficult choice.

Weaponizing human rights is irresponsible

The protection and promotion of human rights are things that all countries should cooperate on. But once again, as is so often the case, some countries sought to use them to smear others and create division at the general debate of the Third Committee of the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly on Monday.

At the general debate, Sun Lei, China's deputy permanent representative to the UN, called out the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, Ireland, the Czech Republic and Lithuania for their representatives' groundless accusations against China's human rights situation.

At a gathering that is supposed to pool objective observations and opinions, these countries rehashed and manipulated the unfounded claims about China in an attempt to tarnish China's image, turning a blind eye to the steady progress the country has made in promoting human rights.

As Sun rightfully pointed out, China has continued to safeguard and improve people's well-being through development, eliminating absolute poverty nationwide. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of impoverishment, and a middle-income group of more than 400 million people has been established.

Take the development of the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region for example. The region's gross domestic product increased 5.5 percent year-on-year in 2025 to exceed 2.1 trillion yuan ($313 billion). Tourism flourishes in the region, with the local cultures well preserved and people of all ethnic groups living in harmony and peace. But some countries, prompted by ideological bias or their perception of China as a "rival" whose development must be stifled, have ignored the reality of the great progress made in Xinjiang's human rights situation. Instead, they cling to the pretexts concocted long ago to justify their false narratives about China and baseless sanctions against Chinese entities.

The false narratives are aimed at weaponizing human rights to target China. In doing so these countries are throwing stones in glasshouses, since they all have domestic human rights issues that they want to sweep under the carpet.

Taking these facts into consideration, one can't help but wonder whether these countries really care about human rights, or if their primary concern is distorting human rights to help them dominate the international narrative and level unfounded accusations to besmirch the image of other countries and, for some, foment social unrest.

The protection and promotion of human rights should not be abused as a pretext for propping up Western hegemony.

Fully recognizing the importance of human rights for people's well-being and peace and stability, China has advanced its human rights cause through concrete actions, supports the human rights endeavors of the Global South and stands ready to work with other countries to contribute to global human rights progress.

The 63rd session of the UN Human Rights Council on Monday adopted by consensus the draft resolution titled "Promoting accessibility for the full enjoyment of all human rights by all" proposed by China on behalf of 47 countries.

Jia Guide, China's permanent representative to the UN Office at Geneva and other international organizations in Switzerland, said during his introductory remarks that building an accessible environment provides important safeguards for people of all groups to participate equally and conveniently in social life and to fully enjoy their human rights.

Representatives of Cuba and Egypt, among others, spoke in support of the resolution, commending China for actively promoting the concept of "accessibility for all" and moving forward the accessibility cause.

In 2024, the UNHRC adopted, for the first time, a resolution under the same title proposed by China, marking the first thematic resolution on accessibility in UN history.

The fact that the UNHRC passed such a resolution for the second time shows the international community's recognition of China's endeavors to enhance human rights not only for its own people, but also for people around the world.

It's high time some countries stopped wielding the cudgel of alleged "human rights abuses" to denigrate others and present a veneer of moral superiority, and instead started dealing with their own human rights problems.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

Holiday consumption reflects latest trends of economic life

Economists see the National Day holiday in China less as a time for rest than a natural experiment: a mass migration of hundreds of millions of people, a surge in spending, and a live readout of consumer confidence.

According to Qunar, a travel platform, during this year's Mid-Autumn Festival holiday, Sept 25-27, and National Day holiday, Oct 1-7, flight bookings for distances over 2,000 kilometers rose by more than 40 percent year-on-year. Ten-day or longer tours accounted for 26 percent of bookings on Tuniu, another platform. In a nutshell, people traveled longer and farther. This is not the behavior of an economy powered by bargain hunting.

The destinations are changing too. On Qunar's list of the 10 most popular attractions, the top three were lesser-known places. On Fliggy, another travel platform, traveler interest in villages and natural scenery jumped by nearly 50 percent year-on-year.

As the 90th anniversary of the victory of the Long March draws near, former revolutionary bases are drawing visitors interested in China's modern history. In Yan'an, Shaanxi province, the first day of the National Day holiday saw a 20 percent year-on-year surge in visitor numbers.

Thanks to years of investment in roads, railways and rural vitalization, villages, museums and intangible cultural-heritage sites are emerging as alternatives to crowded landmarks. China's comprehensive transport network now exceeds 6 million kilometers. On Oct 1 alone, the national railway carried 25.2 million passengers, a single-day record; across the first three days, cross-regional passenger movements exceeded 300 million a day.

Then there is the immersive economy. In Tianjin, playwright Cao Yu's *Sunrise* was staged on the very street where it is set; the surrounding commercial district drew 600,000 visitors a day. In Chengdu, robots performed dances inspired by local opera's face-changing art and used digital technology to recreate *tanghua*, a traditional form of sugar painting.

Cultural consumption is thriving too. After a five-day streak in which daily box-office revenue topped 100 million yuan ($14.91 million), total National Day holiday ticket sales surpassed 900 million yuan.

The same is true of the green transition. New energy vehicles are becoming fixtures on holiday roads, while China continues to expand charging infrastructure. Nearly 11,000 new high-power charging facilities were added at expressway service areas from January to August, bringing the national total to about 89,000.

The government is playing its part. The fourth batch of trade-in subsidies — 62.5 billion yuan in ultra-long special treasury bonds — was released just before the holiday. In the first three days of the National Day holiday, trade-in programs drove 19.6 billion yuan in sales, benefiting 3.48 million consumers.

Even the countryside is being pulled into this process. Roads, public services and digital connectivity have made villages more accessible, while rural tourism is increasingly packaged around art, food, ecology and local culture. Some county destinations have seen homestay bookings more than double. Yet the challenge is that footfall does not always translate into equally strong spending.

Perhaps the most striking shift is the influx of foreign visitors. China's border crossings are expected to see about 2.15 million passenger trips a day on average during the National Day holiday, according to the National Immigration Administration.

That growing international interest is also showing up in spending. Overseas visitors spent 263.6 billion yuan in China in the first seven months of 2026, up 27.8 percent year-on-year, according to China's Commerce Ministry.

China is promoting common prosperity as well as mutual understanding. That not only matters economically, but also culturally. A country is easier to understand when experienced rather than merely described.

The country's vast domestic market is being reshaped by infrastructure, digitalization, new-energy technology, cultural production and the green transition.

Chinese consumers are becoming more demanding, more experience-oriented and more willing to travel far. However, the story is not simply how much China spent. It is what consumers wanted to buy: more experiences, more convenience, more mobility and, increasingly, more of China itself. The holiday lasts for days. The economic transition it reveals will last far longer.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Plan aims to develop pharma into a pillar industry

Editor's note: *China recently released a five-year plan for its pharmaceutical industry. People's Daily Overseas Edition spoke to Li Yan, a researcher of the Development Research Centre of the State Council, and Jiang Deyuan, president of the China Association for Medical Devices Industry, on the sector's development. Below are excerpts of the interviews. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

The plan aims to enhance the core competitiveness and international standing of China's pharmaceutical industry from 2026 to 2030, while driving systematic breakthroughs in core technologies in key fields during the period.

It comes at a time when China's pharmaceutical industry is rapidly moving beyond its traditional role as a major producer of active pharmaceutical ingredients and a large consumer market toward a new stage marked by the growing export of innovative drugs.

The plan has outlined ambitious targets, such as positioning China at the forefront of global biomedical research, development and application by 2030. The country expects the biomedical sector to rapidly evolve into a national pillar industry.

During the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period, rapid advances in global biomedicine technologies, a growing demand for international innovation partnerships among multinational pharmaceutical companies, improvements in China's multi-tiered healthcare security system, and steady progress in domestic innovation and research and development capabilities will create major opportunities for the industry.

The next five years will be critical for China's biomedicine industry to move from quantitative growth to qualitative transformation.

The plan outlines specific strategies for key areas, including innovation, priority products, cutting-edge technologies, advanced manufacturing processes and the development of competitive industrial clusters.

For example, the plan calls for the development of products such as bioresorbable stents and cardiac pacemakers with a controllable degradation rate, as well as high-end computed tomography scanners, magnetic resonance imaging systems, multimodal artificial intelligence pathology systems and other AI-assisted diagnostic products and their key components.

China is one of the world's key suppliers of medical consumables. During the 15th Five-Year Plan period, the focus should be on areas where China is already strong and on moving from scale to strength. Medical consumables need to become more sophisticated and intelligent, increasing their added value while maintaining cost advantages.

In vitro diagnostics should intensify efforts to develop core raw materials and key components, moving beyond following and replacing existing technologies toward original innovation. Rehabilitation equipment and wearable products should become more intelligent, personalized and suited to home use, enabling more products to move beyond hospitals into communities and households.

The five-year plan also outlined the development of specialized large language models and AI agents for the pharmaceutical sector, as well as the efforts to accelerate AI-driven transformation in pharmaceutical R&D and production management.

Breakthroughs in AI, life sciences, new energy and advanced materials are already reshaping the medical device industry. During the 15th Five-Year Plan period, efforts should be made to bring AI into the entire industry chain and expand its application across R&D, manufacturing, diagnosis and treatment, and healthcare services.

China should also advance the development of national pilot platforms for AI applications in healthcare, providing a testing and commercialization environment for applications such as AI-assisted medical imaging and clinical decision support.

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VIEWS

Dan Steinbock

China builds its future on innovation

China's emergence as a global innovation power is no longer a future projection — it is already shaping the global technology landscape. When I first arrived in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, about two decades ago, it was during a period of dramatic infrastructure expansion. Over the years, the Greater Bay Area — which includes Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions — has undergone a remarkable transformation.

Today, it stands out as a world-class innovation hub, boasting advanced manufacturing, venture capital, prestigious universities, robust supply chains and dynamic entrepreneurial networks.

Similarly, Shanghai was in the midst of rapid changes in the early 2000s. Now, after two decades of transformation, Shanghai, alongside Beijing, plays a pivotal role as a global innovation hub. The increasing number of artificial intelligence events reflects China's ambition to move beyond applications and become a leading developer of foundational technologies, including large language models, robotics, autonomous systems, and industrial AI.

What sets China apart is that its colossal ecosystem integrates supply with demand through innovation.

In the 1990s, while I was in New York and occasionally visited Finland, I found myself at the intersection of two technology revolutions: the internet in the US and mobile communications in the Nordic countries. This led me to write *The Nokia Revolution* (2001) and other pioneering works on the globalizing information and communication technology sector.

At that time, China's R&D capabilities were modest but growing exponentially. Comparing innovation leaders from small countries with China's continental size is misguided, however. Innovation leadership stems not from individual companies but from national ecosystems, where both the government and the country play crucial roles.

Agility and focus are equally important. Europe's science and technology base was on par with the US in the early 1990s. But US technology finance was more risk-driven and agile, which resulted in Europe falling behind the US in the technology revolution. Today, China's advantage lies precisely in the synergy between national strategy, market competition and finance, engineering talent, and massive domestic demand.

In the mid-2000s, Western observers still viewed Chinese companies primarily as efficient manufacturers benefiting from low costs, technology transfer and imitation.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Global Lens

But early signals hinted at a more complex trajectory. China's initial competitiveness was based on scale, its enormous manufacturing base offering cost advantages unmatched elsewhere.

However, this scale fostered capabilities, as suppliers improved, engineers gained experience, and domestic competition spurred faster innovation. Companies once dismissed as copycats developed their own technologies, business models and global strategies.

As domestic competition intensified, companies learned to redesign products, reduce costs and shorten development cycles. What began as imitation evolved into indigenous innovation, mirroring industrial transformations in Japan and the Republic of Korea. China's unique advantages lie in its vast domestic market, low starting point for catch-up growth and rapid technological diffusion.

Between 2005 and 2007, I chronicled these shifts in The National Interest, a leading US international affairs journal, highlighting "the rise of the Chinese multinationals" and identifying the "new innovation challengers" in China, India and other large emerging economies. In particular, Chinese firms were turning from production platforms into global competitors.

These findings were initially dismissed in the US and Western Europe. The prevailing assumption was that China was "just a low-cost imitator", a belief rooted in the bias against Chinese and Asians as world-class innovators. The myth was shattered a few years later, when the OECD PISA tests highlighted the rise of Asian students, prompting some Western critics to claim that the tests were "rigged".

As times grew tougher following the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of the emerging markets was no longer viewed favorably in the West, giving rise to protectionism and geopolitical tensions. By the early 2010s, Huawei's dramatic rise marked the arrival of China's first generation of genuinely global innovation multinationals. In Washington, this development was met with aggressive political opposition.

In October 2012, the US House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence released a report investigating Chinese telecom companies Huawei and ZTE. The move was reminiscent of the 1950s McCarthyite persecutions. Internationally, Huawei's rise marked a turning point in global innovation. However, the US response was not commercial competition but aggressive geopolitics, as pointed out by William Plummer, former head of Huawei's external affairs in the US, in his book *Huidu — Inside Huawei* (2018).

The US controversy surrounding Huawei became symbolic of a broader technological rivalry. Proponents of cooperation pointed to the company's research investments, global patents, and partnerships, which could greatly benefit US companies and consumers.

The White House had said it examined the opportunities, risks and implications of reliance on global, commercial markets, not targeting "any particular company". This was a wise qualification, but unfortunately ignored by subsequent US administrations.

Instead, the US administration opted for technological protectionism, hoping to restore US primacy in innovation through unilateral coercive measures in the absence of a strategy to tackle the Chinese challenge.

China has emerged as a major global innovation power by developing an enormous innovation-to-production ecosystem capable of turning research, engineering, capital and market scale into products at extraordinary speed and diminishing costs.

As these global innovation controversies intensified, AI arrived.

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The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Biljana Vankovska

CPC committed to self-reform, self-improvement

In many Western countries, political parties have increasingly become focused on winning elections and securing political power, at the expense of long-term policy visions, institutional continuity and substantive results. Many of these organizations functioned as "sultan parties", where decisions were made at the top, insulated from criticism or accountability.

In contrast, the Communist Party of China, which just celebrated its 105th anniversary, is a model of self-reform. Three key concepts underpin this approach: self-governance, self-cultivation, and self-strengthening. The most important element is the prefix "self", emphasizing the CPC's commitment to governing itself. The CPC treats these reforms as its own responsibility, rather than as problems for which solutions must be sought from outside or for which blame can be shifted onto others.

All three processes are complementary and take place simultaneously because the CPC acts through synergy and harmony, because one process feeds into another and vice versa.

Self-governance, the first pillar, is about the CPC's commitment to self-regulation. Political organizations that remain in power for extended periods can face the risks of bureaucratic decay, complacency, or the seduction of privilege. The CPC's response to this danger is nothing short of revolutionary: the political courage to "turn the blade inward". The anti-corruption campaign and the strict Eight-Point Regulation are necessary interventions aimed at removing the rot that destroys the Party from within. By holding officials at all levels accountable, the CPC prioritizes political discipline and integrity and the people's trust over the comfort of its cadres.

Global Lens

The second pillar, self-cultivation, involves systematically nurturing political cadres through continuous education, training, selection, mentoring, and gradual advancement within the political structure. Unlike systems in which proximity to power can fast-track careers, the CPC emphasizes that its leaders do not rise to positions of authority by accident, but through merit, hard work, and years of proving themselves. This approach fosters respect for the organization and ensures that leaders rise through dedication and achievement, not accident or privilege.

The Party's tangible results, such as lifting over 800 million people out of extreme poverty and building robust healthcare and social security systems, reflect a deep-rooted relationship with the masses. This people-centered approach is the best antidote to the "trust deficit" that afflicts capitalist democracies.

This internal discipline naturally fuels the third pillar: self-strengthening. Many political parties in Western democracies face challenges including fragmentation, institutional paralysis and the difficulty of maintaining long-term policy continuity amid intense electoral competition. Voters have become like "a reed in the wind", moving from one party to another in the hope that a desperate situation can be overcome simply by changing the political context. The CPC continuously strengthens its organizational cohesion. It understands that in order to lead the nation through a period of profound global turbulence, it must remain a united vanguard whose strength derives from the people, the tangible improvements in their lives and future prospects.

The Party adapts to new challenges with scientific foresight, optimizing grassroots organizations, integrating new forms of employment into its outreach, and advancing "smart Party building" in the digital age. The Party's digital transformation reflects the idea to create a more efficient, transparent, and accountable political system, keeping pace with societal changes.

The CPC has continued to adapt to new developments and challenges rather than remaining static. It is a modern and dynamic organization that embraces new developments for societal advancement. A recent report by a CPC think tank and Xinhua, Contemporary Features and Global Significance of Xi Jinping Thought on Party Building, captures this dynamic, highlighting the CPC's ability to draw from Marxist theory and traditional culture to navigate challenges in the new era.

I often wonder if any Western political party has produced a comparable analysis of its organizational health and ideological foundations or its long-term capacity for renewal. Many Western parties face persistent difficulties balancing short-term electoral pressures with long-term governance competence. The CPC looks at itself in the mirror and seeks to assess its performance through its achievements and its ability to respond to changing circumstances. It is hardly surprising that many young people in the West show disillusionment toward a political sphere that has earned poor public regard and often struggles to deliver tangible results.

For the Global South, and other nations seeking alternative approaches to political and economic development, the CPC's practice of Party building is a profound source of inspiration.

The author is a professor of political science and international relations from Skopje, North Macedonia, and the director of Synergia Orbi: Institute for Global Analysis.
The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Guo Qiang

Tourism soars as rocket launches ignite Hainan's economy

Flames light up the horizon as a rocket roars into the sky above the blue sea, witnessed by thousands gathered at Qishui Bay in Wenchang, South China's Hainan province. What was once a niche interest has become a nationwide tourism phenomenon: traveling to Wenchang to watch rockets lift off.

This growing trend exemplifies how technological advancements can create unique tourism experiences and how opening-up can significantly stimulate consumption and boost economic growth.

The Hainan Free Trade Port is an important gateway for China's high-level opening-up and a frontier for institutional innovation. By facilitating the freer flow of trade, investment, capital, people and transportation, it provides an ideal environment for high-quality tourism development.

Wenchang International Aerospace City is turning its aerospace resources into new tourism momentum by combining technology with travel. This initiative is an example of how China can enhance its modern tourism system, foster new forms of consumption and expand inbound tourism.

Wenchang has a unique appeal. It is China's only coastal, low-latitude launch site where rockets rise against a backdrop of sea and palm trees — a spectacle difficult to replicate elsewhere. The rapid development of China's aerospace sector has fueled public enthusiasm for space exploration, driving demand for family tours, science study experiences and youth travel.

Institutional opening-up has made these conditions more favorable. More regular launch missions and commercial launches provide ample opportunities for visitors, while visa-free entry policies make it easier for travelers from Southeast Asia to witness the launches. Together, these advantages have helped Wenchang move beyond conventional tourism and build a unique model that combines aerospace technology with coastal attractions.

A rocket launch lasts only a few minutes, but it stimulates spending across various sectors, including accommodation, restaurants, educational tours and cultural products. This reflects the broad reach and strong spillover effects of modern tourism.

Rocket tourism has invigorated the local economy. Ten years ago, there were only a handful of homestays in Longlou town. Today, there are more than 150, often with high occupancy rates. This growth has benefited restaurants, retail, transportation and car rental businesses. Aerospace science centers attract a large number of educational tour groups, including young visitors from China's Hong Kong and Macao, and Southeast Asia. New businesses ranging from virtual-reality space experiences to aerospace-themed cultural products and accommodation are also emerging.

The real value of institutional opening-up lies in reducing the cost of moving resources, energizing market players and encouraging integration across industries.

Even so, Wenchang also faces several challenges. Visitor numbers tend to fluctuate sharply around launch schedules. Overseas visitors are predominantly aerospace enthusiasts rather than mainstream inbound tourists. Many tourism products remain event-driven, necessitating more regular, international and quality offerings.

To achieve high-quality growth, Wenchang must turn visitor traffic into longer stays and event-based attractions into permanent industries. The following measures can help in this direction.

First, institutional innovation should be used to diversify tourism products. A modern tourism system requires varied products, integrated business models, regular supply and high-quality experiences. Wenchang can utilize Hainan's preferential 15 percent corporate income tax rate and zero-tariff equipment policies to attract global companies in aerospace cultural products, immersive experiences, educational travel and digital tourism. Introducing advanced science exhibition facilities and VR and AR equipment can further enhance these offerings.

Developing tourism products around aerospace breeding, satellite applications and industrial tours can make Wenchang an attractive destination even without a scheduled launch.

Second, easier movement of people should be facilitated to strengthen inbound tourism services. After Hainan began island-wide independent customs operations in December 2025, the free trade port offers enhanced travel facilitation. By improving multilingual services, international payment options, overseas booking channels and transport connections, Wenchang can establish itself as an international destination for aerospace study tours.

Greater cross-border convenience can help expand inbound tourism from a niche launch-watching market into family holidays, educational travel and technology tourism, boosting Hainan's appeal as an international tourism and consumption destination.

