OUR OPINION, THEIR OPINION

An unpleasant truth

An unpleasaCaste Census is not a pleasant demand but it is a truth which can hardly be denied either in a country like India. Even 78 years after Independence, a damning truth confronts the country: the chains of caste oppression remain unbroken. The Justice H N Naga mohan Das Commission's report on internal reservations lays bare an uncomfortable truth – untouchability remains deeply entrenched in our social fabric. This is not merely discrimination; it is a brutal system of oppression that has adapted to modern times while retaining its medieval cruelty. The Commission's findings shock the conscience: 75 per cent of Scheduled Caste (SC) members still face untouchability, with the Madiga community suffering the worst. The manifestations are barbaric: denial of entry to temples, exclusion from community dining, segregation in schools, separate drinking glasses, and bonded labour. Most shocking are the complaints of sexual violence and forced consumption of human excreta. All 101 SC castes in the state experience some form of discrimination, ranging from severe to moderate oppression, proving that no Dalit community is untouched by this social scourge. The report also flags a disturbing pattern in reporting these atrocities. Only relatively empowered Dalit communities are reported to have filed complaints. While ten communities accounted for more than 100 atrocity cases in the last five years, 45 registered none. This is not because they were spared but due to their dependence on the dominant castes for livelihood, fear of retaliation, and the absence of a supportive environment. The abysmal single-digit conviction rate under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, caused by police apathy, witness intimidation, and protracted trials, only emboldens perpetrators. Three urgent reforms must guide Karnataka's response. First, education must be the equaliser. Second, economic empowerment should reach the poorest of Dalits, not just a privileged few within the community. The committee's identification of the most marginalised subgroups can help targeted welfare policies. Third, the justice system needs an overhaul – exclusive special courts, a witness protection mechanism, and time-bound trials are non-negotiable. The report is not just a document – it is an indictment of our collective failure. Karnataka, which is home to India's IT revolution, cannot claim progress while such dehumanising practices persist. The state must launch a comprehensive mission that combines education, economic justice, and legal reform. More importantly, civil society and political leadership must demonstrate the courage to confront this shameful reality. Until every Indian can drink from the same well, eat at the same table, and worship in the same temple, our freedom remains incomplete. Only decisive action can redeem the promise of our Constitution.nt truth

AI chatbots can be a terrible therapist

Investors are betting that AI chatbots can treat people who are struggling with mental-health issues and are unable to access professional care. But the "sycophantic" behaviour of chatbots is at odds with evidenced-based psychotherapy

In January, the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz announced that it had backed Slingshot AI, the world's first foundation model for psychology, bringing the startup's total capital to $40 million. A few weeks later, the European Union's AI Act, which includes a ban on manipulative AI systems, came into force.

These two events highlight a troubling contradiction. Even as regulators attempt to protect users from deceptive AI practices, investors are betting that AI chatbots can treat people struggling with mental-health issues – in other words, when they are especially vulnerable to exploitation. Worse, the way that large language models are currently trained may make them fundamentally incapable of providing such treatment.

The mental-health market is huge, and the use of generative AI is poised to expand significantly. The United States National Institute of Mental Health estimates that one in five US adults has a mental illness. But more than 122 million people in the US live in an area with a shortage of mental-health providers. This has given rise to a slew of AI chatbots that promise to fill the gap. Wysa, for example, calls itself the "clinical alternative to ChatGPT" and claims to have helped six million people in 95 countries.

But AI chatbots' behaviour is at odds with the delicate balance of empathy and confrontation that evidence-based psychotherapy requires. Mental-health professionals must validate patients' experiences while challenging the rigid thinking that perpetuates psychological distress. This productive discomfort helps patients examine their assumptions, driving meaningful change.

Consider a patient who avoids social situations, claiming that they prefer solitude instead of acknowledging their social anxiety. A skilled therapist might gently challenge them by asking if something else is informing that preference – perhaps a fear of how others might react. This opens space for self-reflection without attacking the patient's conception of self.

Current AI models tend to avoid such confrontations. In April, OpenAI rolled back the GPT-4o update because it was "overly flattering or agreeable – often described as sycophantic." It reportedly praised one person's plan to "sell shit on a stick" as "genius" – an obvious example of prioritising agreeableness over accuracy. Researchers have found that sycophancy is "a general behaviour of AI assistants" that likely stems from the way these models are trained, particularly the use of human feedback for fine-tuning. When human evaluators consistently rate validating responses more favorably than challenging ones, AI assistants learn to echo, rather than question, the user.

In mental-health contexts, this tendency toward agreement may prove problematic because psychological disorders often involve cognitive distortions that feel true to the individual and thus contribute to their distress. For example, depressed people tend to feel worthless or hopeless, while anxiety is often associated with catastrophic thinking. An AI chatbot programmed to be agreeable might reinforce these harmful thought patterns by focusing solely on validation, rather than introducing alternative points of view.

As governments grapple with how to regulate AI, mental-health applications present unique challenges. While the EU's ban on manipulative AI is a good first step, it does not address the subtler problem of current models' excessive agreeableness.