Third, integrating offshore duty-free policies with aerospace tourism can also boost consumption. High-quality, new and cross-sector consumption is an essential part of a modern tourism system. Wenchang can develop packages combining rocket launches, educational programs and duty-free shopping, incorporating aerospace-themed intellectual property and cultural products into duty-free retail channels. This integration can extend visitors' stays and increase per capita spending, translating tourist traffic into real consumption growth.

Fourth, independent customs operations provide an opportunity to improve service standards. The change is not only about customs supervision but also about aligning tourism services with international practices. Wenchang can improve standards for homestays, restaurants, transportation and launch-viewing platforms while developing high-end offerings such as themed vacations, customized tours, small exhibitions and international science exchanges.

Wenchang's experience offers broader lessons for China's tourism development. Modern tourism needs new business models, scenarios and forms of consumption, with technology tourism offering significant growth potential. Institutional opening-up can remove barriers and support new tourism industries. Attracting more inbound travelers depends not only on tourism resources but also on convenient rules, services and consumption.

From momentary traffic to lasting demand, Wenchang shows how institutional opening-up can empower tourism, transform technological resources into tourism assets, and translate free trade port policies into real economic activity.

The author is a professor at the College of International Tourism and Public Administration, Hainan University.
The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

OPINION

South Carolina Could Go Blue



UNRULY REPUBLIC
By Barton Swaim

North Charleston, S.C.

After the death of Lindsey Graham on July 11, Gov. Henry McMaster chose the late senator's sister, Darline, to serve out the remainder of her brother's term. A few days later, with Ms. Graham sworn in, President Trump endorsed her in a race in which she hadn't intended to compete. Ms. Graham agreed to run.

On July 30 this column stressed that endorsement's riskiness and noted several unanswered questions, among them: "Might she"—meaning Ms. Graham—"get in front of a news camera, or on a debate stage, and bungle so badly that an adversary features her in an ad?" So it came to pass. In a debate with a primary opponent, Ms. Graham couldn't so much as fudge an answer to a question on Taiwan. "National security is not my thing," she said in a devastating instance of candor. "I'm not that informed on national security." Ads featuring the line, paid for by allies of the Democratic nominee, Annie Andrews, currently flood South Carolina's media markets.

Ms. Graham will probably win. As former state GOP chairman Katon Dawson points out, "you can count on 14% to 17% of South Carolina voters to pull the lever straight Republican in every election. It's very hard for a Democrat to overcome that in a statewide election." Even so, Mr. Dawson says, "Darline could be in trouble."

Polling, limited as it is, has Ms. Graham, 62, and Ms. Andrews, 45, well within the margin of error. Maybe that's all guff. In 2020, former state Democratic Party chairman Jaime Harrison ran against Lindsey Graham. Polls had the race within a point or two and the progressive donor class in a state of ecstasy. Graham won by 10 points.

But that was Lindsey Graham, not his sister. She projects a likeable persona, but her candidacy inspires no one. The circumstances of her nomination—chosen to finish her brother's term, elevated by the president for no obvious reason—don't motivate young campaign grunts to knock on doors.

Also, she's absent. Ms. Graham appeared with Mr. Trump at an Aug. 21 rally in Myrtle Beach, but if she has held other public events, I haven't discovered their whereabouts. Her campaign emails consist almost entirely of fundraising messages, one of which sought to instill a sense of urgency by noting a poll—by a firm not noted for penalizing Republicans—that had Ms. Graham a single point ahead of her Democratic opponent. My requests for comment to the Graham campaign, if that's the right word for it, have gone unanswered.

In an ordinary election, or one in which Lindsey Graham were alive, Ms. Andrews wouldn't get much attention. In 2022, in a race for the state's First Congressional District, Rep. Nancy Mace got the better of Ms. Andrews, formerly a pediatrician at the Medical University of South Carolina, by pointing out her equivocations on the subject of, as the euphemism has it, gender-affirming care for minors. Ms. Andrews lost by nearly 14 points.

But Ms. Andrews seems a savvier politician than the also-ran of four years ago. At a Tuesday campaign event in Columbia, at a community center in a low-income neighborhood and attended by about 100 people pretty obviously not from that neighborhood, the candidate made the case for a litany of redistributionist policies, mainly on the topic of healthcare: Medicaid expansion, a "public option" for health insurance and so on.

Democrat Annie Andrews is showing up. Darline Graham is nowhere to be found.

A well-delivered line about Ms. Graham's "not my thing" blunder drew loud laughter and applause. "If your surgeon said to you 'Appendectomies aren't really my thing,' how do you think that would turn out?"

Notable in Ms. Andrews's talk was the absence of the name Trump. Asked about the Iran war, she proclaimed her opposition to it but named only Jared Kushner in her answer. The Democrat can sound vaguely socialistic on her signature issue—she frequently criticizes the American healthcare system as "profit-motivated rather than patient-centered." But otherwise Ms. Andrews, with long, wavy blond hair and always smartly dressed, doesn't project assertive left-wingery. She likes the word "bipartisan" and refers to the state's popular senior senator, Republican Tim Scott, in respectful terms.

If Ms. Andrews does win, and particularly if the Democrats gain a slim majority in the Senate, she will find herself in a position akin to Joe Manchin's and Kyrsten Sinema's a few years ago: badgered relentlessly to cast votes large majorities of her constituents would find abhorrent. Her trouble expressing clarity on gender-altering surgeries a few years ago makes me wonder if Ms. Andrews won't follow her party wherever it goes, but she may have learned from that mistake.

After an event in North Charleston on Wednesday, in which cancer survivors related their travails with insurance companies, I asked Ms. Andrews if she's prepared for the Manchin/Sinema experience. "I can go to Washington and stand up to my party," she said. "I can take those hard votes. . . . This isn't really about my personal political ideology." Maybe.

A Democrat hasn't won statewide in South Carolina since 2006 and, before that, 1998. Polling and vibes aside, I find it hard to imagine the state's electorate in 2026 plumping for a Democrat. But recall Woody Allen's remark that 80% of success is showing up. Annie Andrews has shown up. So far, Darline Graham hasn't.

Republicans Pray for a Polling Failure

By Karl Rove

In every election, a moment comes when things lock in. There's money for only one more set of messages. Only enough volunteers to get out only so many voters. No time to try something new. With less than four weeks to go, many campaigns are likely at that point.

So what are they talking about? Every candidate is attacking his opponent. But what about each party's ads boosting its candidates and saying what they would do?

The Wesleyan Media Project tracks the ads of Senate and House candidates. Their recent report covers television, cable and digital spots from Sept. 8 through 27. Each party's Senate and House advertising strategies are similar, so let's look at the Senate, where the big money is.

The Wesleyan study finds that 36% of pro-Democratic Senate ads mention business (not in a positive light), 35.7% the cost of living, 33.8% healthcare, 29.1% ethics and scandals, and 25.3% energy (both prices and climate). Since a single ad may mention several topics, these numbers add up to more than 100%.

Democrats clearly remember James Carville's 1992 mantra, "It's the economy, stupid and don't forget healthcare." They hope President Trump's poor ratings on inflation give them the win on economic issues generally, despite a strong stock market, stable job numbers and healthy growth.

By contrast, 46.1% of pro-Republican Senate ads mention taxes, 19.9% the cost of living, 18.1% transgenderism, 15.1% immigration and 14.4% crime. The GOP clearly devotes less attention to the economy and more to cultural issues. But immigration and crime may be yesterday's news, especially since the border is closed and crime is down. Voters tend to pocket success and focus on what's bothering them. Concentrating on the One Big Beautiful Bill Act also risks seeming complacent. Republicans look as if they're running on what they've done more than on what they'll do next.

The midterm election is almost here, with campaigns nearing the lock-in point.

What's the money situation? Here the GOP edge is undeniable. Republicans have lots more. California data scientist Rob Pyers estimates Republicans have spent $642.9 million on ads for Senate candidates and $165.6 million for House candidates. Democrats have spent $235.2 million on Senate hopefuls and $125.8 million on the House. Does spending the most money guarantee victory? Ask President Mike Bloomberg.

Moreover, the president's political-action committee might have waited too long to release its enormous load of cash. Many undecided and swing voters could have decided before Labor Day, making movement difficult in September and October. Some always wait until closer to the election. But will there be enough for Republicans to cut their losses? Only time will tell.

What about the polls? Republicans believe they are biased in favor of Democrats. One of the best GOP polling minds, Patrick Ruffini, examined this question, studying 3,312 polls from the last four elections. He found 73% of these overstated Democratic performance compared with the actual results.

That Democratic overperformance peaked in July at 5.9 points. The numbers generally started declining in late August. By Election Day, polls were on average 2.6 points more Democratic than the results.

Mr. Ruffini also examined the most competitive races during this period, those with 30 or more polls. At this point in the cycle, these polls were 7 points more Democratic than the outcome. The redder the state, the more polls overstated the Democratic candidate's numbers.

If this pattern holds this year, then virtually every battleground Senate race is within the margin of error today, exaggerating the current strength of Democratic candidates. Some who look today like possible winners will lose if the pattern holds. Still, how this plays out is up in the air. "Each cycle has the potential to behave differently," Mr. Ruffini acknowledges. Maybe this is that cycle. Or maybe not.

What Republicans don't need are distractions. That's why the president's undisciplined appearances are a problem. Take Monday's Nebraska rally. Mr. Trump said that Iran could "take out" Los Angeles and San Diego. Taken out of context, as it predictably was by the president's antagonists in the media, it sounded like an invitation or a joke. Then there is the controversy about the political ads the White House was running with taxpayer dollars. Mr. Trump said he'd pay for them, then that he'll pay for them only going forward. There are likely to be more distractions almost every day. That's unhelpful. But we know Mr. Trump won't change.

Republicans can only hope the polls are off, debates go well, their money and message keep down their losses, and any October surprise sprung by America's adversaries fails. It's nail-biting time for everyone, especially Republicans.

Mr. Rove was senior adviser and deputy chief of staff for President George W. Bush and is author of "The Triumph of William McKinley" (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

Let Physics Regulate the AI Industry

By Frank Wilczek

Call it the artificial-intelligence crime wave. AI agents are breaking through safeguards, sneaking into outside systems and hiding from monitoring. This has led AI executives including Dario Amodei, Sam Altman and Elon Musk to call for slowing the development of these systems.

Meanwhile, in Abilene, Texas, construction of the Stargate data center is proceeding at a breakneck pace. It draws power from the Texas grid and from 10 on-site natural-gas turbines, with 62 diesel backup generators. Its developers have sought permission to add 41 more gas turbines and 18 more generators. Many other giant data centers are under construction or are being planned and financed aggressively.

There is a contrast here between the professed desire for caution in theory and pedal to the metal in practice. Over the next few years, one can reasonably expect improvements in technological fundamentals, with AI helping to drive them.

No new data centers without enough clean power to run them.

Algorithms will improve, as will power electronics, cooling systems and data efficiency. Computation will be cleaner, more useful and more energy-efficient. Meanwhile, a slower pace could give us time to understand AI better and develop meaningful systems of governance.

That prospect ought to be attractive to AI planners. Yet their actions suggest that the competitive frenzy to secure market share has displaced rational assessment of long-term social benefit. The strength of that incentive suggests that voluntary restraint is unlikely to succeed. The same competitive pressures that drive the accumulation of computing power will also encourage the invention of ways to circumvent, erode or evade vague or complex rules.

Regulation works best when attached to measurable physical acts. Bans on atmospheric testing, numerical limits on delivery systems, and the general understanding that first use will be severely condemned and punished have held off nuclear catastrophe. Sharply defined restrictions on biological weapons, ozone-destroying chemicals, leaded gasoline and tobacco marketing have also succeeded. "Develop AI responsibly" is fog. Gigawatts are measurable.

There is a golden opportunity for physics to establish a red line for AI technology: no new sustainable power, no new data center. No large data center, or major extension of an existing one, should receive the permits or grid connection it needs unless its developer brings enough new carbon-free generation, energy storage and transmission online to meet its additional electricity demand—and pays the full cost.

By itself, this won't solve all the problems AI poses. Controlling AI remains difficult. But we can use the physical bottleneck of energy to impose a clear and simple restraint on an industry that has otherwise proved elusive to regulate.

Mr. Wilczek is a 2004 Nobel laureate in physics.

BOOKSHELF | By Daniel Akst

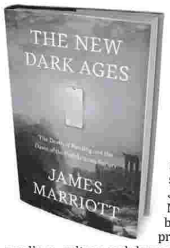
Is Reading A Dead Letter?

The New Dark Ages

By James Marriott
Doubleday, 208 pages, $26

The decline of serious reading may remind the bookish of a fictional exchange about going broke. "How did you go bankrupt?" "Two ways. Gradually and then suddenly." There was a time when many would have recognized those lines from Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel, "The Sun Also Rises." Today we are more likely to plug the passage into a chatbot to determine its source and then move on to social media, where rudimentary reading thrives yet true literacy withers.

In 2022, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, fewer than half of American adults read a book in the previous 12 months. Another study found that a mere 16% "read" anything for pleasure on a given day in 2023, including newspapers and audiobooks. The trend isn't altogether new. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the number of college graduates in 2003 who could interpret complex texts proficiently had fallen to 31% from 40% in 1992. The assessment, an official noted, was "not designed to test your understanding of Proust, but to test your ability to read labels." Students have lately shocked professors with their inability to carry out sustained reading. Campus syllabuses have been pared down to accommodate this generational change.



"The decline of student reading is only the most visible symptom of a wider crisis," James Marriott warns in "The New Dark Ages," a disturbing book about the death of the print culture that once shaped our lives, culture and democracy. "In America," he writes, "reading for pleasure declined by 40% in the first two decades of the 21st century. And in the U.K., more than a third of adults say they have given up the habit." Publishers have evidently responded by dumbing down their offerings. Mr. Marriott cites an analysis from the Economist of New York Times bestselling books over the course of nearly a century that found that "sentences in popular books have contracted by almost a third since the 1930s."

Nothing, in Mr. Marriott's view, has done more than the smartphone to bring on the culture of illiteracy that we seem to be entering. He notes that people on average now check their smartphones 144 times a day. A columnist for the London Times and an inveterate reader, Mr. Marriott recounts his own early experience with the technology. "It was often a matter of minutes after sitting down with a book," he writes, "that I would spring up again, assailed by thoughts that were at once impossibly petty and yet possessed of an inexplicable urgency," to check his phone.

While television helped undermine reading, Mr. Marriott writes, "the culture of print could probably have reached some kind of equilibrium with TV." He notes that "in the 1990s, if you were commuting to work or on a long train journey or hanging around in an airport, a book or a newspaper was probably the best entertainment option available."

The portability of smartphones meant that reading—especially book-length works—was no longer the most convenient activity for these interstitial periods. Smartphones, the author says, "are much more effective predators of our attention than TV ever was," so effective that he eventually found radical action necessary. "In the end I got rid of my device and bought a dumbphone instead. It's made me somewhat annoying as a friend and a boyfriend but I am able to read again."

For a doomsayer, Mr. Marriott is good company, and it is a shame how many people wouldn't dream of reading his eloquent, learned and admirably brief book. As "The New Dark Ages" makes clear, there is a lot more at stake than the joy of reading in what the subtitle calls the "Dawn of the Post-Literate Society."

Reading for pleasure has declined dramatically in recent decades. Blame the smartphone, an ever-present distraction from the book at hand.

Historians, the author notes, "have linked the spread of literacy to the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the birth of human rights, the rise of capitalism and the advent of modern democracy. The ascent of reading changed the world. Our vast, interconnected, tolerant and technologically advanced civilization is founded on the complex, rational kinds of thinking fostered by literacy."

For Mr. Marriott, reading isn't only a matter of personal cultivation. On the contrary, he makes a strong case that reading is a necessary ingredient for the exercise of reason, providing a mechanism for arguments to be considered and assessed, for truths to be asserted and defended. Reading, as generations of the downtrodden have discovered, can be liberating, which is why a number of slave states before the Civil War made it illegal to teach the skill to black people.

Our ability to think isn't helped by the decline of writing, a task increasingly delegated to chatbots. "The death of writing compounds the death of reading," Mr. Marriott asserts, "further unmooring our culture from its foundations in the written word."

These developments have clear political implications. Mr. Marriott believes that the decline of reading and writing (and the growth of hyperkinetic distractions such as TikTok), abets the rise of an ignorant, irrational and distracted electorate. "Mass literacy is a recent phenomenon," he writes. "So is mass democracy. We simply don't know whether one can survive without the other."

Demagogues and electoral dysfunction are nothing new, as he acknowledges. The Third Reich bubbled up in a deeply troubled society of near-universal literacy. Communism has taken hold among exquisitely educated intellectuals; collectivism's malignant appeal seems strongest on elite campuses. Yet if human folly predates the decline of reading, the atrophy of this splendid activity is no less lamentable.

Aside from the sheer fun of it, the more demanding kind of reading Mr. Marriott champions helps us make sense of the world, furnishes the mind and elevates our species. "For centuries," he writes, "people have accepted that literature and learning are among the highest purposes and deepest consolations of human existence."

And so they always will be, whether we avail ourselves or not.

Mr. Akst is the publisher of Tivoli Books.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Celebrating Hamas on Oct. 7

Zohran Mamdani, the mayor of New York, used Oct. 7, 2026, the same way he used Oct. 7, 2023: as another opportunity to libel Israel. After his perfunctory mention Wednesday of the Hamas massacre came a stream of propaganda, much longer, about Israel's "ongoing genocide," "so-called ceasefire," "apartheid" and "war crimes"—with Hamas disappearing from the picture as if to its hostage tunnels.

Mamdani and others use the day of the massacre to blame the Jews.

Basic dishonesty is a feature of all such harangues. Mr. Mamdani passes off the Hamas-supplied Gaza casualty figure as if all the dead were civilians, not bothering to mention that at least 25,000 are believed to have been terrorist combatants.

To do so would be to admit that Israel waged a war, not a genocide, with a civilian-to-combatant casualty ratio well within historical precedents for difficult urban warfare. For the same reason, he also has to omit that Hamas fought from hospitals, schools and mosques, posed as journalists, and built an unprecedented military tunnel system under Gaza's cities.

It betrays a particular ugliness to smear Israel to mark Oct. 7, the day Hamas started the war by deliberately massacring Jews. It killed nearly 1,200 of all ages in scenes reminiscent of Nazi death squads. The terrorists even took a baby hostage, among 250 others.

Yet it is for the Hamas attack alone that Mr. Mamdani insists on context. "The suffering did not begin nor end that day," he wrote Wednesday. So even Oct. 7 is Israel's fault.

That's also how Mr. Mamdani responded in 2023 to the Hamas attack. At the time, his wife was celebrating the massacre and his political party, New York's Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), was promoting a rally in solidarity. Three years on, the party's youth wing endorsed another such protest for this Oct. 7. "Glory to the martyrs, victory to the resistance," reads its flier.

Wednesday's protests typically praised the Hamas massacre while also denouncing Israel as the aggressor. "Three years of genocide, three years of resistance," proclaimed Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). On Oct. 8, 2023, the same national SJP told its chapters to celebrate the "historic win for the Palestinian resistance."

During a walkout at Columbia on Wednesday, students chanted, "Resistance is justified when people are occupied." They mean the day's massacre of Jews was justified, even while Hamas ruled all of Gaza. In London, protesters outside the office of the main communal organization of British Jews called for "intifada."

A Haverford professor was arrested Tuesday for allegedly stalking and threatening a Jewish colleague—as well as his infant child—in antisemitic terms for months via anonymous online accounts. The professor, a Columbia anthropology Ph.D. (what else?), previously wrote on behalf of the Haverford Faculty for Justice in Palestine to denounce efforts against campus antisemitism as "Zionist witch hunts."

Israel fought back after Oct. 7 to lift existential threats—Hezbollah is devastated and Iran's nuclear program is in rubble. But the antisemitism unleashed again three years ago is still with us. Defeating it remains the West's duty.

Rubio Gets to the Heart of the Matter

The Western world is having a crisis of confidence, moral and political, and it is eroding its prosperity and the will to defend its principles. For a bracing and timely antidote, we recommend Marco Rubio's speech Wednesday at the Acropolis in Greece.

At the Acropolis, he says the West can revive itself by recalling its historic virtues and ambition.

It's the speech of the year by our lights. The Secretary of State is on a diplomatic swing through Europe, and he met with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who has led that country's economic revival. Mr. Rubio also took the opportunity to visit the Pynx, near the Acropolis, that great symbol of Western civilization, and remind us of the history and ties that bind Europe and America.

"Here, in Athens, we found the first full realization of all the essential traits that would come to define the West," Mr. Rubio said: "fierce individuality and relentless ambition; daring exploration and invention; a yearning for discovery, for adventure, risk and glory. An insatiable curiosity about the world and the principles by which it operates, a hunger to know the mysteries of nature and grasp the secrets of the cosmos."

He then connected those traits to the West's achievements. "This was the foundation of the Western mind: our math, our science, our medicine. Our philosophy, ethics, and religion. . . . It was the foundation of the riches of Christian theology—of Augustine and Aquinas, and the whole tradition of natural law."

It isn't often these days that you hear a politician speak of "the West," much less make the essential connection between our own day and our inheritance from Athens and Jerusalem. Would that we heard it more.

Mr. Rubio moved on with an honest appraisal that "today, too much of the West has forgotten this quality. Over time, we in the West came to feel ashamed of the very things that made us exceptional. We felt embarrassed that our achievements set us apart from the rest of the world. Our prosperity somehow became a source of guilt. We no longer believed we deserved and had earned our greatness."

Visit an Ivy League campus any day of the week to see what Mr. Rubio means.

Our enemies, the Secretary of State says, have been only too happy to fill the vacuum left by Western self-doubt. "National interests did not vanish in the face of international institutions. War did not disappear simply because we preferred peace. . . . And now, there is war again. There is new competition between great powers again. There is vulnerability, aggression, terrorism, a whole universe of new threats and attacks again."

So the West is at "a crossroads," and "the course we take will determine whether the West maintains its place at the head of the world, or resigns itself to a future of atrophy and servitude and decline. We will either choose to act now, or lose the choice to act at all."

As a senior Trump official, Mr. Rubio says the U.S. is attempting to lead a Western revival. But importantly, he didn't chastise Europe as others in the Administration have done. He asked Europe to join America in this great endeavor, and he even pointed to green shoots that it may be doing so.

Mr. Rubio's speech is all the more notable because it comes in an age of impoverished political rhetoric. Narrow partisanship and sniping rule the day on left and right. Mr. Rubio is describing a larger ambition that connects the best of the West's past to a better future. Our view is that Americans are aching for this kind of vision and leadership, and they will respond to someone who offers it.

Anduril's Bet on U.S. Submarines

By now you've heard that the American military needs more cheap drones and missiles, but U.S. forces are also facing a dangerous decline in ships, submarines and aircraft. Anduril Industries' big bet this week on helping to build U.S. submarines is a major step toward easing the national shipbuilding crisis.

The defense tech firm invests $3.7 billion to build more attack subs.

In an announcement with President Trump on Tuesday, Anduril said it will invest $3.7 billion to build a facility that can produce sections of Virginia-class attack submarines for the U.S. Navy. The aim is to stand up the plant in Maryland by 2030 and build items such as torpedo tubes and eventually perhaps larger parts of the vessel.

The U.S. has long failed to build two attack submarines per year, though America dominates undersea technology and the hulls are crucial to deterring a war with China.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies has run a war game of a Chinese assault on Taiwan some 24 times, and it found that "in every iteration, the U.S. player moved submarines into the Taiwan Strait, where they could attack Chinese amphibious ships directly." Beijing has to assume the stealthy submarines could be in the region at any time, which enhances deterrence.

But U.S. submarine production is limited by a brittle supply chain, scarce skilled labor, and other dysfunctions. The Navy would be lucky to reach its fleet goal of 66 attack submarines in several decades, and in 2024 only 31 of 47 were operationally ready, according to the Congressional Research Service.

The status quo of building 1.1 or 1.2 subs per year hasn't improved even amid Congressional concern and billions of dollars in funding. The glacial pace is a threat to U.S. defenses and to the American promise to sell Australia at least three and up to five submarines in the Aukus deal with the U.K.

Anduril's new facility could add nine million labor hours a year to the Virginia-class industrial base, a 15% boost that should relieve other facilities and help put the boats together faster. The defense tech company is known for using manufacturing innovation, software and a commercial labor force to reduce production time and expense.

Let's hope the Administration and Congress understand this is a no-aborts mission. Anduril is putting up billions of its own capital, as Administrations of both parties are always demanding from weapons makers. But other defense companies will watch this effort and calibrate their own bets accordingly. One risk is that the project is strangled by inflexibility in the Navy's technical bureaucracy that certifies parts.

Still, credit the Administration for injecting more competition into a calcified U.S. defense industrial base. Many in Washington have invoked America's submarine travails as a reason to write-down U.S. interests and accommodate China's Taiwan designs. This week's announcement is a sign that the U.S. is at long last starting to throw American ingenuity and capital at a major strategic problem.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Education, Unions Aren't the Only Problem

In his op-ed "Nikole Hannah-Jones vs. Randi Weingarten" (Oct. 5), Joel Klein places the blame for the lack of student and teacher accountability measures primarily on New York's powerful teachers union.

The New York State Board of Regents and state Education Department, however, are even more culpable. Take two recent actions as examples.

First, the board voted last month to eliminate the requirement that students pass the longstanding and nationally respected Regents examinations to graduate starting with the class of 2028. Instead, the board tells school districts to use more subjective measures of student progress to determine graduation eligibility.

Second, New York's Education Department has refused to share the results of Advanced Placement (AP) examinations with third parties, thus precluding the ranking of New York high schools based upon this powerful measure of academic achievement.

Unions exist to protect their members and to raise their salaries, which is what the teachers unions are doing. One would have thought that government officials entrusted with students' academic success would act differently. Apparently not.

Marc F. Bernstein
Retired New York state supt. of schools
Boynton Beach, Fla.

Teachers don't enter the field of education to slide by with an easy job or to underperform out of laziness or ill will. In his op-ed, Mr. Klein leaves out the important role of administrators. The good ones recognize and support real teaching. The poor ones make choices that handicap, disempower and disillusion good teachers.

In my last few years as a teacher before I retired in 2022, I—along with my fellow educators—were called into the administration office to discuss our grading policies. These discussions turned out to be orders from our bosses, sugar-coated in corporate buzzwords, to stop giving low grades. Student learning went under the bus to make sure administrators' resumes reflected the academic improvements of the school under their leadership.

Many teachers have experienced similar actions that are intended to improve the lives of administrators at the cost of real and effective teaching.

Yes, there are many poor teachers, and teachers unions have many faults, but when seeking to improve education, the role of administrators is too often left out.

Paul Forster
Retired teacher
Santa Barbara, Calif.

The Trouble With Fair-Weather Originalists

Justice Samuel Alito's explanation of how originalism disciplines judicial decision-making is a refreshing answer to those who see the Constitution as an empty vessel to be filled by transient social values ("Even Originalist Judges Make Mistakes," op-ed, Oct. 3). The document means what it says. All the more reason not to ignore the 14th Amendment's Privileges or Immunities Clause, as the Supreme Court has since 1873, shortly after the amendment was ratified. Alas, that is precisely what the good justice accepts, citing precedent—the high court's *Slaughter-House* decision that year, which most scholars today believe to have been wrongly decided—adding that reviving the clause "would have opened a can of worms." Had that rationale prevailed in 1954, we would still be living with the court's 1896 "separate but equal" decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, effectively overruled in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which also opened a can of worms we're still wrestling with today.

Justice Alito's proper respect for originalism's restraint on judicial mischief is ill-served by the court's reliance on the 14th Amendment's less substantive Due Process Clause to do the work the Privileges or Immunity Clause was meant to do. Not for nothing does the latter come first in the amendment. Still more, unlike with the former, there is precedent to guide the court: Justice Bushrod Washington's ample explication of Article IV's Privileges and Immunity Clause in 1823 in *Corfield v. Coryell*. If we are all originalists now, as Justice Elena Kagan remarked in her confirmation hearings, let's not be fair-weather originalists. The text is there for a reason.

Roger Pilon, Ph.D., J.D.
Cato Institute's Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies
Washington

The Fed Has a History of Wasteful Spending

Joseph C. Sternberg's column on the Fed's botched Eccles Building renovation highlights a familiar pattern: When the Federal Reserve mismanages something, it invokes "political independence" as the excuse ("If the Fed Can't Stay on Budget, Can It Manage the Economy?," Politics & Ideas, Oct. 2).

That claim has always been dubious. During Congressman Wright Patman's 1964 investigation of the Federal Reserve System, his staff combed through Reserve Bank ledgers looking for signs of waste. In the published hearings, "The Federal Reserve System After Fifty Years," they itemized the Cleveland Fed's purchase of "24 ping-pong balls and 12 ping-pong paddles." Patman later brandished that line item on the House floor as evidence of an unaccountable central bank. When I joined the Cleveland Fed as a monetary economist in 1974, the closet containing those ping-pong balls was still padlocked, a relic of the Fed's fear of congressional oversight.

As for the Fed's vaunted independence, the record is stark. Cumulative inflation was about 8% in the century before the Federal Reserve existed; since its creation, cumulative inflation has exceeded 2,400%. Whatever independence was intended, it has not produced monetary stability.

Kevin Villani
La Jolla, Calif.

The AI Luddites Won't Win

I agree with Andy Kessler that "technology always finds its way around opposition" ("The AI Luddites Are Here," Inside View, Sept. 14).

Economists remind us that the Luddites were acting rationally. They were losing their jobs. It's no surprise that unions, which depend on membership, oppose the technology. Nevertheless, we need a balanced approach to avoid the putative pitfalls.

In his 2016 book "Paper: Paging Through History," Mark Kurlansky describes the technical fallacy that technology changes society. Mr. Kurlansky argues that the reverse is true: It is society that "develops technology to address the changes that are taking place within it." In short, artificial intelligence is here to stay. Luddites never win.

Paul Freiberg
Neenah, Wis.

If Boulder County Is So Eager To Sue, Why Not Sue Us All?

As your editorial "A Big Moment for Federalism" (Oct. 3) notes, the central issue in *Suncor Energy v. Boulder County* is "whether states and localities can turn federalism on its head to dictate policy for the rest of the country."

Here is a question for Boulder County: Why stop with targeting oil and gas companies? If it seeks to hold entities responsible for the ills caused by the use of petroleum products, why not include as defendants anyone who has ever used gasoline, vinyl siding, packaged food, electricity, pharmaceuticals, heating oil, fertilizer, rubber, computers, cellphones and so on? After all, it is consumer demand that keeps oil companies in business. Any judgments received could be apportioned among consumers, with their respective share of damages added to their annual tax bill.

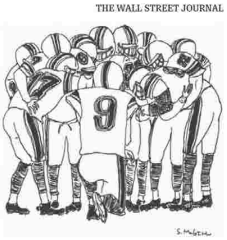
Another question for Boulder County: What energy sources does the county use to power its facilities and vehicle fleet?

Peter D. Kearns
Point Pleasant Beach, N.J.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Cuddle up, everyone."

Most Recycling Is a Waste

By Bjorn Lomborg

I recently finished an ice cream in Copenhagen and found myself stumped at the trash bins, wrapper in hand. Denmark sorts its garbage into 10 official categories, so that throwing something away becomes a small bureaucratic exam. The bins embody an idea that has gone too far: that more recycling is always better.

Modern enthusiasm for recycling was turbocharged by the 1970s panic that the world was running out of resources. But the biggest item households recycle is paper, and we aren't running out of trees.

Metals and some plastics are worth separating, but the rest of it is costly and can hurt the environment.

The case for recycling then shifted to protecting the environment. That argument has some merit. Recycling plastic can save oil. But heavy glass has to be collected, trucked, cleaned and remelted. Almost anything can be recycled if you throw enough money and energy at it. But are the benefits worth the cost?

Valuable materials were long recycled without government programs to make it happen. A century ago, scrap supplied about 30% of America's copper, close to the 32% recycled globally today. Iron, steel and construction debris are recycled because businesses find it profitable.

Yet governments have increasingly pushed citizens to recycle paper, glass and plastics worth less than the cost of collecting and processing them. Sometimes the environmental benefits made up the difference. But over time the means became the end.

Governments in Europe and North America now chase suspiciously round numbers. The European Union sets mandates for 90%, 85%, 80%, 75%, 70%, 65%, 60%, 55% and 50%, covering everything from beverage containers and packaging materials to municipal rubbish. In 2010 Scotland promised "zero waste" with 70% recycling by 2025. Its household recycling rate stands at 44%.

The world now spends more than $250 billion a year managing municipal waste, perhaps $50 billion of it on recycling. That money can't go to policies that do more good.

A new study from Denmark's Environmental Protection Agency shows the trade-off. Mechanical post-sorting of household trash nationwide would lift Denmark's recycling rate by almost 5 percentage points toward EU requirements. By the usual scoreboard, that is a win.

But the costs far exceed the benefits. Each ton of carbon dioxide avoided would cost nearly €4,000. That's almost 50 times the European carbon price, meaning emissions can be cut far more cheaply elsewhere.

Even California's governor has begun asking whether another recycling rule is worth the cost. Last week Gavin Newsom vetoed a bill tightening requirements for recycled-content claims, having concluded that it would bring "little benefit."



Garbage bins proliferate in Denmark. ALAMY

Recycling for its own sake can do harm. For decades, rich countries collected low-value plastic and shipped more than a quarter of it to China and other poorer countries that promised to recycle it. Much of it was never recycled. One U.S. study found that about one-fourth of exported plastic scrap was unusable, and half of that was badly managed. This trade fell sharply after China's 2018 import ban, but even in the years immediately afterward perhaps 5% to 10% of land-based plastic entering the ocean came from plastic that wealthy countries had virtuously collected for recycling.

Some recycling clearly pays, but the question is how much. Japan, which publishes the world's best data on municipal waste, offers an answer. One peer-reviewed study estimated the socially optimal recycling rate—the point at which benefits, including environmental ones, most exceed costs. It was 10%. A newer study finds that municipal management costs alone were minimized at 7.6%. Recycle less and you miss cheap gains from metals and plastics. Recycle more and you pour ever greater resources into ever smaller gains, leaving society worse off.

A much-cited U.S. analysis imagined a suburban county designing its waste system from scratch. It tested every combination of recycling, landfill, incineration and anaerobic digestion. The best social outcome? Collect everything in one bin, send it to a central sorting plant, pull out recyclables and organics by machine, turn the organics into biogas and soil amendment, and burn the rest. Roughly half the waste ends up incinerated, 38% digested and 12% recycled. One bin instead of 10, with the best mix of low cost and environmental benefit, delivered by machines rather than by hectoring households.

Official accounts ignore a cost every household pays: the time spent sorting. Peer-reviewed studies from Sweden and Finland find it takes 26 to 29 minutes a week per person. Value that time at half the minimum wage in each country and it comes to €43 billion to €47 billion a year across the EU, about as much as the entire cost of Europe's municipal waste system. Across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's member states, it amounts to $111 billion to $123 billion.

Recycle what is worth recycling. Then throw away the idea that more recycling is always better.

Mr. Lomborg is president of the Copenhagen Consensus, a visiting fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and author of "False Alarm" and "Best Things First."

India's Best Bet to Catch Up With China? Democracy


EAST IS EAST
By Sadanand Dhume

When President Trump rolled out the red carpet for Xi Jinping, some pundits saw it as America foolishly acknowledging its main competitor as a peer, signaling a "G-2" world dominated by Washington and Beijing.

For developing-world democracies like India, the threat from China's rise goes beyond geopolitics. Beijing and many pro-Beijing commentators portray China's authoritarian government as inherently superior to democracy.

India is a tempting subject for comparison. But while China has outpaced its southern neighbor economically, technologically and militarily, that doesn't make authoritarianism a superior system.

"The simplistic view is that China has grown faster than India because China is an autocracy," says Yasheng Huang, a professor of global economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "I just don't see any evidence for that."

Scholars have long seen the broader significance of the economic race between China and India. The communist takeover of China in 1949 came two years after Indian independence from Britain. The world's two most populous nations saw themselves as ancient civilizations humiliated by industrialized Western powers.

"Given the present role of these two nations in Asia and their strategic importance in the world, it seems likely that the relative degree of success attributed to the two development efforts will determine the part they will be able to play in international affairs," Wilfred Malenbaum, an MIT economist, wrote in a 1956 paper. He argued that the winner of the contest would help determine whether other newly independent countries would "be a force primarily for or against the spread of free and open societies throughout the world."

Milton Friedman, an early critic of India's failed experiment with state planning, wrote in a 1963 essay: "We have rightly regarded India as a key country in the struggle for the uncommitted nations of the world, as the major counterforce to the influence being exerted in the Far East by China."

China initiated market-based economic reforms in 1978. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 1980 China and India were neck and neck in nominal per capita gross domestic product, with China at $310 and India at $275. India's growth accelerated after 1991, when it also began economic reforms, but it hasn't kept pace with China. The IMF estimates China's per capita GDP last year at about $14,000, more than five times India's roughly $2,700. In purchasing power parity terms, which accounts for goods and services typically costing less in poorer countries, Chinese per capita GDP of about $29,500 was 2.5 times India's $12,000.

Economic liberalization and meritocracy, not autocratic rule, enabled the sparkling megacities.

China's system looks attractive at first glance. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of the country's economic reforms, sold his departure from Maoism with aphorisms such as "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice" and "Let some people and some regions get rich first." He could say such things, the argument goes, because he didn't need to win elections. Indian politicians, by contrast, rarely rise above promising voters freebies or appealing to caste or religion.

China's political system supposedly lets leaders take the long view instead of devising short-term policies with the next election in mind. In India, a project like China's Three Gorges Dam would likely become ensnared in endless lawsuits and protests by civil society groups.

Although democracy has become synonymous at times with bloat and red tape (think of California's high-speed rail project), democratic governments have a stronger record of delivering prosperity—without brutalizing their people. China's boom is less than 40 years old and shows signs of fading. In per capita GDP terms, China trails the U.S. and has yet to catch up with Japan or South Korea. Mr. Huang points out that the most authoritarian Chinese leaders, including Mao Zedong and Mr. Xi, have a far worse economic record than the relatively liberal Deng and his immediate successors.

Those drawn to authoritarianism believe it will yield sparkling megacities and world-beating companies. But war-torn Myanmar and bankrupt Zimbabwe are examples of where autocratic rule often leads. China still holds lessons for India—and any democracy. Julian Gewirtz, a China expert at Columbia University, calls the country's economic takeoff "as much a story of bottom-up experimentation and exploration of international ideas as anything else." By embracing meritocracy, China has made its universities world-class. China sees its cities as engines of growth, not merely cash cows for rural hinterlands.

But these are arguments for improving Indian democracy—so it may one day offer the developing world a better example than China.

'Londonistan' and Britain's Growing Rift With Washington

By Dominic Green

London

The only thing worse than being Britain's enemy is being Britain's friend. For decades a pillar of the Western alliance, the U.K. is becoming an unreliable ally. The foundation of the British-American alliance isn't sentiment but security cooperation. The unraveling of Britain's postimperial strategies for managing the domestic front while maintaining its international status is damaging that cooperation and harming American interests.

On Oct. 4, the Pentagon withdrew its B-1 bombers from RAF Fairford, the main U.S. air base for strikes on Iran, to American soil, citing security concerns about an Iranian-led plot to attack the base. The withdrawal, which was so precipitate that some of the bombers took off before airborne refueling was fully arranged, came a week after British counterterrorism police arrested five black-clad men near the base in the early hours of Sept. 27. The men had driven three vehicles toward the base, and police later recovered "a quantity of petrol" from the cars. President Trump said the threat linked to Iran was the reason for removing the aircraft. Yet the "Fairford Five" were released on bail a day later.

Meanwhile, Britain's Labour government stalled on corroborating its ally's assertions while Labour held its annual conference and rallied to a new prime minister, Andy Burnham. On Sept. 24, three days before the Fairford arrests, Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband posed shaking hands with Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, in a meeting at the United Nations General Assembly. Mr. Miliband, who earlier in the month had announced sanctions on Jewish-owned businesses in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), avoided meeting any Israeli officials.

In the Oct. 8 by-election for ex-Prime Minister Keir Starmer's London seat, Labour's Somali-born candidate is challenged by a Green Party candidate running on a "pro-Palestine" platform. In his conference speech on the morning after the Fairford arrests, Mr. Miliband denounced Israel at length and told Labour delegates that "you were right" to be "outraged by the plight of the Palestinian people." He devoted three sentences to Iran, none of them mentioning terrorism or domestic subversion.

No mention of the intelligence tip-offs that preceded the Fairford arrests, or that Iran had declared RAF Fairford a "legitimate target." No mention of the more than "20 potentially lethal Iranian-backed plots against people in the U.K." that MI5 described in July. No mention of the arrest earlier in September of two Iranian men who allegedly planned to detonate a chlorine bomb at Heaton Park Synagogue in Manchester, site of a jihadist attack in 2025.

Only on Sept. 30, after Labour's conference and after Secretary of State Marco Rubio cited the hand of a "foreign actor," did Mr. Burnham admit to "strong indications" that Iran "played a part" in the incident. It is impossible not to conclude that Labour played down a major security incident for domestic political reasons, that Iran sees Britain as weak—and that the U.S. does too. Mr. Miliband did it again on Sept. 30 by euphemizing the hijacking of an airliner flying between Dubai and Tel Aviv by a British-educated Omani as an "incident."

The U.K. is now a hub for the Iranians, which has turned Britain into an unreliable ally for the U.S.

As to how a key American ally allowed Iran, the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, to establish operations on British soil, consider another case that broke on the night of the Fairford arrests. The Sunday Times of London reported that a bodyguard to the late Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh obtained "asylum" and citizenship in Britain from the previous Conservative government, then planned Hamas attacks on Jewish sites in Germany and Austria to celebrate the second anniversary of the Oct. 7 massacres. A court order initially anonymized "Mr. X" for 100 years. The order was later amended, but he remains protected from identification in the U.K. while separate proceedings are under way.