The US has no comprehensive federal laws or regulations for AI – and judging by President Donald Trump's AI Action Plan, none will be forthcoming. This regulatory gap will grow more dangerous as US venture capital firms increasingly pour money into AI tools that provide psychological support, and as these tools scale globally, reaching places where access to mental health care is even more limited.

Addressing AI's sycophancy problem requires fundamental changes to how these systems are designed and used. Instead of optimizing for user satisfaction, AI chatbots that provide mental health care should be trained to recognize when a therapeutic challenge is necessary. That could mean incorporating therapeutic principles and examples of effective therapeutic interventions into training strategies.

Crucially, health professionals and patients must play a central role in developing these tools, given their insights into which therapeutic interactions are helpful and which are harmful. Meaningful patient involvement in design and deployment would ensure that the models serve end users' real needs, not what tech leaders assume they want.

The global mental-health crisis demands innovative solutions, and AI will be an essential component. But if AI technologies are to expand access to quality care and promote long-term healing, investors should demand evidence of effective therapeutic outcomes before funding the next chatbot therapist. Likewise, regulators must explicitly require these technologies' developers to demonstrate clinical efficacy, not just user satisfaction. And policymakers should pass laws that mandate the inclusion of mental-health professionals and patients in the training of AI models aimed at providing this kind of care.

Claims about AI revolutionising mental health care remain premature. Until it can master the very specialised ability of therapeutic confrontation – sensitively but firmly questioning patients' assumptions and offering alternative perspectives – it could end up harming those it is meant to help.

BY-MARC AUGUSTIN

AIPEF opposes privatisation of power sector

The All-India Power Engineers Federation (AIPEF) completed 52 golden years of its existence on August 16 and is facing the biggest challenge in the states is to save privatization of the state power sector under the pressure of the central government.

The AIPEF has witnessed a remarkable upward journey since its inception in 1973 under numerous eminent power engineers like Harbans Singh, R S Verma, Bhopal Singh, Shrikant Mane, RSS Chauhan, J C Marathe, Padamjit Singh and Shailendra Dubey.

The AIPEF was formed to establish a professional organization for the improvement of the power supply situation in the country and to simultaneously safeguard the interests of the power engineers' fraternity. The AIPEF provides a forum for discussion and exchange of views amongst power engineers across the country on various policy matters concerning the power sector. Despite the failure of different forms of privatisation in various states, the state governments wanted to do privatization of the power sector not for the benefit of consumers but for the corporate houses. Against all efforts of state and central government to privatise the state power sector, the power engineers remained united and strongly opposed it, the results have been fruitful and the state governments had to withdraw the decision of privatization and cancel it.

After privatisation of electricity departments in some of the union territories, the state government are trying their hands for privatisation of state power distribution companies and through parallel licensing in areas served by state Discoms.

In Uttar Pradesh privatization process has started between Purvanchal Vidyut Vitran Nigam and Dakshinchal Vidyut Vitran Nigam since November 2024 covering 42 districts of UP. As soon as privatization was announced, the power employees and engineers of UP are opposing it for the last more than 8 months despite victimisation.

In Maharashtra privatisation of power distribution through parallel distribution licence is being proposed to bring privatisation entry through the back door.

The privatisation of transmission systems across states through tariff-based competitive bidding (TBCB), monetization of transmission assets, and formation of joint ventures involving a state-owned electricity generation company (GENCO)is being proposed.

It is very clear from the above circumstances that the central and state governments are bent on privatizing. Whether there is a loss making unit of profit making unit privatization is the sole mantra for the government. The governments of the centre and state are now looking at electricity as a business, not as a service to consumers. Privatization has not improved the power sector's efficiency or affordability.

The AIPEF will continue to play a pivotal role in raising concerns about the policies adopted by successive governments at the Centre and in the States. The AIPEF's initiatives have gone a long way towards safeguarding the interests of electricity consumers in different States.

At present, the power sector is going through difficult times, with predatory moves by private entities, with the support of politicians who have an unholy nexus with them, to appropriate the valuable assets created in the public sector by those leaders who envisioned people-oriented development of the electricity industry in the country in the past and by lakhs of employees, engineers, who put in their sweat and toil into building up a strong power sector.

The main reason for the present day crisis is the non-professional bureaucratic approach in central as well as state governments. Electricity being a complex technical subject requires professional approach to achieve the targets which is possible only by appointing experienced power engineers as secretary in central government and CMD in central/state power corporations.

Over the years, the Centre has progressively intruded into the state's domain, curtailing its authority. From time to time, the Central Government is making changes in the Electricity Law through Electricity (Amendment) Rules. Its direct impact is on the states.

The state government is forced to follow the instructions of the Centre. Arm twisting is being done in the name of financial help to the states. In such a situation, the biggest challenge before the AIPEF is how it can stop privatization in their state under this pressure.

The AIPEF's viewpoint is that privatization has not improved the power sector's efficiency or affordability and advocates for India specific power sector reforms. It has been demanding to reverse the privatization of power distribution in states and focusing on strengthening state-owned power companies to provide affordable and reliable electricity to all. It is in that context that AIPEF have an increasingly arduous role to play in the coming years in safeguarding the integrity of the electricity industry and the interests of the consumers. AIPEF will rise to the occasion and successfully enable the power sector to tide over the present crisis. AIPEF continues to be an important partner in developing the electricity sector on all fronts in a way that promotes the well-being of electricity consumers across the length and breadth of the country.