This story reeks of sub-Le Carré spycraft gone wrong and the use of the courts to hush it up. The reality behind the James Bond myth is that postimperial Britain boosted its status by making itself useful to the U.S. The noble legacy of hosting Europe's dissident liberals, the ignoble imperial game of divide-and-rule, and the trade-offs of Cold War cat-and-mouse declined into an amoral willingness to cultivate terrorist funders such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and even to host the West's enemies. French intelligence services nicknamed Britain's capital "Londonistan" decades ago.

First a policy runs out of utility. Then its institutional momentum runs out of control. Britain is now a key European hub for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Muslim Brotherhood. If Britain continues its diplomatic and economic assault, Israel may reconsider the intelligence-sharing that has previously spared British citizens from the fatal consequences of British government policies. The British and Israelis should be working together as American allies against common threats. Instead, Britain's strategic exhaustion and cynical compensations are disrupting America's global strategy at a critical moment and making America and, it appears, American bases and personnel less secure.

Mr. Green is a columnist for WSJ Opinion's Free Expression.

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Notable & Quotable: Satire

From the Instagram account of the Columbia Federalist, a satirical university newspaper, Sept. 30:

It was brought to our attention that a recent article published on our Social Media and Website titled "I Lived It: Before We Had Sex, My Boyfriend Said a Land Acknowledgement" upset many members of the Columbia community and handled a very sensitive topic rashly and irresponsibly: the important recognition of the native land that Columbia University and much of our country sit on.

We take full accountability for the weight of our harmful words, and we thank Columbia's Native American Council, as well as other members of the community, for bringing this to our attention. We deeply apologize for any harm that this article caused, and we are taking this moment to refine our humor guidelines to ensure that our mission of satire does not hurt communities and voices that should be uplifted. In a moment like the one we are currently living in on a campus like ours, political satire is more important than ever, and we would like to reaffirm our commitment to uplifting marginalized voices in this endeavor.

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EDITORIALS

Endorsements for Illinois Senate districts 8, 9, 14, 17, 18, 21, 23

Today the Tribune Editorial Board turns its attention to contested races for the Illinois Senate. This is our first batch of endorsements there; we are endorsing statewide.

8TH DISTRICT

Ram Villivalam, 39, has represented this district, covering parts of Chicago's North Side including West Ridge as well as such northern suburbs as Skokie, Park Ridge, Morton Grove, Lincolnwood and Niles, since 2019. As majority caucus whip, he's part of Senate President Don Harmon's leadership team and led the upper chamber's negotiations for the mass transit rescue package enacted late last year.

Giving Villivalam his first general election challenge since winning office is Vince Romano, 53, a Skokie real estate agent who's run unsuccessfully for the state legislature several times. This is Romano's first Senate run.

Romano is a harsh critic of Democratic Party leadership in Illinois, saying of Villivalam that his rise within the state Senate is "the exact problem. He's a leader, and he's leading us in the wrong direction."

Of the transit package, which resulted in a record increase in road tolls throughout Illinois, he says bluntly, "It sucks. ... One more thing (my opponent) did to make constituents' lives unaffordable."

Our view of Villivalam is more nuanced. We don't love the spike in tolls either, but we believed the transit funding increase was unavoidable (if excessive). The money had to come from somewhere, and Villivalam helped put the kibosh on some truly unacceptable proposals that surfaced in the House — particularly a tax on the unrealized gains of Illinois billionaires.

Romano's critiques of Democratic Party hegemony in Illinois are well taken, but we consider Villivalam to be an experienced problem solver even if he is philosophically liberal.

We endorse Ram Villivalam.

9TH DISTRICT

This is a seat left open after the failed congressional candidacy of Democrat Laura Fine, who's represented this north suburban district since 2019. The Democratic candidate to succeed her is Winnetka small business owner Patrick Hanley, 36, who edged out Evanston lawyer Rachel Ruttenberg in a hotly contested primary.

Hanley, whom we endorsed over Ruttenberg in the primary, faces Glenview resident Thomas Lally, 74, now retired after a career in the insurance and defense industries. Lally is from a very old North Shore family; the family business is West End Florist in the far western part of Evanston, a business established by Lally's grandfather in 1908.

Hanley's views are similar to those of Fine and her predecessor Daniel Biss, the Evanston mayor now running to succeed Jan Schakowsky in the U.S. House of Representatives. Hanley told us he opposes the so-called millionaire's tax, a surcharge on incomes over $1 million that House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch endorses. But he believes Illinois should adopt a progressive income tax in the future, something Illinois voters rejected in 2020.

At the same time, we are heartened to see that he would consider Cook County State's Attorney Eileen O'Neill Burke's suggestions for state legislation reforming the county's broken electronic monitoring system. He also has some solid ideas on getting more housing built in Illinois, which we have identified as an urgent need.

Lally hasn't waged any kind of serious campaign that we can discern; for example, the League of Women Voters said his campaign didn't respond to a request to debate Hanley, who'd agreed to attend. A lengthy statement on Lally's campaign website as to why he's running includes a hearty defense of President Donald Trump and a description of Democratic voters as "lemmings."

In a district where Democrats far outnumber Republicans, that struck us as an odd form of outreach to potential swing voters.

14TH DISTRICT

State Sen. Emil Jones III has represented this district in Cook County's south suburbs since 2010 when he succeeded his father, Emil Jones Jr., Senate president from 2003 to 2009 and famously Barack Obama's mentor when Obama was a state senator.

The younger Jones entered into a deferred prosecution agreement with the U.S. attorney's office in Chicago late last year after his 2025 trial on bribery and wire fraud charges ended in a hung jury. If he complies with the terms of the agreement, which included an admission that he lied to the FBI, the charges will be dismissed.

Perhaps it's not surprising then that Jones, 48, was challenged in the Democratic primary for the first time since he took office. He defeated the two candidates, including Ahmed Karrar, whom we endorsed, winning about 60% of the vote.

He's also getting his first general election challenge since winning the office. Republican Brian Skala, a Crestwood village trustee, is running.

Skala, 53, a union plumber and Crestwood native, says Jones essentially has been an absentee senator. Skala is striking a moderate tone in his bid for the office and pledging to work with Democrats but believes, as we do, that taxes are too high in Illinois. He also tells us he would support a constitutional amendment that would allow for pension reform.

We're glad voters in this heavily Democratic district will have a choice, even if Skala faces an uphill battle given his opponent's familial advantages. But that is not what should matter here.

Skala is a very reasonable alternative for independents and moderate Democrats who want more curbs on Democratic excesses in Springfield and a change from their scandal-tarred incumbent.

Brian Skala is endorsed.

17TH DISTRICT

Sen. Elgie Sims Jr., 56, has represented this district, stretching from South Side neighborhoods like Chatham through south suburban parts of Cook, Will and Kankakee counties, since 2018. He faces a general election challenge (other than write-ins) for the first time since taking office from Republican Frederick Walls, 55, a carpenter who's run unsuccessfully in the past for the Illinois House.



State Sen. Ram Villivalam speaks during an event on Feb. 12 in Chicago's Loop. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



Brian Skala is a Republican running to represent the 14th state Senate District. **BRIAN SKALA**



Patrick Hanley is running for the Democratic nomination for state Senate in the 9th District. **PATRICK HANLEY**



State Sen. Elgie Sims, majority caucus appropriations leader, speaks to the press before Gov. JB Pritzker signs the state budget package on June 16. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/ CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



State Rep. Fran Hurley, D-Chicago, speaks in the riding arena of the Chicago School for Agricultural Sciences on Sept. 2, 2022. **MICHAEL GARD/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



Laura Ellman, then-candidate for state Senate, speaks during the Women's March to the Polls Early Vote Rally at Fishel Park on Oct. 22, 2018, in Downers Grove. **STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Sims is a leader in the Senate, chairing the Appropriations Committee and serving as the chamber's lead budgeteer, including for the current-year budget. He also was the driving force in the Senate for the SAFE-T Act, which eliminated cash bail and has been controversial since its adoption in 2021.

Sims is well to our left on many issues, and while we have argued the elimination of cash bail was justified on the grounds of economic fairness, we urge the senator to be more open to amending the landmark law than he has been to date in order to enhance public safety.

That said, while we appreciate that Walls is giving voters a choice, Sims is a force in Springfield who has received our endorsement in the past. Voters in this district have good reasons to support him.

18TH DISTRICT

The Illinois Senate is losing one of its best in Democrat Bill Cunningham, who is retiring. The open seat, covering parts of Chicago's Southwest Side and nearby suburbs including Alsip, Palos Heights and Palos Park, is being contested by former state Rep. Fran Hurley, 66, a Democrat, and Republican Christine McGovern, 56, a real estate broker who lost to Cunningham in 2022 and ran unsuccessfully for Hurley's old House seat in 2024 after Hurley retired.

Voters in this region know Hurley well. She served in the Illinois House for a decade before leaving in 2023 to join the Illinois Labor Relations Board.

This board endorsed her in her last House race as a strong voice for moderates in Springfield. She voted against the SAFE-T Act initially due to the objections from the law enforcement community, which she has consistently supported; and indeed the law was substantially amended later to address some of those concerns.

Hurley tells us now that she supports Cook County State's Attorney O'Neill Burke's call to bar judges from allowing those accused of the worst violent crimes to be confined at home with their whereabouts tracked using electronic monitors. Flagging affordability and public safety as the two issues of most importance to this district, she says, "What matters most is making sure people can afford to live in the communities they call home and can feel safe while doing so."

Fair enough.

McGovern is staunchly conservative and tells us, for example, that she would support rescinding the recent toll-road fee increases as part of last year's transit rescue package. We don't like how steep those toll increases are, either, but we don't think it practical to repeal them without another viable plan.

Hurley will be a welcome moderating voice in the Senate and a worthy successor to Cunningham, who endorsed her.

We endorse Fran Hurley.

21ST DISTRICT

Naperville Democrat Laura Ellman is seeking a third term representing this district centered in Naperville and including DuPage County communities like Lisle, Glen Ellyn and Lombard. She's challenged by fellow Naperville resident Julie Berkowicz, a Will County Board member for eight years.

Berkowicz, 65, opposes Illinois' sanctuary-state law and believes the state imposes too many mandates on localities. She is an advocate of school choice and says the state should opt into the new federal program providing scholarships, funded by donors who get a federal tax credit for their contributions. We agree with her on school choice and many of her other departures from her party's more extreme positions.

Berkowicz strikes us as a savvy Republican who understands that she must appeal to Democrats in a once-Republican suburban area that now trends blue.

But Ellman, 60, is a very reasonable and moderate Democrat who has received our support in the past and done nothing in our eyes to merit ousting this time around. We appreciate, too, that she's been a consistent co-sponsor of lifting Illinois' longstanding moratorium on new nuclear plants — a policy change that finally was enacted last year.

We also applaud Ellman's stated view that "our (legislative) maps should be compact and contiguous and recognize those natural (community) boundaries." We hope when the time comes that she insists her party leaders follow that same principle, which they've refused thus far to do.

23RD DISTRICT

This west suburban district has been represented by Democrat Suzanne Glowiak Hilton since 2019. She faces a challenge as she seeks a third term from Republican Linda Polacek, a former Marine who serves as a York Center Park District commissioner and who says that she believes "Illinois families are being ignored by career politicians while struggling under rising costs and high taxes." They certainly are struggling.

A mechanical engineer from Western Springs, Glowiak Hilton, 68, has been a moderate in the state Senate, reflecting a district that was represented by a Republican before her. She defeated her GOP opponent, Dennis Reboletti, by nine points in 2022.

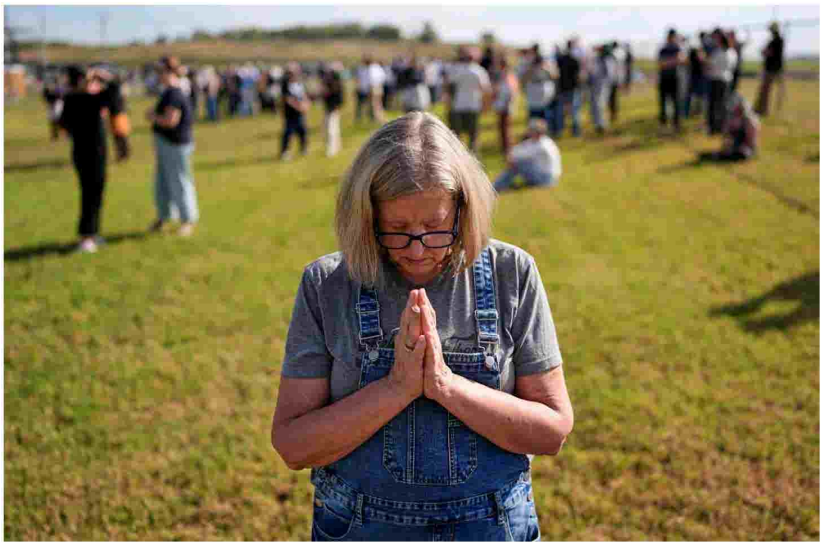
We endorsed the moderate Reboletti in that race but we also recognized Glowiak Hilton's centrist, bipartisan approach, reflected in votes against the state budget in each of the past three years. She has sponsored legislation, co-sponsored by Republican state Sen. Chris Balkema, to cap state spending growth at no more than growth in the state's economy. She tells us in no uncertain terms that she opposes the proposed 3% surcharge on incomes over $1 million, backed by House Speaker Welch. We could not agree more.

Polacek's campaign has, to our minds, been less than vigorous.

OPINION

Failed Tennessee execution shows lethal injection is breaking down

By Maya Foa
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Kathleen Walter prays in an area reserved for people opposed to the death penalty outside Riverbend Maximum Security Institution before the planned execution of Christa Pike on Sept. 30 in Nashville, Tennessee. **GEORGE WALKER IV/AP**

Christa Pike's execution in Tennessee was a disaster waiting to happen. The warnings did not only come from her lawyers or opponents of the death penalty: Doctors in Tennessee and Republican state senators called for the state to pause executions, because the chances of one going catastrophically wrong were so high.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee did not heed those warnings. Now, the defining image of the death penalty in 2026 is a woman strapped to a gurney, in unbearable agony, being tortured by prison officials tasked with killing her but unable to do so.

In May, Tennessee officials stabbed Tony Carruthers with needles and a scalpel for more than an hour while blood streamed down his chest. In August 2025, Byron Black groaned and cried out in obvious distress as he died. But this is not the story of a handful of botched executions. We are witnessing the complete breakdown of the dominant method of execution in the United States.

My organization, Reprieve, studied botched lethal injections that were carried out from 1977 to 2023. Over a third of them lasted more than 45 minutes, and over a quarter lasted longer than an hour. Secrecy was among the risk factors we identified, increasing the chances an execution would go wrong. Haste was another. Taken together, they define the approach being taken by execution-seeking states during President Donald Trump's second administration.

The death penalty in the U.S. relies entirely on secrecy. Indeed, the whole point of lethal injection is to obscure the violence of the state taking a human life. Tennessee's secrecy law is extremely broad, but no more so than many other death penalty states. The curtain that officials brought down to prevent witnesses seeing Pike's suffering is merely the visible manifestation of a process that is hidden from voters by design.

Tennessee refuses to say where it gets its execution drugs. It will not disclose how many vials it has on hand, how they are stored, when they expire or even whether it uses compounded or manufactured pentobarbital in executions. It was recently revealed that the state spent $650,000 on a supply of execution drugs.

If a state purchases manufactured drugs on the black market, which comes at a huge markup, that breaks pharmaceutical company distribution controls.

From the executive order "Restoring the Death Penalty," issued on his first day back in office, Trump made clear that he wants to see more executions. Some executing states have been following his cue. Nationally, there were 47 executions last year, but three-quarters of these were in just four states and 40% in Florida alone.

In April, the Department of Justice published a death penalty report that bizarrely asserted that all methods of execution available to states are constitutional and humane, from lethal gas to the electric chair, the firing squad and lethal injection.

Alabama has been busily demonstrating that the reverse is true, following a string of hideous botched lethal injection executions with a series of no less gruesome executions with nitrogen suffocation. After a federal court prohibited further nitrogen executions, the state switched back to the old, broken method.

In the aftermath of the failed execution of Pike, Tennessee officials issued a statement observing that they had "followed every step of the State's lawful, established execution protocol approved by the Attorney General's Office." We have become accustomed to states breezily dismissing witness reports of a man violently thrashing for 22 minutes as he dies as "nothing out of the ordinary," but this was staggering, even by those debased standards.

In the 2015 landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Glossip v. Gross, which held that condemned prisoners may only challenge their method of execution after providing a known and available alternative method, Justice Samuel Alito wrote for the majority that "our decisions in this area have been animated in part by the recognition that because it is settled that capital punishment is constitutional, 'it necessarily follows that there must be a (constitutional) means of carrying it out.'"

The cruel and unusual punishment of Pike, following a horrific run of botched executions, must be a turning point. Facing the reality of capital punishment as it is carried out in 2026, we should turn Alito's logic on its head. If there is no constitutional means of carrying out the death penalty, it follows that the capital punishment itself is unconstitutional.

Maya Foa is CEO of Reprieve and Reprieve US, leading a team of lawyers and investigators fighting against human rights abuses, including the death penalty, torture and indefinite detention without trial.

CPS can lead on universal mental health screening. Will it?

By Vanessa Andersen, Chime Asonye, Andrew Cockroft and Brian Peckrill
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



People walk past Chicago Public Schools headquarters at 42 W. Madison St. on July 30. **JOHN J. KIM/TRIBUNE**

Illinois educators are less than a year away from undertaking one of the most consequential mental health initiatives in the world. This week, as we mark World Mental Health Day, Chicago should seize the opportunity to lead that effort.

We know when mental health conditions begin: Nearly half of all cases appear before age 18, while a child is still sitting in one of our classrooms. Right now, we find these children late. Schools are where we could find them first.

Signed into law on July 31, 2025, Illinois Senate Bill 1560 made the state the first in the nation to require universal mental health screenings, or UMHS, for students. Starting with the 2027-28 academic year, every public and charter school in Illinois must offer these screenings for all students in grades three through 12, for which the state will provide a free screening tool.

Chicago Public Schools, the nation's third-largest district, enrolls more than 300,000 children — 1 in 6 Illinois public school students — and could play a defining role in the success of this groundbreaking initiative.

The past decade has brought on varied traumas for Chicago's youths. Gun violence, COVID-19 and fear of immigration raids, to name a few, have accelerated the structural, socioeconomic causes of psychosocial challenges.

Beyond increased self-harm and suicide, youths are reporting rising unhappiness and a shrinking sense of belonging.

And despite the city's growing mental health resources, the most in-need residents are left wanting. In Chicago, suicide rates rose among Black, Latino and Asian residents between 2015 and 2021 while falling among white residents, researchers at the University of Chicago found. About 1 in 10 Black suicide deaths was a child or teenager.

Addressing this vulnerable population of youths in Chicago begins with understanding and prevention. We must identify youths in crisis before it is too late and provide them with the resources they need.

Mayor Brandon Johnson made mental health a cornerstone of the Healthy Chicago 2025 Strategic Plan, which aims to close the 8.8-year life expectancy gap between Black and white Chicagoans in one generation. Together We Rise, CPS' five-year strategic plan, highlights student connectedness and well-being, emphasizing collaborative approaches to assess student needs, monitor intervention progress and leverage community partners for support.

Universal screening is one way those plans become reality. Done well, universal mental health screenings will provide the first population-level map of where youth mental health needs actually sit, letting the state and municipalities direct resources based on evidence rather than assumption.

Early detection is also instrumental to addressing chronic absenteeism, classroom misconduct and student disconnectedness detrimental to any learning environment.

Done badly, UMHS will fail to fulfill their promise and become a sorting mechanism — identifying distress in schools ill equipped to treat it — without connecting adolescents to care.

While many Chicago schools choose to screen students, they are far from a majority. Schools already routinely check physical health, such as exams for children's vision and hearing. Universal screening extends that same practice to the whole child.

As a key pillar of Gov. JB Pritzker's Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative, the state has spent significant resources laying the groundwork for UMHS. The Illinois State Board of Education gathered data on current practices and readiness of school districts across the state for the past several years, published guidance and FAQs in August, and announced plans to provide a free screening tool for districts.

CPS is far from leading on UMHS. It did not formally participate in ISBE's multiple inquiries to assess school district capacity for UMHS, and it has not yet announced any public plans to act on the new ISBE guidance.

These delays may be a natural consequence of a district stretched too thin. Barring additional funds from Springfield, CPS faces continued budget deficits and staffing shortages into the next school year. Administrators may see UMHS as nothing more than an unfunded mandate that merely adds to the myriad crises Chicago schools face.

UMHS, however, is not a matter of "if" but "when." Universal screening will be the law of the land beginning with the 2027 school year. And it is not another problem for Chicago leaders to solve. It is a solution.

Chicago cannot waste this opportunity to take advantage of a cost-free tool provided by the state that will equip teachers and administrators and save the lives of students. Despite the reduction in budget and staff, Chicago's emphasis on student well-being and existing infrastructure positions CPS to lead on UMHS and provide critical support to the city's youths — but only if it acts now.

As advised in ISBE's published guidance, CPS must begin engagement efforts now to ensure that each of its schools are aligned with staff to appropriately administer screenings, that parents' concerns are heard and discussed, that proper consent mechanisms are installed and that key stakeholders are engaged.

By leading, CPS could use UMHS to jump-start programs to further ease everyday burdens on administrators and staff. UMHS provides an opportunity to pilot additional mental health programs across schools, map school-level studies, and work with local providers to prepare evaluation protocols and referral pathways.

Chicagoans — parents and youths alike — must demand a plan from CPS. The school board should require regular updates on it. For candidates running to join Chicago's first fully elected board this November, committing to those updates should be a top priority.

Almost no government in the world has a systematic way of finding where its young people are psychologically struggling. Illinois is about to, and Chicago can serve as a model for other municipalities, states and countries.

What gets built here is what the rest will copy. We should be a beacon for a revolution in mental health treatment and understanding.

Vanessa Andersen is a sustainability commissioner for the city of Park Ridge. Chime Asonye founded Nigerian Mental Health, a network advancing mental health policy and disability inclusion in Nigeria and across its diaspora. Andrew Cockroft is an attorney at King & Spalding, where he advises employers on government investigations and workforce compliance. Brian Peckrill is executive director of the Chicago-based William G. McGowan Charitable Fund. The authors are 2026 emerging leaders at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

OPINION

Federal labor bill could force social agendas into private school contracts

By Mailee Smith
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



A sign for an all-gender restroom is posted at LaSalle Elementary Language Academy on Dec. 14, 2021, in Chicago. **ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Illinois could soon be ground zero for government-mandated arbitrators dictating provisions in private school union contracts.

That could include provisions governing locker rooms, keeping secrets from parents and other social issues that have little to do with traditional bargaining.

The Faster Labor Contracts Act (FLCA) would make that possible. The bill is supposed to speed up the negotiating process with newly unionized private employers. But if the employer and union don't bargain and agree fast enough, an arbitration panel could write the contract and make them binding on the parties — even if the workers themselves don't want those provisions in the contract.

That's bad news for private schools, which could be forced into provisions antithetical to their purposes. If the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) organizes a private school, and contract talks stall, a federal arbitrator would write the first contract.

Nothing stops that arbitrator from drawing on the union's own stated priorities or union contracts elsewhere, including provisions related to an array of social issues.

Illinois offers a preview of how that could look. The AFT's Chicago affiliate, the Chicago Teachers Union, already uses collective bargaining to pursue an agenda that extends well beyond traditional questions of wages, hours and benefits.

The union's current contract with Chicago Public Schools includes multiple provisions affecting parental rights and student gender identity that are unrelated to traditional subjects of bargaining.

For example, the contract mandates that "all students and staff are permitted to use the bathroom or locker room that corresponds to their gender identity." There are no caveats or limits.

The contract also allows the district to hide students' preferred gender identity from parents.

It states the district must "respect students' privacy, especially if parents or family members do not know how students identify or express their identity." Teachers "will not be required to reveal a student's sexual orientation or gender identity" to guardians or parents "without the student's permission."

The CTU isn't secretive about demanding these subjects, either. After its 2012 strike ended, "union leaders planned town halls in other cities across the country, in New York and Cleveland, San Francisco and Tampa, to spread the new gospel" of putting "things on the table that hadn't been on the table before," as reported in a Vox article CTU displays on its website.

Whatever one thinks of these provisions, the problem raised by the FLCA is more fundamental.

Who should decide whether they belong in a private school's labor contract — the union and employer through negotiations, or arbitrators that are accountable to no one?

And private schools are not merely hypothetical targets. CTU already has organized charter schools, which are treated as private-sector entities under federal labor law.

In 2018, then-CTU President Jesse Sharkey explicitly admitted his motivation to "undermine further charter expansion," including through the unionizing and merging of charter schools into the CTU. Later that year, the CTU employed its go-to tactic by leading a charter network's teachers out on strike, marking the first charter school strike in the nation and forcing the cancellation of classes for the 7,000 students in the network's 15 schools.

By 2024, that network's administrators announced plans to close seven of its 15 schools, citing declining enrollment and significant operating costs. The CTU's ultimate goal came to fruition: Organize charters, drive up costs to force closure and then absorb them back into the public school system as traditional public schools.

A union that organizes employees with the intent of ultimately closing their schools also is capable of organizing a private school with the intent of introducing drastic contract provisions, especially when those provisions already have been demanded in its other contracts.

The FLCA would give teachers unions an additional tool in their arsenal against anything that isn't a traditional public school. The question no longer would be simply what provisions a union can persuade a school to accept, but what provisions an outside arbitration panel could compel it to accept. If school officials at a newly organized private school don't agree to the social or "climate justice" provisions demanded by the union, the union would have carte blanche to demand mediation that ultimately could lead to third-party arbitrators creating a binding contract that could include those very provisions.

The FLCA cleared the U.S. House of Representatives in June and is now pending in the Senate. Lawmakers may see the bill as a way to deliver faster labor contracts. But for private and charter schools, it could instead mean faster exploitation by teachers unions seeking to impose their broader agenda at the bargaining table.

Mailee Smith is vice president of policy and litigation for the Illinois Policy Institute.

Voice of the people

Strengthen crisis response

Chicago's Crisis Assistance Response & Engagement Program (CARE), once a promising model for coordinating public health and safety in response to mental health crises, has been reduced to a siloed and opaque existence. Around the country, other cities are deploying coordinated responses to mental health emergencies with collaboration and transparency.

In Durham, North Carolina, crisis teams have responded to over 25,000 calls since 2022. In a jarring contrast, Chicago's CARE teams have responded to fewer than 3,000 calls in about as much time. Yet recent rhetoric from City Hall characterizes CARE as a success.

It's not. But it can be.

First, the city must build capacity at 911 to better assess and identify behavioral health calls. Chicago's 911 identifies fewer than 2% of calls as involving a mental health or substance use crisis, significantly below what national studies suggest. If we cannot identify the callers who are experiencing behavioral health emergencies, we cannot deliver an alternate response such as CARE.

Second, the public needs transparent and accessible safety data, including CARE's response statistics, to understand whether the program is operating as intended. At one point, CARE had a public dashboard, but it was removed.

Third, building capacity that adds behavioral health responders to our traditional emergency response options is essential to reimagining crisis response so we reduce harm and save lives. Our Fire and Police Departments remain the primary responders to crisis calls in Chicago, in part because of the responsibilities placed upon them by law and regulation. Given this, increased collaboration and support of those personnel is necessary. The goal should be not to replace those responders, but to make sure they have the necessary capacity and training and that CARE is available alongside them.



People tour the Crisis Assistance Response & Engagement van outside the Roseland East 115th Street Health Hub on Jan. 8, 2025, in Chicago. **STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Lastly, CARE should not be treated as a stand-alone program, but as a critical component of Chicago's broader mental health and crisis response system. Any investment in CARE is amplified when it is braided into the larger crisis continuum and alongside 988 and federally and state funded mobile crisis teams.

CARE is a sorely needed service and a worthwhile endeavor. But our city's approach to mental health crises remains anemic and insufficient, and thousands of people remain without the right response. More vans and increased hours are not going to solve the fundamental gaps.

All of the needed improvements are within reach, and if integrated, Chicago can truly reimagine how we respond to people experiencing crisis.

— Matt Davison, CEO, NAMI Chicago

Permanent leader for NITA

Interim Northern Illinois Transit Authority Executive Director Jamie Rhee will receive an annual pension of more than $213,000 while earning $350,000 to run NITA, it was reported.

They say history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. It's hard not to think of former CTA President Dorval Carter Jr. (NITA now oversees the CTA, Metra and Pace.)

Five and a half years before he took over the CTA, Carter retired from city employment. During that time, he received over $750,000 in pension payouts while earning six figures working full time in then-President Barack Obama's Transportation Department.

Carter returned to the CTA in 2015, and his final retirement came in January 2025. He left as the city's highest paid employee. With Carter off the payroll, Rhee became the city's highest paid employee. Three months later, she retired.

Carter became notably embattled in his final years at the CTA. Two particularly salient lines of attack were that Carter didn't use the CTA and spent more time on international tours than in CTA stations while service suffered.

It's unfair to judge Rhee because she's retired. She served the city of Chicago for over three decades, has an impressive resume and seems like a very strong fit for the interim role. However, it does seem fair for northern Illinois transit users and taxpayers to ask for a permanent leader who isn't already retired.

As the NITA board kicks off a wide-reaching search for a permanent executive director, I recommend someone who isn't already receiving a six-figure pension at the end of a multidecade career.

This critical leadership position, like Carter's position at the CTA before the creation of NITA, shouldn't be a cushy seat for a celebrated civil servant to have their ring kissed in the twilight of their civic life.

The permanent leader of this newly created agency should be someone with enough experience, yes, but with the hunger and career runway to build a legacy: a world-class agency serving the people of northern Illinois, a model for other large metros.

— Chris Curme, Chicago

Demand for luxury rentals?

Regarding the story "Demand high for downtown luxury rentals" (Oct. 5), something is wrong here. Very wrong! Our farmers cannot afford gas to fill their tractors so they can grow the food for all of us. The ill cannot afford insurance that may save their lives. The schools for our beloved children are disintegrating and failing their bright futures, which each and every one of them deserves. Meanwhile, demand for luxury rentals is high?

Something is very wrong here, folks. I implore you to take a stand to change this by voting. Will you stand by our farmers, our sick and our precious children? Vote. Vote. Vote.

Only then will change come and those now invisible be recognized.

— Bonnie Smith, Big Rock

Grateful for the broadcast

Wow! Thank you to UniMas-Ch. 60 for broadcasting the first game in the American League Division Series between the White Sox and the Cleveland Guardians. Nice that somebody cares about Chicagoans who do not have — or cannot afford — cable or streaming services.

— Arlene F. Gottardo, Chicago

Let us enjoy the Sox

On Oct. 5, 1921, the World Series went out live on the radio for the first time, featuring the New York Giants versus the New York Yankees at the Polo Grounds. Fans without a ticket could follow the game as it happened. Did team owners or the Polo Grounds lose any money because of this gesture to the national pastime? Doubtful. Rather, interest in baseball burgeoned.

Today, with the White Sox doing so well, fans are casting about for ways to follow the game without busting the budget as access is proprietary. You need the right equipment and the right streaming subscription to watch or hear the action on the field. Aren't those owners wealthy enough to throw a bone to the future fanbase they may need in years to come?

Even offering it on public radio would leave rural people out, since many small public radio stations have had to fold. If the game is the national pastime, there has to be a way to let the nation enjoy it.

— Margaret Sents, Glenview

Note to readers

With Halloween coming, we'd like you to share your most memorable experience related to the holiday, either as a child or as an adult. A costume that you've never forgotten? A trip to a haunted house that scared you silly? Neighbors who went above and beyond to make things fun for the kids? Send a letter, of no more than 400 words, by Friday, Oct. 23 to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and your city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

Opinion

This is one map Trump can't redraw

Mexico is banking on its competitive advantages and indispensability to the U.S. economy to withstand Trump's tariff campaign.

Mary Beth Sheridan

This essay is part of "The New World Disorder," a series exploring the disintegration of the postwar international system and how countries are adjusting as America steps aside.



JUÁREZ, MEXICO No one expected the artificial intelligence revolution to appear here, on the edge of the Mexican city of Juárez, across from a patch of tiny homes where Roger Vilchis sells Tostitos and Coca-Cola from a roadside stand. His neighborhood is all dust and heat, with dogs sleeping in the dirt roads and norteño music bouncing through the air. A sign on a chain-link fence warns: "It is prohibited to throw garbage or dead animals here."

So when a long white building started rising a few years ago on a tract of land the size of several football fields, Mr. Vilchis, 25, figured it might be a shopping center. It turned out to be a factory — and not just any factory. To the astonishment of the neighbors, the plant belonged to Inventec, a Taiwanese giant with over $20 billion a year in sales that makes servers for artificial intelligence. No A.I. backlash in this blue-collar barrio: "We saw it as good," Mr. Vilchis told me. "We realized there will be more work."

The Inventec facility, one of several new server factories in this desert valley bordering Texas, is a looming testament to how Mexico is surviving — and even challenging — the Trump administration's escalating assault on free trade. At a moment when the post-World War II global trade architecture is teetering, Mexico is testing the notion that the United States can unilaterally decouple from the rest of the world.

While "free trade is no longer the reality we are living," as Mexico's economy secretary, Marcelo Ebrard, put it recently, Mexico and other middle powers are banking on their competitive advantages and indispensability to the U.S. economy to withstand the Trump administration's tariff campaign. As Washington throws its might into dominating the global A.I. market, Mexico has become an increasingly important supplier for America's artificial intelligence boom, providing more than one-third of the United States' imported computer servers.

This growth has accelerated despite President Trump's best efforts to replace America's longtime free-trade philosophy with economic nationalism. On July 24, after the Supreme Court struck down the president's "Liberation Day" tariffs, the administration introduced fresh tariffs on goods from more than 80 countries, citing an obscure law against unfair trade practices. A month later, Mr. Trump imposed 50 percent tariffs on an array of Canadian exports, which took effect after trade negotiations collapsed.

In all of these moves, Mr. Trump has broken sharply with a U.S. policy consensus dating back to the post-World War II era: that international agreements to cut tariffs promote growth and stability. To Mr. Trump, free trade is not a tide lifting all boats; it is more like a hurricane, crashing into domestic manufacturing and killing jobs. Since he took office, average U.S. tariffs on imported goods have more than quadrupled, from 2.1 percent to almost 10 percent, according to the independent Tax Policy Center.

Mexico has not been exempt, enduring new tariffs on its cars, steel and aluminum — all critical exports. Mr. Trump has dismissed the trade relationship, claiming that Mexico produces nothing the United States needs: "I mean, hot tamales, tomatoes, a couple of things."

The numbers, as they often do with this administration, tell a different story. Mexico surpassed Canada as the United States' biggest trade partner in 2024, and its lead over that country and China, ranked third, has only continued to grow. Supercharged by America's data center build-out, Mexico's exports of goods to the United States surged by 16 percent year-on-year in the first seven months of 2026 — to a record of nearly $359 billion. The burgeoning Mexican server industry has become a symbol of Mr. Trump's competing priorities: to establish U.S. dominance in artificial intelligence, but also to rein in trade deficits.

I TRAVELED TO JUÁREZ in August to understand how Mexico and other middle powers are adapting to this more chaotic and disordered trade environment — and navigating these contradictions. Some governments have won reprieves from harsh U.S. tariffs by increasing investment in the United States — in Taiwan's case, a stunning $250 billion for semiconductor plants and tech manufacturing — or further opening their markets to American goods. Several have agreed to other U.S. demands in a kind of quid pro quo; Mexico, for example, is subjecting foreign investment to an enhanced national-security review and ramping up cooperation against drug cartels.

But such concessions don't tell the whole story. The president's effort to use tariffs to steer manufacturing back to the United States can only go so far; some economic paradigms are so entrenched that even Mr. Trump will have a hard time reversing them.

Nowhere is that clearer than in Juárez.

Decades ago, Juárez — just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas — was known for its cotton fields and quickie-divorce industry (Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe were among those who untied the knot here). Its transformation into an industrial powerhouse began in the 1960s, when the Mexican government created the "border industrialization" program, a scheme that allowed export-oriented assembly plants, or "maquiladoras," to operate in a free-trade zone stretching along the Mexican border. By the late 1990s, when I began to visit Juárez as a reporter, the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, had sparked an explosion of factories. Today the city is a sort of shop floor for American industry.

Mr. Trump has made no secret of his disdain for NAFTA, which he has called "the worst trade deal maybe ever signed anywhere." Throughout his first term, he negotiated a successor treaty to NAFTA known as the U.S.M.C.A, which included rules that were more favorable for U.S. automakers, among other things. This term, he has refused to join Mexico and Canada in inking a 16-year renewal of the U.S.M.C.A, opting instead to delay while he seeks even tougher terms.

But the border has an economic logic all of its own. Unwinding U.S.-Mexico supply chains "would have a monumental economic and political cost," Luis de la Calle, a former Mexican trade negotiator, told me. Many U.S. businesses — from A.I. data centers that get their servers from Juárez to Iowa farms exporting chicken feed — now rely on Mexico, as a supplier or customer. For American consumers, that trade has kept prices in check on strawberries, compact cars, pacemakers and countless other products. With U.S. inflation stuck above 3 percent, and the cost of fuel surging, the president only has so much room to maneuver — whatever his dreams of a fortress economy.

Indeed, Mr. Trump's efforts to impose 25 percent tariffs on Mexico's and Canada's exports to the U.S. in March 2025 were met with an outcry from U.S. industry and a drop in the stock market. Days later, the White House changed its mind, exempting products that comply with U.S.M.C.A rules — accounting for about four-fifths of Mexico's exports to the United States.

"Reality," as Mr. de la Calle said, "will end up winning."

CÉSAR OCHOA HAS WATCHED Mexico go global. He is one of Juárez's city fathers, a 64-year-old with salt-and-pepper hair and a banker's neat attire. His office is a hushed, wood-paneled sanctuary just off a noisy six-lane highway lined by tire shops, gas stations and burrito stands. Such is Juárez.

Mr. Ochoa arrived in the border city in 1992, a Mexican rancher's son who had made his way to Harvard Law School. A few years earlier, Mexico had joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, a rules-based system promoted by the U.S. government after World War II to lower tariffs and rebuild the global economy. (It would later evolve into the World Trade Organization.)

Since the 1940s, the Mexican government had zealously protected its fledgling industrial sector, walling off imports with high tariffs and limiting foreign investment. But the result was inefficient, uncompetitive firms. By the 1990s, Mexico was desperate for economic growth and foreign capital.

When NAFTA took effect in 1994, "the gates were opened," Mr. Ochoa recalled. Mexican stores were bursting with cheap TVs and stereos, Levi's jeans and Snickers bars. American businesses rushed in to do joint ventures. Mr. Ochoa helped OfficeMax set up its Mexican franchises. Home Depot and Costco stores sprouted around the country; Walmart became one of Mexico's biggest employers.

NAFTA offered U.S. companies access to Mexico's fast-growing consumer market and a vast pool of workers who often earned less than $2 an hour. If the corporations benefited, many of their employees did not. In the United States, millions of American factory jobs vanished — a drop that many economists attribute more to automation and the China shock than NAFTA, but one that nonetheless caused deep pain in the Rust Belt and ultimately catalyzed support for Mr. Trump. In Mexico, shantytowns sprung up to house laborers pouring into the industrial boomtowns, and Juárez became infamous for the murders of hundreds of women.

The NAFTA border frenzy didn't last. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, offering an even lower-cost work force and drawing tens of thousands of factory jobs away from Mexico. Then came a bloody drug war starting in the late 2000s. Still, Juárez persisted, developing a complex logistics and manufacturing infrastructure.

And bilateral trade continued to grow. Americans came to rely on the tomatoes, berries and avocados that are the fruits of Mexico's longer growing season, while American grain producers, with their more advanced technology and colossal farms, became the suppliers of half the corn consumed in Mexico. Car parts zipped back and forth from Mexico to America to Canada in a three-country assembly of vehicles. In 2020, a startled Pentagon had to appeal to Mexico to open factories that were closed during the pandemic, and help the U.S. maintain critical supply chains for its defense contractors.

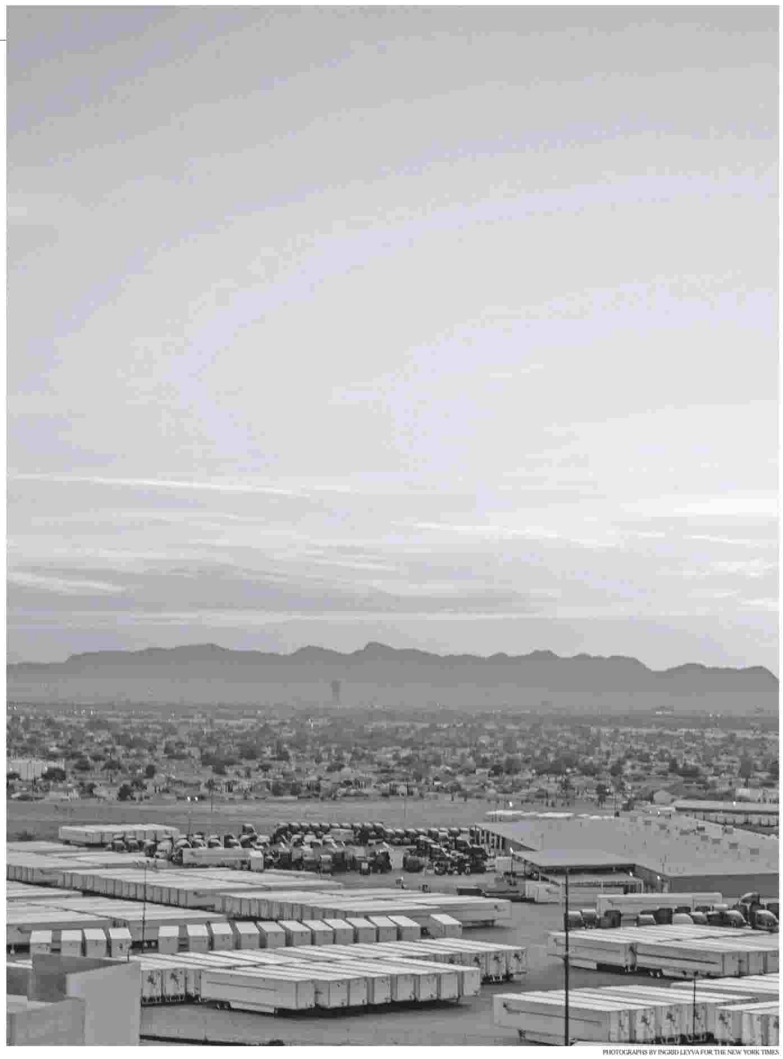
Thousands of white buses now rumble through Juárez each day, delivering workers to factories. Scores of major international firms operate big factories, and smaller manufacturers can now open plants in a matter of weeks, thanks to the system of so-called shelter companies that provide a vast array of services — leasing factory space, hiring employees, handling import-export permits, and even stamping out thousands of tortillas for hungry workers.

"Geography is destiny," said Mr. Ochoa. The trade momentum, he said, isn't determined solely by the terms of the next agreement. "It's driven by the needs of the U.S. market."

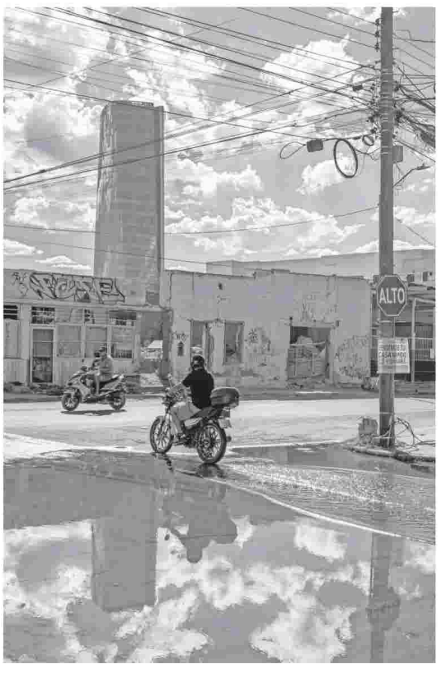
IF JUÁREZ'S RISE WAS POWERED by American corporations, the current boom belongs to the Taiwanese. As trade tensions have mounted between the United States and China, a wave of companies have "near-shored" factories reliant on lower-cost labor from Asia to Mexico. Today, four of Taiwan's manufacturing giants — Foxconn, Inventec, Wistron and Pegatron — have operations in Juárez.

Initially, this so-called Taiwanese cluster pumped out goods like iPhones and Dell computers. But in the last few years, the factories have pivoted, amid exploding demand for technology for artificial intelligence and cloud computing. According to local officials and current and former employees, and confirmed by the state government, the companies now make the servers that fill the data centers of Google, Amazon, Microsoft and other companies, taking advantage of duty-free entry to the U.S. market under the U.S.M.C.A. Last year, computing technology became Mexico's largest export. So far, Mr. Trump has refrained from imposing tariffs on those goods, given the economic and strategic importance of A.I. (Or, as he recently branded it: "superintelligence.")

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY INGRID LEYVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Above, freight containers along the U.S.-Mexico border at Juárez, Mexico; left, entering El Paso, Texas, at the Paso del Norte international bridge in Juárez; below, the recently built Centinela Tower, a hub for A.I.-powered surveillance, in Juárez.

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A.I. is lying to you. Here's how to fight back.

Anthony Vinci

For months, a foreign agent has been cultivating some of the most powerful figures in the United States in hopes of turning them into unwitting allies. Targeting their weak spots, the foreign agent is feeding them hour after hour of falsehoods. Already the would-be proxies are passing on the foreign propaganda to tens of millions of their followers.

If this sounds like a chapter from another century — think K.G.B. officers swaying unsuspecting fellow travelers in London or New York — it's actually worse. The spy runner is a Russia-backed network called Portal Kombat that operates hundreds of websites to spread disinformation. The powerful figures it's seeking to influence? Artificial intelligence-driven large language models such as ChatGPT, Grok and Gemini.

Portal Kombat's goal is to influence these models so that they will pass along propaganda to trusting users in response to questions. Portal Kombat pushed over 3.6 million stories across hundreds of independent websites in dozens of languages in 2024, according to NewsGuard, an organization that tracks online disinformation. NewsGuard researchers systematically tested A.I. chat systems and found that Portal Kombat propaganda was regularly provided to users.

In the age of disinformation, we all need to use the tools of counter-espionage to find the truth.

Large language model influence operations are just one way that America's adversaries are using A.I. to try to steer its politics. China directs its A.I. platforms to push false claims about the treatment of Uyghurs and to censor dissent and criticism of the Chinese Communist Party. Russia is using A.I. to generate scores of news websites to turn Americans against democracy and Western alliances. Like many, these adversaries use A.I. to create fake written, audio or video content that is nearly indistinguishable from the real thing.

The greatest danger, though, isn't A.I.'s ability to lie. It's the ability to persuade. These new agents of influence are less like a traditional propaganda pamphlet — static and lifeless — and more like a living, breathing case officer, as I used to be. A.I. agents try to manipulate us through sustained engagement. And unlike the K.G.B.'s espionage machinations during the Cold War, which focused on recruiting powerful individuals, today's A.I. influence operators are trying to persuade all of us.

To fight back, people need to learn the counterspy techniques of C.I.A. officers: using multiple sources to check information; testing those sources regularly for reliability; never getting complacent and trusting one source without thinking.

Learning those tools has broader benefits. We are all asking ourselves: How do I believe anything in a world of A.I.? Foreign actors may be in the vanguard of this new era of disinformation, but it's spreading at home, too, and fast. Already, politicians are changing what A.I. has to say about them by manipulating content to be picked up by A.I. models.

From resisting foreign influence campaigns, to safely navigating our domestic politics, to understanding rapidly developing marketing techniques, we all need to start thinking like spies.

Social media has long-used algorithms to make propaganda more effective. Studies by the Network Contagion Research Institute at Rutgers University have showed that the amount of time spent on TikTok correlates with more benevolent views of Chinese human rights. What's new about A.I. is its personalization and interactivity. A.I. can identify your online expressions of belief and desire and create content tailored to persuade you, in real time. That used to take teams of well-paid people weeks to do. Now, bad actors can do it in seconds at little cost.

The Chinese company GoLaxy has already advertised such an integrated, A.I.-driven persuasion system. Researchers at Vanderbilt University analyzed leaked documents showing that GoLaxy used A.I. to mine user information from social media, create psychological profiles, develop personalized content and then engage users in conversation to change their political opinions. GoLaxy used this capability in 2020 in Hong Kong and again ahead of Taiwan's 2024 election, likely at the behest of the Chinese government. (GoLaxy denies it has done election-related work, developed psychological profiles or deployed bots.)

Further afield, Reporters Without Borders showed that the Chinese A.I. model Qwen advanced the Communist Party line on Uyghur internment camps, calling them "education and vocational training centers" and saying questions about them were "baseless speculation" despite extensive independent reporting showing otherwise.

Another propaganda house, CopyCop, uses A.I. to create seemingly real local journalism sites in an effort to persuade Americans to support Moscow's aims. CopyCop publishes its articles on seemingly authentic websites such as The Boston Times and mimics the branding of existing major news sites like The San Francisco Chronicle, according to the cyberresearch firm Recorded Future. The French government has linked CopyCop, also known as Storm-1516, and one of its operators, an American who was once a deputy sheriff in Palm Beach County, Fla., John Mark Dougan, who now lives in Moscow, to the Russian intelligence agency G.R.U.

In June, OpenAI presented evidence that their ChatGPT model was likely used by China to create covert propaganda messages about data center construction. The "Data Center Bandwagon" campaign used OpenAI's models to create social media comments and images on issues like electricity costs, which were then posted to X in an apparent attempt by China to handicap American A.I. ambitions.

It works. A recent study in the scientific journal Nature showed that A.I. dialogue is roughly four times as persuasive as traditional political ads.

Over time, intelligence officers have developed tools and techniques for

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ILLUSTRATION BY SAM WHITNEY/THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY CONNECT IMAGES AND PHOTOALTO/SIGRID OLSSON/GETTY IMAGES

Israel has changed. Why hasn't AIPAC?

Eric Alterman

In December 2018, Representative Nancy Pelosi made a pledge to a largely Jewish audience: If the U.S. Capitol "crumbled to the ground, the one thing that would remain is our commitment to our aid — and I don't even call it aid — our cooperation — with Israel. That's fundamental." That commitment apparently faltered in mid-July, when Ms. Pelosi voted with over a hundred of her colleagues to slash U.S. aid to the Jewish state.

Unconditional support for Israel was once as common in Congress as the flag pin on a senator's lapel, largely thanks to the bipartisan efforts of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Today, in the aftermath of Israel's bloody war on Gaza, launched in reaction to Hamas's brutal attacks on Oct. 7, 2023, Israel has reached near-pariah status globally and domestically. "The condemnation of what Bibi Netanyahu is doing is almost universal" within the Democratic Party, California Governor Gavin Newsom told PBS News in September, speaking of Israel's actions in Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank. Furthermore, he said, these days the party has a "pretty overwhelming opposition to accepting money from AIPAC."

THE AGE OF AIPAC'S unmatched political power and influence is at an end. Rejection may be the most bipartisan act the group inspires. In the U.S. Senate race in Michigan, allies of the Republican candidate Mike Rogers reportedly asked AIPAC not to advertise on his behalf. AIPAC and affiliated groups invested nearly $30 million in advertising during the summer's Democratic primaries to help Representative Haley Stevens in her bid for the Senate nomination in Michigan. During that race, her opponent Dr. Abdul El-Sayed bragged, "AIPAC has called me the single most dangerous candidate in this race." Dr. El-Sayed, of course, won.

Despite the profound transformation in how the world sees AIPAC's sole client, and its increasing marginalization in American politics, the group not only hasn't acknowledged the change, but it operates as though Israel were as popular as it was in 1991, when the Jewish state enjoyed a nearly 80 percent favorable rating among Americans. According to a 2026 NBC News poll, just 32 percent of American voters now view Israel positively; among Democrats, that number falls to just 13 percent.

What's more, Israel has lost even many American Jews. According to a 2025 Washington Post poll, 61 percent of American Jews said they believe Israel committed war crimes in Gaza and some 40 percent believe Israel has committed genocide. Another recent poll found nearly half of American Jews under the age of 35 believing that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be solved by creating a single, binational state, an idea considered to be fringe since the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said advocated it in 1999.

Support for Israel is now a millstone around the neck of Democratic politicians and a source of profound inner conflict for American Jews who seek to balance their Zionism with their liberalism. Many of the Jews who continue to define their identities via their support for Israel are, today, most likely calculating the cost of nursing homes and retirement communities. Younger Jews, like most young Americans of virtually all religions and ethnicities, increasingly express negative views about the Jewish state.

The question facing AIPAC is not simply whether it can find a way to adjust to this new political world but, more fundamentally, whether it can even see the changes demanded by these new circumstances?

AIPAC WAS FOUNDED by I.L. "Si" Kenen, a former lobbyist for the Israeli foreign ministry, in the wake of a 1953 Israeli military massacre of 69 Palestinians in a village called Qibya. Mr. Kenen suggested to friends and colleagues that they create a new organization, initially called the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs, to make Israel's case whenever circumstances made it necessary. The U.S. State Department consistently tried to pressure Israel to take a more generous attitude toward the roughly 750,000 Palestinians it had expelled before and during its war of independence — what Palestinians call the Nakba, or "catastrophe"— but were stymied in part by the political opposition AIPAC's predecessor helped engender.

AIPAC's goal in those early years was to promote the interests of an Israel then understood to be a young and scrappy David surrounded by a Goliath of hostile Arab nations. Its message was straightforward and bipartisan: As a democracy in the Middle East, Israel was morally deserving of generous American financial, military and diplomatic support.

For the United States, that support could be expected to pay strategic dividends, both in the region, where America would gain a reliable ally, and in domestic politics, where Israel was extremely popular with voters, pretty much regardless of religion. By 1963, Senator J. William Fulbright, then the chair of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called AIPAC "the most powerful and efficient foreign policy lobby in American politics."

In the early 1980s, AIPAC's executive director Thomas Dine, a former aide to Ted Kennedy, set out to expand the lobby into a coast-to-coast operation comparable to the National Rifle Association or the AARP, with a national membership made up of wealthy funders as well as American Jews who increasingly defined their religious and political identities through support for Israel. Both groups could be relied upon to call, write and, if necessary, threaten senators and representatives. Relying on a mix of the extremely wealthy and the extremely committed, Mr. Dine increased AIPAC's annual budget to $15 million from some $1.7 million. By the end of the century, it was $50 million, with nine regional offices and 10 satellite offices. At the same time, U.S. public spending on military aid to Israel roughly doubled.

AIPAC also began to woo candidates and congressional staff and provided each with language for legislation and talking points. It funded luxury junkets and met frequently with reporters and editors to try to shape the narratives about Israel and the Middle East that reached the public. Rabbis were offered ready-to-use pro-Israel sermons.

There remains an opportunity for the group to play a positive and honest role in American politics.

Still, for many years, AIPAC did not endorse specific candidates or dispense funds directly to them. Instead, it merely made sure that certain candidates it approved of, from either party, were well-funded, and that those it did not were not.

AIPAC's role started to shift in 1993 with the resignation of Mr. Dine and his replacement by a more conservative set of board members and top executives. When former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin attempted to make peace with the Palestinians in the early 1990s, AIPAC only grudgingly supported the cause. While its leaders did not openly undermine the peace process, they did independently lobby for legislation that complicated the negotiations, such as a bill calling on the Clinton administration to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

After the 1995 assassination of Rabin and the subsequent collapse of the peace process, AIPAC resumed its steady march rightward. The lobby also began to embrace the support of far-right Christian Zionists. At a public interview in 2021, Ron Dermer, a former Israeli ambassador to the U.S. and a close ally of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said "the backbone of Israel's support in the United States is the evangelical Christians" rather than American Jews, who he said were "disproportionately among [Israel's] critics." AIPAC followed suit.

THE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES the organization faces today can be traced to Mr. Netanyahu's decision to appear before Congress in March 2015 at the invitation of Representative John Boehner, then the Republican speaker of the House. In an unusual move for a foreign ally, Mr. Netanyahu publicly aligned himself with the Republican Party's attempts to undermine President Obama, a Democrat and a leader who happened to be supported by a majority of American Jews. In his address, Mr. Netanyahu denounced the Obama administration's diplomatic efforts toward the nuclear disarmament in Iran, better known as the Iran deal. AIPAC and an affiliate spent nearly $30 million on a failed campaign to prevent the deal's passage.

AIPAC's increasing identification with both the methods and the goals of the Republican Party has become ever more evident over the past decade. In early 2020, it produced a Facebook ad accusing "radicals in the Democratic Party" of "pushing their antisemitic and anti-Israel policies down the throats of the American people."

AIPAC'S ANNUAL CONFERENCE was once a way station for all presidential hopefuls, but in 2019 Senators Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris, as well as former Representative Beto O'Rourke, among others, all declined to attend, a decision that would have been hard to imagine just four years earlier.

In December 2021, AIPAC created a super PAC that also swung right. The group immediately amassed an enormous war chest and announced endorsements of over a hundred Republicans, many of whom had voted against certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election. By 2022, its high-profile donors included conservative Republican billionaires such as the Home Depot founder Bernie Marcus and the hedge fund manager Paul Singer.

Using right-wing Republican money to defeat liberal candidates in Democratic primaries exposed AIPAC to considerable anger on the part of progressives, and further alienated the lobby from the mainstream opinions of American Jews. This was especially true of young American Jews whose views of Israel had been shaped by an ever more oppressive occupation of the West Bank and Gaza well before Oct. 7, and the mass killing of Palestinians that followed in its wake.

As a result, the group's electoral strategy has begun to backfire. In February, AIPAC's super PAC dropped $2.3 million into a New Jersey special primary election to try to defeat former Representative Tom Malinowski for what it saw as his wobbly support for Israel. Mr. Malinowski lost — but not to the more pro-Israel candidate. He was ousted by a candidate to his left: Analilia Mejia, a former aide to Bernie Sanders who has indicated she believes that Israel's actions in Gaza amount to genocide.

In Illinois, AIPAC-aligned super PACs invested more than $5 million in an effort to thwart Daniel Biss in his Democratic primary race for Congress in Illinois. Mr. Biss is the grandson of Holocaust survivors, and his mother is Israeli — but he supports limiting arms sales to Israel and recognizing a Palestinian state. When Mr. Biss won his race, he boasted about his willingness to call "AIPAC out clearly and repeatedly."

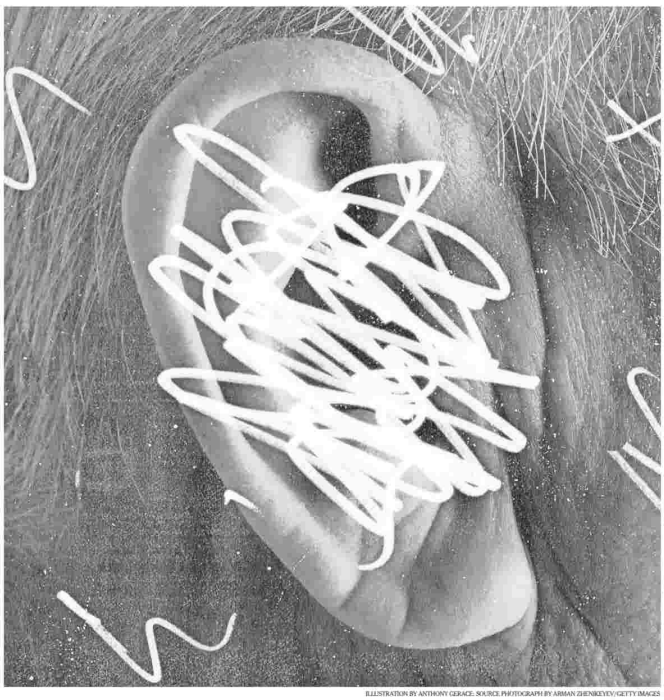


ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY GERACE. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY ARMAN ZHENIKEYEV/GETTY IMAGES

Even establishment Democrats such as Cory Booker and Ruben Gallego have sworn off AIPAC money, no doubt cognizant that public association with the lobby these days can turn a campaign radioactive. Many Democrats who support Israel feel compelled to resist Mr. Netanyahu and publicly criticize his government's behavior — and to vocally and unequivocally reject the lobby's support. AIPAC's influence in future Democratic Party politics will likely be limited to the role of either boogeyman or secret spoiler.

By sticking to its long-held, inflexible, "Israel right or wrong" line and allying itself with a party whose views on race, immigration, economics — and, these days, democracy — are anathema to most American Jews, AIPAC has effectively forfeited the role it enjoyed in the days when Israel was a genuinely bipartisan cause. As America heads into the midterms, it is clear the lobby has all but lost the Democrats and may be skating on ever thinner ice with Republicans as well.

an opportunity for AIPAC to play a positive and, no less important, honest role in American politics.

While no doubt a traditional flavor of antisemitism occasionally attaches to pro-Palestinian arguments on the left, more recently it has been the right's increasing tolerance of widespread antisemitism among its most influential voices — from Tucker Carlson to Candace Owens to Nick Fuentes — that has morphed into a particularly fervent form of anti-Zionism. MAGA anger over Iran (and Israel's role in the war) has hardened that space.

Were AIPAC to commit itself to the battle against this fusion of old-fashioned right-wing antisemitism with its new, virulent anti-Zionism, it could serve the interests of Israel, American Jews and the United States simultaneously. It might also rescue its own reputation in the process.

ERIC ALTERMAN *is a CUNY distinguished professor at Brooklyn College and the author, most recently, of "We Are Not One: A History of America's Fight Over Israel."*

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OPINION

This is one map Trump can't redraw

SHERIDAN, FROM PAGE 12

Taiwanese firms are also investing north of the border, lured by incentives from both the Biden and Trump administrations. TSMC, which makes the majority of the world's advanced semiconductor chips, plans to plow $265 billion into several massive factories in Arizona. As the United States focused on producing high-end chips, Mexico's well-established infrastructure was ready to build more basic, complementary electronics, like servers. Over the decades, the Juárez factories "enabled us to train these incredible engineers and technicians," Pancho Uranga, a vice president at Foxconn, told me.

Today, more than one-third of college and tech-school students in Chihuahua, the state including Juárez, are studying science, technology, engineering or math. Officials have poured millions of dollars into the construction of two tech centers in the city, which will offer residents training in machine learning, robotics and other skills.

Despite the excitement building at the prospect of an A.I. windfall, so far the boom has been a mixed blessing. Unlike the Mexican vehicle industry, which generates around one million jobs and has given rise to a large domestic auto-parts industry, the server plants employ relatively few people — and a lot of machines. And the expensive servers, which cost anywhere from around half a million dollars to $7 million apiece, are pumping up the Mexican trade surplus with the United States, as Mr. Trump rails against bilateral trade imbalances. (He sees them as a sign the United States is being "ripped off," a view most economists reject.) Now, to avoid tariffs on other critical industries, Mexican officials are searching for ways to cool down the red-hot server exports. But any such effort would most likely hurt the A.I. giants currently keeping the U.S. economy afloat.

The Taiwanese keep a low profile in Juárez. My requests for interviews at the factories — via company officials and press offices, Taiwan's official representative in Mexico and state authorities — were met with polite noes. Most U.S. firms that contract the Taiwanese manufacturers to make their laptops, servers and other products impose strict nondisclosure rules. The U.S. companies reportedly buying the servers also declined to confirm they were made by firms in Juárez.

To be sure, Mr. Trump can claim credit for pressuring some manufacturers to move jobs back to the United States



from Juárez and other cities. But the results are modest. Consider the case of Eric Wong, who manages factories in Juárez for two Hong Kong-based companies that produce goods for the U.S. market, including plastic Christmas wreaths, holiday lights and kiddie pools. Mr. Wong shifted some production of extension cables to a plant in the El Paso suburbs this year, after tariffs raised the cost of copper inputs. But that only created around 100 jobs on the American side. Another 1,500 workers remain in Juárez, doing work that isn't feasible at U.S. wages; clients like Walmart will only pay so much for a Christmas wreath.

If Juárez's rise was powered by American corporations, the current boom belongs to the Taiwanese.

Mr. Trump's effort to dismantle free trade with Mexico faces not just economic headwinds, but political ones. So many constituencies benefit from the U.S.M.C.A. that it has generated rare, strong bipartisan support. The 41 U.S. southern border counties in California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas collectively generate $1 trillion a year in gross domestic product, according to recent research. A 30-foot-high steel wall may snake across the edge of Juárez, a powerful sign of Mr. Trump's efforts to cordon off the country. But it cannot obscure just how deeply intertwined the borderlands are.

ON MY TRIP TO JUÁREZ in August, I visited a notorious neighborhood called Anapra, on the western outskirts of the city. When I first reported from there in 1997, it was a dusty hellscape of treeless desert, where factory workers lived in shacks cobbled together from cardboard and wood. The air was thick with eye-watering smoke from brick makers burning tires and old oil to heat their ovens.

Today, the shacks have been replaced by small cinder-block homes with running water. There is an air-conditioned supermarket, as well as a gym, a hardware store and a restaurant called "Pink Sushi." Living standards have risen, albeit not to the first world standards once predicted by NAFTA enthusiasts.

What's even more striking are the townhouse developments where Juárez's engineers and factory managers live, flanking strip malls with fancy taco joints and hair salons offering $200 color jobs. I did a double-take at a concrete monument: the Arc de Triomphe, or a copy of it, anyway. Behind it sat a gated community of mini-mansions called Campos Elíseos — Juárez's own Champs-Élysées.

These are "islands of prosperity," a local economist told me. It seemed an apt metaphor for how free trade has affected Mexico over the past few decades. A number of states in the north and central regions have flourished, but they are surrounded by an informal national economy in which around half of Mexican workers continue to toil in precarious jobs, with lower wages and few benefits. The government has hiked the minimum wage but failed to make the kind of structural reforms, like improving education and infrastructure and encouraging deeper local supply chains, that could allow these other areas to advance. As in the United States, the fruits of globalization have disproportionately benefited better-educated workers. Yet exports are the most vibrant part of Mexico's economy, and even leftist politicians who once opposed NAFTA — including President Claudia Sheinbaum — are eager to preserve free trade.

Mexico has so far resisted the worst of Mr. Trump's trade war, thanks to its deep commercial ties with the United States and the preferential treatment its exports still receive through the U.S.M.C.A. Ms. Sheinbaum's administration has been actively managing up, too, stressing its bona fides as an ally, and may yet persuade the U.S. president to lower tariffs. Mexican officials have



PHOTOGRAPHS BY INGRID LEYVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, Juárez's own Arc de Triomphe, the main entrance to the affluent neighborhood of Campos Elíseos; left, near the entrance to Foxconn, one of Taiwan's manufacturing giants (along with Inventec, Wistron and Pegatron) that has operations in Juárez.

expressed optimism that a new trade accord is near.

But one of the other core elements of the free trade agreements — certainty — has taken a beating. In Juárez, hundreds of millions of dollars of investment are on hold, awaiting the results of the U.S.M.C.A. talks. With Mr. Trump using tariffs as an all-purpose weapon — to press countries to curb drug trafficking, to lower their trade surpluses, to stop buying Russian oil — any agreement is subject to change.

In Juárez, the high-tech industry continues to grow, betting that the demands of the U.S. economy will prove more durable than the whims of one man. On the last day of my trip, a young commercial real estate agent named Juan Alberto Mayorga drove me around southeastern Juárez, pointing out manufacturing plants springing up. His firm had just sold one to Inventec: an airy building of nearly 386,000 square feet, almost as big as New York City's Bryant Park, just down the street from the other Inventec plant.

The newly acquired site had been designed to hold not one but two megafactories. Already, bulldozers and backhoes were scooping and pushing the sandy earth outside the building. The agent looked on happily, saying, "They're certainly going to develop more."

MARY BETH SHERIDAN *is a journalist specializing in Latin America and a fellow at the Georgetown Americas Institute. She was the Mexico City bureau chief for The Washington Post from 2023 to 2025.*

How A.I. is lying to you

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finding useful truth amid deception. At heart, those techniques rely on what makes us human: our natural ability to understand people and their lies, to spot patterns and assess trust. Most of all, they train us to remain aware that any piece of information may be purposefully deceptive. These techniques include:

- Triangulation. If you prefer one source of news — The New York Times, say — also check The Wall Street Journal, Newsmax and The South China Morning Post on any given report. If all say the same thing, the story is more likely right than wrong. The same is true for A.I. systems: if you are a Claude user, then check ChatGPT, or vice versa.
- Operational testing. Ask a question to which you already know the answer. To test an A.I. bot for accuracy about, say, an impending war or civil unrest, first check recent satellite imagery to see if there are actually troops in the area or visit the website of a protest movement. Then see how close the bot's answer is to the primary source.
- Trust no one. The hardest part of spy craft may be never taking anything as permanently true. A.I. makes it especially easy to go soft. Chat systems are good at providing answers and it's tempting to just accept their answers. But A.I. is optimized to get you to like it and to continue using it, not to give you the truth. Remain skeptical.

Analogues exist already in the world of law enforcement: Apps like Nextdoor and Citizen allow users to share information with each other about crime or other hyperlocal concerns. There are Reddit groups in which users investigate cold case murders like r/coldcases. Bellingcat is a citizen journalism site that provides tools and techniques for anyone to investigate war crimes and other worthy causes.

The challenges of a world in which adversaries try to undermine society by manipulating truth via A.I. are real. But there is hope. We can learn how to spot and confront these agents of influence by using the tools and techniques of the intelligence officer.

ANTHONY VINCI *is a founder and the C.E.O. of VICO.io, a venture backed A.I. company, and the author of "The Fourth Intelligence Revolution: The Future of Espionage and the Battle to Save America."*

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Two fighters on the frailty of democracy

FRIEDMAN, FROM PAGE 1

even some media companies bent to Trump's political demands without a fight.

"For me," Karman said, "as someone who opposed dictatorship, who knows how dictatorship works and knows what we needed to free our country from the dictatorship, it all starts when the head of state controls the media, accuses the media of lies and discredits the media — and then does not play by the rule of law, and the institutions work only for the benefit of him and his family."

The trigger for the democratic revolution in Yemen was when President Saleh "put his son and his family in the most important institutions," Karman added. "He attacked the judiciary and emptied it of its work. He escaped all accountability through immunity and interfered in the work of Parliament and the legitimate institutions. And now all of this I am seeing in the United States. What is that?"

The most dangerous thing in a democracy, she said, is when you start to ask yourself: " 'If I do this, what will happen to me? What will the leader do to me?' "

Karman hasn't given up hope on America, though. "I gave a speech in North Dakota," she told me. "There were a lot of conservative people there. They were so welcoming. I told them: 'Don't think you are divided because you have the soul of division. It is because someone wants to divide you through hate speech.' People got very emotional."

Karman and I first met in Sanaa, Yemen's capital, in 2013, when I went to observe Yemen's broad-based national dialogue. New parties, young people, women, Islamists, tribes, northerners and southerners all took part, with the aim of writing a new constitution and holding presidential elections. The process fell apart when the Houthi movement seized the city in September 2014. The Houthis, a Shiite group based in the north of Yemen, were backed by Iran and allied with forces loyal to Saleh. The Houthi takeover plunged Yemen into a catastrophic civil war from which it still has not escaped.

Karman travels the world now promoting democracy through her foundation, while working every day with followers in Yemen to try to win its democracy back from the long arm of Iran.

"What we need from the world is to stand with the Yemeni people and confront Iran's project to control Bab al-Mandab through the Houthi militia," she said, referring to the strait at the mouth of the Red Sea. "If Iran, through its Houthi proxy, succeeds in controlling Bab al-Mandab in addition to its leverage over the Strait of Hormuz, the consequences for global security could be even more dangerous than Iran possessing a nuclear bomb. This is Yemen's battle for freedom, democracy and sovereignty, but it is also the world's battle for peace, security and the freedom of global trade."



WILL MATSUDA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

While I was in Athens, a Palestinian democracy activist from East Jerusalem, Samer Sinijlawi, reached out to me with a similar alarm bell. Sinijlawi leads Masar Jadid (New Path), one of the many new parties seeking seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections — the first such elections since January 2006.

Yes, folks, there are three big elections coming up that will shape the Middle East: Israel's on Oct. 27, America's on Nov. 3 and the Palestinian Authority's first legislative elections in two decades, scheduled for Nov. 28. Unfortunately, there are forces around the authority's leadership pressing to have these elections postponed again. Sinijlawi urged me to tell the world: "Do not let that happen." (At least seven parties have submitted candidate lists for the council's 132 seats.)

The most dangerous thing in a democracy, Tawakkol Karman said, is when you start to ask yourself: " 'If I do this, what will happen to me? What will the leader do to me?' "

It is such a breath of fresh air to talk to someone like Sinijlawi. He understands that no matter how many European or American rallies there are to "Free Palestine," the only thing that will do so is a freely elected, legitimate Palestinian government and legislature ready and able to be a partner for a two-state solution.

The repeated postponement of Palestinian legislative elections in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem "reinforced Hamas's argument that change could never be achieved through democratic or peaceful means," Sinijlawi wrote in a Sept. 18 essay in The Jerusalem Post urging President Trump to support the Palestinian elections. "When ballot boxes are closed, extremists offer other boxes — filled with weapons, funerals and false promises. We must not repeat that mistake."

His party, he said, is drawing the support of registered Palestinian voters — women and students, professionals, academics, entrepreneurs and people entering political life for the first time, even young Gazans living in tents.

"We support a demilitarized Palestinian state, regional economic integration and a negotiated two-state solution that provides Palestinians with freedom and dignity while ensuring security for Israelis," Sinijlawi wrote.

An East Jerusalem Palestinian, Sinijlawi speaks both Arabic and Hebrew. He learned his Hebrew largely during five years in Israeli prison after being arrested as a teenager in the First Intifada.

There is no way to pressure the Israelis, Sinijlawi explained; "the only way is to persuade them."

"We Palestinians continue denying the historical links of Jews to this land," he continued. "Instead, we must move from a question of who belongs and who does not belong to this land to the question of how we both belong to this land."

This is a point Sinijlawi and I have long had in common: There are seven million-plus Jews and seven million-plus Palestinians living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea — and neither are leaving. The only solution is two states — no matter how long that takes.

And the person who understands the power of that logic best is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Why do you think he made it a top priority for most of his premiership to strengthen Hamas in Gaza? He wanted to keep it divided from moderate Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem who accepted the Oslo peace accords. Netanyahu knows what would happen if a noncorrupt, legitimate, unified Palestinian leadership came together — one that had learned from past mistakes. The whole world would insist that Israel negotiate with it on a two-state solution.

What I admire about Tawakkol Karman and Samer Sinijlawi is that they know how to get off Facebook and into somebody's face — to actually fight for democracy, not just pop off with slogans, which are a substitute for both thought and action. That used to be us in America. We used to model that for the world.

If there was ever a time to get back to that spirit, it's now. It starts with voting on Nov. 3 in the U.S. election and getting others out to vote too — for any candidate who puts loyalty to democratic institutions over loyalty to any single person.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Badenoch's UK Conservatives are a work in progress

Burnham's leftward shift opens space in the centre. The Tories should occupy it

Kemi Badenoch has come quite a distance in 12 months. A beleaguered figure at last year's Conservative Party conference, she is today master of her party; her personal ratings have improved markedly. Her party has come less far. It is still hollowed out, languishing in third place in the polls and under huge pressure from Nigel Farage's populist Reform UK on the right. It remains far from being a credible party of government. It is, though, beginning to shape up as a credible party of opposition.

That is significant in itself. New Prime Minister Andy Burnham is shifting his government alarmingly towards the big-state, high-spending Labour of old, seeming to repudiate not just Thatcherism but the Blairite blend of social democracy and free markets. After the Starmer government heaped taxes on business, his successor seems less committed to freeing animal spirits than to expanding public control.

This not only opens up a space in the political centre that Badenoch's Conservatives ought to be seeking to occupy. It also makes it all the more important for a centre-right opposition party to be holding Burnham's Labour firmly to account.

The Tories are showing some progress on both. Most welcome is the re-embrace of business, in rhetoric and policy. Despite business scepticism given the Conservatives' economic record in the 14 years to 2024, the party is earning a hearing for its emerging offer: lower taxes on work, wealth and business, with fewer regulatory constraints and stronger incentives to work and invest.

Halving employer national insurance contributions for 21- to 24-year-olds, cutting business rates for 250,000 high street businesses and simplifying Britain's bloated tax system are encouragingly pro-business or pro-work policies. Badenoch's pledge to scrap inheritance tax on family homes, with an additional £1mn tax-free allowance, is a stark contrast to Labour's post-2024 extension of taxation on wealth.

Less favourable is the Conservative leader's insistence, for now, that she would keep the unsustainable triple lock on pensions, which Burnham said he would loosen in 2030 to help fund a national care service. It betrays a tendency to play politics rather than to make savings wherever they can sensibly be found.

Among the party's big weaknesses are its neuralgia over the EU. Burnham's pitch to improve the UK's post-Brexit relationship with the bloc is one area in which many in business may favour Labour. The Conservative proposal to rip up any UK-EU deal made by Labour to liberalise trade in agrifood has raised concerns that the food industry could face ever-shifting regulatory regimes.

> The party has spent too long trying to ape Reform's hardline stance on immigration, hoping to win back voters lost in 2024

The Conservatives have also spent too long trying to ape Reform's hardline stance on immigration, hoping to win back voters lost in 2024 — but risking alienating centrist waverers. Here, however, there were signs yesterday of a shift. Badenoch repudiated any idea of "uniting the right", insisting Reform "are not like us, we are not like them". In a sometimes emotional speech that decried "people" debating whether Badenoch's mixed-race children were English, she appealed to Reform-leaning Tories to come home to her party.

A final issue is the shrunken parliamentary party's shortage of talent beyond Badenoch herself; new shadow chancellor Andrew Griffith's speech failed to enthuse despite sounding some of the right notes. The leader herself is beginning to show a little more political subtlety and depth. Her rebuilding of the broader party remains a work in progress, though it is showing moves in the right direction.

Opinion Asia

Japan was never normal, and will not be now

Marta Herguera





Leo Lewis

To lose one century-old, Sendai-area producer of leaf-shaped *sasakamaboko* fishcakes may be considered a misfortune. To lose two looks like carelessness. Lose three in quick succession, as Japan has done in the past 12 months, and people start talking about a "new normal".

But should they? If ever there were a moment for Japan, for those that engage with it and those that invest in it, to embrace the certainty of a new abnormal, that time is surely now.

Clearly, times are cruel in the north-eastern Japanese fishcake game. Surging costs, from pollock paste and plastic packaging to logistics and labour, are straining business models to breaking point. Changing diets have less space for fishy fare; tourists prefer local beef tongue. Behind all of these pressures, one can see the vast

> The Liberal Democratic Party needs a new policy and the country needs a new mindset

hydraulics of geoeconomics, climate change and demographics.

These fishcake makers have previously survived military dictatorship, world war defeat, oil crises, tsunamis, generational handover and deflation. So as well as being saddened by the abrupt, back-to-back shutterings of Takeda no Sasakamaboko (est. 1935), Bajo Kamabokoten (est. 1912) and Kaneko Hashinuma Shoten (est. 1927), there is huge temptation to conclude this is part of an unusually forceful shift away from life as Japan knows it. Key political figures actively reinforce that view. On Tuesday, Ryosei Akazawa, Japan's minister for economy, trade and industry, used a press conference to upend decades of his own party's thinking on the role of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Akazawa is someone who knows a bit about epochal disruption of norms. His role puts him prominently on the front line of America's redefinition of friendship and of China's redefinition of hostility. When Japan needed someone to negotiate its way through Donald Trump's arbitrarily calculated "reciprocal" tariffs, and to pledge $550bn of infrastructure investment to an economy nearly 10 times its size, Akazawa was the one trusted to put on a Maga hat and give a double thumbs-up to the new world order.

And for almost a year, he has also had to field the concerns of the business lobby as diplomacy between Beijing and Tokyo has entered a deep freeze and Japanese companies have pulled out of China — Japan's biggest trading partner — at a record rate.

In his presentation earlier this week, Akazawa did not mention the three fishcake makers, but his thesis was that Japan should expect and embrace a spate of company closures. Crucially, he argued, it has resisted this for far too long.

For decades, the government has seen its enormous SME sector as the bastion against mass unemployment. Those businesses, no matter how economically illogical at the individual level, were collectively legitimised by a broader national goal. They were given what Akazawa called a "warm and comfortable atmosphere" of subsidy and incentives in hard times. But however flabby and irrelevant they became, it remained core LDP policy that, wherever possible, no SME should go bankrupt.

With the working population now in permanent decline, that policy is clearly brimming with moral hazard. "Most SMEs have no ambition to grow," he said, adding that "this is not exactly a capitalist mindset." His argument? The LDP needs a new policy and Japan needs a new mindset.

Thinking in terms of "new normals" is the wrong way to form such a policy — however alluring that sounds. Japan, however desperately it would like to imagine itself as having evolved through a series of established normals, is perhaps more usefully defined by its rolling embrace of abnormality. An economy in which tens of thousands of companies are over 100 years old gives the impression of permanence; in fact it represents abnormality stacked on abnormality.

The Bank of Japan, in its long build-up to sustained monetary tightening, has talked a lot about the necessity of "normalisation". Akazawa's comments suggest that the country's entire approach to capitalism needs a similar overhaul. Others lament Japan's focus on its pacifism or immigration rules. Too often, these debates underplay just how resistant it is to having normality defined for it — either domestically or by the outside world.

At the most recent census, 11 per cent of Japanese were under 15 and 17 per cent were over 75. Others may well follow Japan down this road, but no modern country has yet arrived at these extremes — and no country will experience the transformations of environment, geopolitics and technology from a similar starting point. There is no lingering "normal" to be had for Japan, new or otherwise.

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Sanctions policy sometimes must be compromised to save lives

Martin Sandbu, in his column on EU members using their veto powers to lift sanctions on targeted oligarchs, is sharp in his criticism of France for the actions it took to free a French citizen from jail in Azerbaijan ("EU countries shoot themselves in the foot when they veto sanctions", Opinion, October 5).

However there is not the slightest recognition in his article of the vital humanitarian concerns that we all should have for innocent hostages jailed by authoritarian regimes, such as those in Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran.

We need to be concerned about every individual who is taken as a pawn in international strategies, often tortured, often facing death, as, for example, Emad Shargi recounts about his more than five years in Evin prison, Tehran. This Iranian-American businessman was on a business trip when he was arrested, subsequently interrogated, tortured and confined to solitary by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and held for ransom, which the Biden administration negotiated to secure his freedom along with four others.

Then, in a complicated exchange that involved a Russian murderer in a German jail, American journalist Evan Gershkovich was freed from a Russian prison — he describes his terrible ordeal in his new book *This Cursed Beautiful Land*.

The stories these victims tell of the nightmare situations in which they found themselves ought to convince Sandbu, and others who share his view, that there are times when broad sanctions policies need to be compromised in order to save lives.

The actions taken by western governments to rescue hostages is vital to provide us all with a sense of safety, and give hope for all those who today are political prisoners.

Frank Vogl
Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University; Co-founder, Transparency International, Washington, DC, US

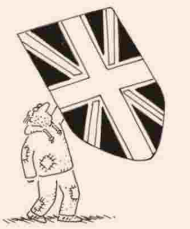
Recalling the British input to the EU's single market

Your Big Read "Is Britain welcome to return?" (October 3) leaves out an important piece of history: for more than two decades, the UK was one of the European single market's leading architects and defenders.

In the European parliament, the internal market and consumer protection committee was chaired by British MEPs, both Labour and Conservative, for most of the years after it was created in 2004. Michel Barnier, the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, knows this well. As internal market commissioner, he worked closely with those British chairs to deepen the very market he now says cannot be taken "à la carte".

As a former MEP, I saw this commitment at first hand. British members were often the strongest voices for open markets, consumer protection and fair competition.

Barnier is right that the single market's integrity matters. But Britain is not asking to join a club it never understood. It helped write the rules. After a decade of failing to find a relationship that works, both sides



should be open to closer economic ties, whether through the European Economic Area and European Free Trade Association route or a tailored arrangement built on that shared history.

Catherine Stihler
Former MEP for Scotland (Scottish Labour), Carmel-by-the-Sea, CA, US

Merz's reforms could help blunt the appeal of the AfD

Janan Ganesh ("Leadership is not the problem in the west", Opinion, September 24) suggests that resistance to Friedrich Merz's reforms reflects voters' unwillingness to surrender comforts acquired over generations of the welfare state. Yet, as Harvey Clark Greisman recently noted (Letters, September 23), some East Germans remember reunification as their loss of economic security. Apprehension about further change cannot simply be dismissed as excessive expectations.

In a course on geoeconomics I taught at the Riga Graduate School of Law, I used Sheri Berman and Hans Kundnani's 2021 essay "The Cost of Convergence" to examine the risks of Germany's over-reliance on exports to drive economic growth. The essay argued that this reliance left Germany vulnerable to external shocks, and proposed higher wages, stronger household consumption and investment in the digital and green transitions.

Merz's infrastructure and climate programme addresses part of that agenda. Whether his wider reforms bring tangible benefits to communities at risk of being left behind matters for Germany's resilience and could reduce one source of insecurity on which the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) draws. The question is not whether reform hurts, but whether it leaves Germany and its people more secure.

Tjaco van den Hout
Riga, Latvia

The benefits of HS2: a sceptical northerner's take

Jennifer Williams' Inside Politics piece "Burnham's Blind Spot" (FT.com, September 11) alludes to the benefits of HS2, Britain's high-speed rail project. Really? *Cui bono* as we say "oop" north.

What is the point of a train its promoters say will get you from Birmingham to London in under 50 minutes, when most families with two kids will not be able to afford the fares, unless they can plan in advance or take trains at times nobody wants to travel at? Up north, the taxes of Mancunians like me will pay for HS2 but we will not get to use it.

Peter Hardwick
Manchester, UK

OUTLOOK

PIEDMONT

Italy's wine harvest is creeping ever earlier



by Susannah Savage

Before setting out for my first day of grape-picking I smothered myself in sun cream and offered the bottle to my Italian partner, Francesco. He glanced pointedly into the inky darkness outside and raised a hand, fingertips gathered in disbelief. A gulp of thick coffee, a bite of ciambellone, and we were off to the vines before the sun could rise.

Francesco's parents' vineyard sits on a hillside in Agliano Terme, among the folds of the Piedmont countryside in north-west Italy, a region that is known for its red wines.

It was August 30. Francesco's mother reckoned they were harvesting around a month earlier than most years. I had come on holiday and found myself helping with a harvest I might once have missed altogether.

Blue-black bunches hung beneath the tangle of leaves. Here and there, whole bunches had shrivelled in the parching heat. Others had obligingly grown large and juicy at an easy-to-reach height. Smaller clusters nearer the dusty ground required more contortions. Before long, I had grape juice on my face and an ache in my back.

I glanced down the row to check everyone else's progress. As a farmer's daughter, I felt I ought to be making a better showing. Francesco, unaware he was in a race, was also losing. His mother, equally unaware, was comfortably winning, her deeply tanned arms darting among the leaves. His nine-year-old niece had switched to the more congenial task of team photographer.

Stefano Pesci, director-general of wine co-operative Terre del Barolo in nearby Castiglione Falletto, remembers harvests beginning in mid-September when he started his career some 20 years ago. Now they are largely finished by late September, he says. "The change was and is very, very fast."

Although harvests have been creeping earlier for some time, this year's has been "exceptional", says Paolo Castelletti of Unione Italiana Vini. "Irrigation was once considered sacrilege when it came to wine quality," he says. "Today, drought actually reduces quality."

Extreme heat meant sugars rose and acidity fell, meaning growers had to pick earlier to prevent the fruit becoming too sweet and the resulting wines too alcoholic.

Accounts collected by trade publication *Il Corriere Vinicolo* put our region's picking 15 to 25 days ahead of dates familiar in past decades.

Like Francesco's family, grape pickers across Italy have also been slowed down by dehydrated grapes, which have forced them to pick more slowly and selectively.

The heat is also following the grapes into the cellar. Managing the temperature of the fruit and its fermentation requires cooling equipment and electricity. Pesci says they had to put this year's Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes in the fridge before they were pressed.

There is no such cooling equipment at Francesco's parents' little vineyard. They leave the cellar work to their neighbour, who crushes and ferments the grapes and turns their small annual harvest into wine.

Our part was rather less technical. As our buckets filled with grapes, we lugged them down the row to the edge of the neighbour's vineyard. While I caught my breath, I enviously watched his little tractor chug between the vines, doing the carrying for him and his workers. Grapes themselves, however, still have to be picked by hand.

This presents another problem. In Italy, August is holiday time. "The early start caught people somewhat by surprise," Castelletti says. An industry already short of labour also faces heat that restricts working hours. Some growers harvest at night where the terrain permits. "Working at 30-35 degrees is extremely difficult."

I can attest to this. Our early start was not early enough. Leaves that concealed whole bunches of fruit offered little shelter to the people gathering them and the sun caught us long before we finished. Soaked with sweat, some of us retreated for water and coffee. Francesco's parents, both in their seventies, kept going.

Their efforts paid off. By the end of the day, the last grapes were off the vines. The next time we encounter them will be in a glass.

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Opinion

We need a US debt conversation — will the Republicans have one?

Brendan Boyle

When the US national debt crossed $40tn in August, I knew exactly what Republicans would say: America spends too much money.

Spending does matter and, as the top Democrat on the House Budget Committee, I am very conscious of how taxpayer dollars are spent and where this can be done better. However, my Republican colleagues who say that we got to $40tn because of spending alone are ignoring half the story.

Over the past 25 years, major tax cuts, primarily benefiting the wealthy and large corporations, have reduced federal revenues by trillions of dollars.

One analysis using data from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and Joint Committee on Taxation found that President George W Bush's tax cuts, their extensions and Donald Trump's 2017 tax law added roughly $10tn to the debt through 2023. Any honest account should acknowledge that Democrats also voted to make the Bush tax cuts permanent.

But over the past 10 years, President Trump and Republicans have gone even further. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, passed in 2017, added nearly $2tn to the debt, according to the CBO. At the time Republicans promised that faster economic growth would make up for the lost revenue. It did not come close.

Then last year, Trump and Republicans passed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. That legislation, according to the CBO, will add a staggering $4.7tn to the deficit over the next decade, making it one of the most expensive pieces of legislation in US history.

Tax cuts are not the sole reason for the debt. The government borrowed heavily to pay for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. During the Great Recession and the Covid-19 pandemic, we spent a tremendous amount to keep the economy afloat and prevent economic devastation.

Those situations also show why America's fiscal health matters. In times of emergency, the nation needs the capacity to borrow. Piling up structural debt during normal times, such as by borrowing heavily to finance tax cuts for the wealthy, leaves us less prepared for emergencies when they come.

Another factor that has added to the debt, but is often left out of the story, is taxes that are owed but never collected.

> Piling up structural deficits during normal times leaves us less prepared for emergencies

The Internal Revenue Service estimates that nearly $700bn in federal taxes owed for 2022 were not paid on time, and roughly $600bn of this will never be collected. Not all of that is fraud, but the scale of not complying with the tax code is enormous.

Nevertheless, Republicans repeatedly cut IRS enforcement funding. That has had a serious impact. A report from the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration published in August showed that IRS audits brought in 35 per cent less in revenue in fiscal year 2025 than in the previous year. That sharp decrease has come after Trump, supported by Republicans, cut the number of IRS staff dedicated to audits by roughly 30 per cent.

The negative impact of our deteriorating fiscal health can no longer be ignored, as it has been by many on both sides of the aisle. The national debt is now so large that annual net interest costs are projected to be higher than $2tn. Every dollar that goes towards servicing the debt is money we cannot use on healthcare, infrastructure or education.

So, what do we do about it without asking working families to make sacrifices?

First, large tax giveaways, especially to the wealthy, should not be permanent. They should face periodic non-partisan reviews on their impact and whether economic growth has covered the cost of the tax break. In addition, Congress should be forced to vote to renew them on an annual or biennial basis. Congress, rightfully so, carefully examines spending line by line. The same should be done for tax cuts.

Second, my Republican colleagues must get serious about tax enforcement. If they are truly serious about "waste, fraud and abuse" and tackling the deficit, they should join Democrats to give the IRS the resources to audit wealthy tax cheats and large corporations.

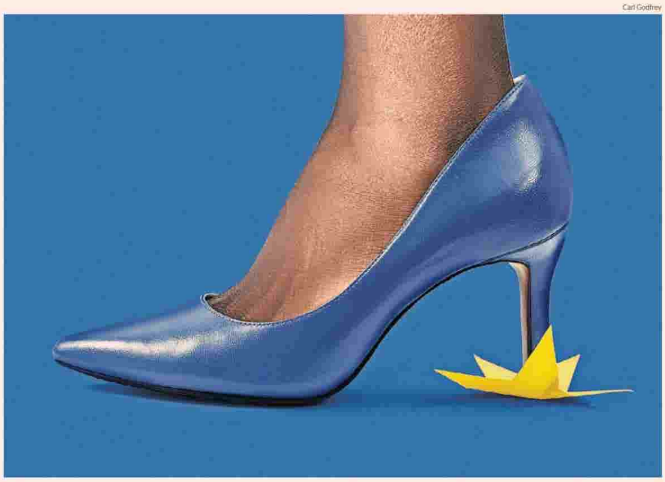
The debt is $40tn and rising — quickly. Republicans have proved to be hypocrites on the issue. But that does not make the debt problem any less real.

If they want a serious debate about how we got here and how we fix it, I am ready to have one. We need an honest discussion, followed by a credible plan, before it's too late.

The writer represents Pennsylvania's second congressional district and is the ranking member of the House Budget Committee

Badenoch's European nightmare

POLITICS
Janan Ganesh



Carl Godfrey

A while ago, this column advised readers to bet on the Conservatives winning the most seats at Britain's next general election. The odds at the time were 13/2. Now? 3/1, and shortening. Don't mention it.

Their leader Kemi Badenoch might soon be overpriced — more on which in a minute — but underpricing her was the real offence. It should have been obvious that people would tire of big government under Labour. Voters want tax cuts even at the expense of public services, and have done for a year. This is politics at its most thermostatic: the ruling idea sets off a counter-reaction. (Notice that "austerity" has not been cited as the national ill for a while.) The Tories' poll rating is still in the sewer but it might just lag their better, underlying numbers on economic trust.

So, what's all this about overcorrection? Well, one issue has undone talented Conservatives before: Europe. There is reason to think it shall again.

Scarcely one voter in three believes it was right to leave the EU. That figure has not moved for four years. A plurality favours much closer co-operation with the bloc, even if that entails accepting its rules. Total re-entry would be provocative. But imagine that Andy Burnham offers a fudge, such as single market membership. A fragmented left would at once consolidate behind Labour. The right would have to defend an unpopular status quo, citing — what? — Britain's freedom to set lighter AI rules than Brussels, just as voters come to fear AI. If indeed Burnham did clinch a half-in deal with the EU, the Tories seem set to promise to reverse it in office. Could anything be sillier?

Foreign affairs never decided an election, Tories will argue. But the UK-EU relationship is different. It is inseparable from economic management, which is the paramount issue for voters. Some of the business leaders now despairing of Labour would endorse the single market.

Also, in two anglophone democracies of late, Canada and Australia, conservatives have lost winnable elections due to their association with the American right. That is, a foreign entity. A man of Burnham's demagogic gifts can frame Badenoch's anti-EU line as American servility. She is not Maga, no, but she is not *not* Maga. She made her name in US-flavoured culture debates. She got into a mess over the Iran war, reflexively backing America until that became untenable, at which point she backed off with a clumsiness that was hard to watch. If she defends pure Brexit, for the sake of US trade and perhaps AI frontier-model access, Labour should rejoice.

Britain has settled into a routine that should trouble Badenoch. Labour proposes some accommodation with the EU, the right alleges betrayal and . . . almost no one cares. Last week, Burnham outdid all the post-2016 prime ministers in calling Brexit a mistake that should at least be softened. His poll lead held. The Tories are right that voters don't think much about the issue, but that means Burnham can do a lot without risk. Forget the next parliament. The time to torture the Tories is now. He could trade single-market access for rule-acceptance, sector by sector, Swiss-style, and dare them to oppose it. Their political prize for doing so would be, what exactly? A better third or fourth position in long-lost Red Wall seats?

And this is just the politics. The larger problem with the status quo is that it is bad in practice. Badenoch's most appealing trait is a sort of engineer's innocence. She seems to care about getting to (what she sees as) the right answer on a given subject. Most politicians let electoral calculation, tribal feeling or ideological priors muddle the cold act of problem-solving.

> The question is whether she confronts it now, at a time of personal strength, or under duress later

In private moments, the engineer in her must ask what the hardest of all possible Brexits has achieved. Essentially no European democracy chooses to be as cut off from the EU as Britain. Even Turkey is in the customs union. Switzerland, where independence is the national ethos, is three decades into a rolling negotiation with Brussels, in which it mostly gives ground. Norway, with mineral wealth galore, is in the Schengen visa-free zone. Most of the western Balkan states have candidate status.

You have to think of the EU in terms of general relativity: as a mass that bends space-time around it, forcing smaller entities into its orbit. Britain won't resist the gravitation indefinitely, because it can't. This is why the subject of Europe never goes away here. A place in the middle-to-outer orbit is destined to materialise. The question is whether Badenoch confronts it now, at a time of personal strength, or under duress later, when the untenability of hard Brexit becomes plain.

As the election approaches, she will have a voter in mind: an upper-middle earner who feels fleeced under a Labour government but recoils from Nigel Farage. That person might vote for a Conservative platform that offers no particular thaw with the EU. But not one that proposes to reverse an ongoing thaw. It would reek too much of dogma, of wilful disruptiveness.

If Badenoch is shrewd, she will let Burnham do the hard work of easing Brexit, then accept it as a fait accompli at the election, and win on the tax burden instead. If not? If she defends the status quo, or what would then be the status quo ante? Sell the bet at 2/1.

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Real men don't do climate change

ENVIRONMENT
Pilita Clark



If you are a man who cares about climate change, are you a bit of a dweeb? Put another way, if a man says global warming is rubbish, does he seem more manly?

In my 15 years of writing about climate change, these are not questions I have considered before. But I have begun to do so since coming across research that suggests a lot of men brush off the climate problem for fear of seeming too feminine.

The analysis by Michael Haselhuhn, an associate professor of management at University of California, Riverside, helps to answer one of the more baffling climate questions: why do studies and polls across the world consistently show that men care less about global warming than women?

Some studies suggest that men feel they have more to lose from policies to fight climate change. Others conclude it is because women are socialised to care more about things like the environment. But researchers who focus on socialisation tend to look at it from the perspective of the women being socialised.

Haselhuhn thought the same patterns of conditioning might be having a separate but overlooked effect on men. So he did a series of linked studies that suggest this is indeed what is happening.

Using data from the US, and a long-running survey of more than 40,000 people across Europe, he showed that men who say they want to save the planet are perceived to be more warm and caring. In keeping with this finding, he also showed that men who are strongly concerned about maintaining their sense of manhood express less concern about the climate problem and say they feel less responsibility for managing it.

This does not, of course, mean that all male climate sceptics are worried about their manhood. Other views also matter. A study of more than 9,000 scientists in 115 countries published this week shows that those who believe technology will largely solve the climate problem are 23 per cent less likely to go on a climate march, sign a petition or take similar civic actions, compared with scientists who lack such faith. The techno-optimists are also 18 per cent less likely to make big lifestyle changes to cut carbon. In other words, many personal views matter, even for experts.

> Those concerned about their sense of manhood express less concern about global warming

But Haselhuhn's work does raise a question about the best way to sell the need for climate action, especially to men. He is now trying to determine which messages might land best, with mixed results. At first he thought it might be effective to suggest that real men take care of their family and are good parents, but that "just didn't move the needle at all", he told me.

More success came when highlighting the financial benefits of climate action. For example, when men are choosing between a regular showerhead and an energy-efficient one, about 80 per cent of them will choose the greener one if it is described as a way to save money. But if told that the same showerhead uses less water and is more environmentally friendly, that support falls by 10 percentage points. Taking out the word "environment" seems to help, says Haselhuhn.

All of this gels with the ideas of climate scientists such as Katharine Hayhoe, a Texas Tech University professor who has worked extensively on effective ways to talk about climate change. This includes advice on dealing with the inevitable uncle who tells you at every family gathering that the climate has always been changing and today's record temperatures are just part of a natural cycle.

It doesn't help to spout scientific facts to show why he is wrong, Hayhoe told a recent FT conference. That's because the real issue here is not science denial but solution aversion, or concern that climate policies will clash with a person's identity, ideology or ideas about a better world.

Because it's unpleasant to say openly that you don't want to fix a serious problem, people use so-called motivated reasoning to find grounds for why climate change cannot be real or serious. In other words, they process information in ways that align with what they already believe or want, rather than with objective evidence.

Happily, Hayhoe says, the same uncle's views can reverse completely if he buys solar panels that save him money or does something else that improves his own circumstances as well as the climate.

There is a message here for those of us who rightly worry about warming temperatures. Scientific facts really matter, as does the health of the environment. But there will be times when the best thing you can do for the planet is not talk about it at all.

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Important judgments for Healey in the coming Budget

ECONOMICS
Chris Giles



At a time of geopolitical tension and bond market volatility, the UK's economic and public finance outlook is shrouded in uncertainty. No system of fancy equations will enable the Office for Budget Responsibility to produce perfect forecasts for the Budget. And no agentic John Maynard Keynes will reliably tell John Healey what he should do. Everything instead rests on sound judgments from both the fiscal watchdog and the chancellor.

By far the most consequential decision the OBR needs to make is to set the potential level of GDP at the end of its five-year forecasting horizon. This is an informed judgment, complicated this year by movements in its underlying drivers. The Office for National Statistics has revised productivity growth up and hours worked down. It has also revised the path of net migration down and is advising everyone to focus on tax records rather than surveys to discern employment trends. These are weaker.

The OBR would be well advised therefore to judge that the potential growth of the UK economy is just a bit worse than in March, with hours and productivity growth cancelling each other out, while the scope for more employment growth is more than offset by lower migration. Together, these broad assumptions would generate a little less tax revenue than previously expected.

On top of that, the inflation profile will be higher due to the prolonged energy shock the UK has suffered in 2026. This will raise the costs of pension and welfare payments in future and is unlikely to generate commensurate additional tax revenue. The final piece of bad news is that higher interest rates will raise forecasts of government debt-servicing costs by roughly 0.3 per cent of GDP by the end of the decade.

> Any forecast he will receive from the OBR is likely to be unwelcome but not disastrous

You might notice that I have been able to talk about the economy and the public finances without any mention of fiscal headroom in billions of pounds. The final OBR judgment should be to ditch this unhelpful invention, follow the letter of the law and start reporting on the sustainability of the public finances as economists rather than officials seeking to get themselves noticed.

Putting this together, the news Healey will receive from the OBR is likely to be unwelcome but not disastrous. The forecast path of deficit reduction will be slower and debt-servicing costs higher, but the UK will still be set to balance its budget and stabilise its debt-to-GDP ratio by the end of the decade.

The chancellor's core judgment will be to decide how to respond; the prime minister and his cabinet are fizzing with ideas but have few plans ready for implementation. It would therefore be reasonable for Healey to deliver a steady-as-she-goes Budget so long as he meets the following conditions.

Any fiscal loosening in the early years of the forecast to meet Andy Burnham's pledge to give people a bit of breathing space needs either to be credibly temporary or to be matched with spending cuts or tax rises in later years. That means there must not be a sustained discretionary fiscal loosening. It is OK for deficit reduction to be slower because the world has become more difficult, so long as the UK government does not aggravate the trends.

The deficit must also stay on a downward path. This will mean that any cost-of-living breathing space is followed by some tougher fiscal years towards the end of the parliament. Healey would be wise to put his political capital behind that necessity.

Finally, the chancellor should outline his longer-term strategy for tax and public spending. The aim will be to provide some reassurance to financial markets so that speculation can be held in check. Details are not necessary. These are difficult times in public finance. There is nothing more important than demonstrating the UK is facing them with sound judgments on both the forecasts and policy.

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