By-VK Gupta

Guarding freedom in the age of networked threats

In the era of cyber fraud, drones, and transnational crime syndicates, India's internal security must adapt faster than the threats it faces. Seventy-eight years after independence, India is a confident, rising power. Our military capability is formidable, our economy is among the fastest growing, and our democracy—messy but resilient—still holds. Yet, the security challenges we face in 2025 are unlike any we have seen before. They are harder to see, quicker to adapt, and less constrained by geography than at any point in our history.

The threats are no longer neatly divided between "internal" and "external." The line has blurred. A cyber-fraudster operating from a different continent can target thousands of Indians before breakfast. A drone launched from across the border can deliver drugs or weapons in minutes. Human traffickers can coordinate cross-border movements using encrypted apps that vanish conversations within seconds. Organised crime syndicates can launder illicit profits through cryptocurrency wallets that slip past traditional banking oversight.

The game has changed, and so must we.

From Borders to Networks
For much of independent India's history, internal security was about managing physical space—preventing infiltration across borders, containing insurgencies, and policing cities and villages. That remains essential. But in today's networked environment, much of the threat landscape exists in virtual space.

• Cyber fraud: India is both a booming digital economy and a prime target. Fraudsters exploit everything from Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transactions to fake investment apps. They prey on human trust as much as on technological loopholes.
• Organised crime: Once geographically bound, criminal enterprises now operate like multinational corporations—diversifying into narcotics, cyber-crime, extortion, and trafficking. The same network that moves heroin can also move stolen data.
• Drug trafficking: Synthetic drugs, easier to produce and harder to detect, are now moving through both traditional smuggling routes and high-tech delivery systems like drones.
• Human trafficking: Technology has allowed traffickers to advertise, recruit, and coordinate with unprecedented speed, while keeping victims hidden in plain sight.

In each of these, speed and anonymity are the criminals' greatest advantages. The physical border checkpoint is of little use when the contraband is a data packet, a crypto transaction, or a drone payload.

The Drone and the Darknet
Two technologies in particular are changing the internal security equation: drones and the darknet.

Drones can be a force for good—delivering medical supplies, surveying disaster zones—but in the wrong hands they are low-cost, high-impact tools for crime. Border states have already seen drones dropping drugs, arms, and ammunition. Their size, speed, and low altitude make them difficult to detect with conventional radar.

The darknet is not inherently criminal; it was designed for anonymity. But that same anonymity shelters marketplaces for narcotics, forged documents, hacking tools, and even contract crimes. Transactions are settled in cryptocurrencies that can be mixed and moved in ways that defy old investigative models.

Why the Old Playbook Won't Work
Traditional investigative and enforcement models—case registration, reactive investigation, isolated jurisdictional action—are not enough in this environment. Three reasons stand out:
1. Jurisdiction is now global: Cybercrime units cannot work in silos when evidence is scattered across servers in multiple countries.
2. Speed matters more than ever: A 48-hour delay in response can mean lost evidence in a disappearing-message app or a cryptocurrency trail that has already been obfuscated.
3. Public awareness is decisive: Portals, helplines, and apps are useless unless citizens know about them and trust they will get a timely, meaningful response.

Re-aligning for the New Game
If the threat has changed, so must the strategy. Five areas need urgent attention:
1. Intelligence integration
We need seamless sharing of intelligence—across states, across agencies, and, when necessary, across borders. That requires both technological integration and trust between agencies.
2. Technology parity
Law enforcement must invest not just in more personnel, but in advanced digital forensics, blockchain tracing tools, drone detection systems, and AI-driven crime pattern analysis. Criminals adopt new tech quickly; the State must do the same.
3. Skilled human capital
Technology will fail without skilled operators. We need more cyber specialists, financial crime analysts, drone interception teams, and victim-centred investigators for trafficking cases. Recruitment and training models must adapt.
4. Community engagement
For crimes that exploit human behaviour—phishing, social engineering, trafficking recruitment—community awareness is a frontline defence. Public education campaigns, school programs, and regular outreach can prevent more cases than post-incident policing ever will.
5. Trust as the foundation
No system, however advanced, will work if citizens don't trust it. Portals and helplines succeed only when people believe that reporting will lead to action without reprisal or bias. This trust is earned through consistent, transparent, and respectful engagement.

Measuring Success Differently
In the past, success was often measured by arrests made or contraband seized. In the new era, those metrics must expand:
• Speed of detection: How quickly can a fraudulent transaction be frozen?
• Prevention rates: How many drone incursions were stopped before delivery?
• Victim recovery: How many trafficking victims were rescued and rehabilitated?
• Citizen participation: How many verified tips came from the public?

A Shared Responsibility
Internal security in 2025 is not the job of the police alone. Banks, telecom providers, tech platforms, logistics companies, schools, and civil society all have roles to play. The same payment app that enables commerce can be a vector for fraud. The same messaging platform that connects families can coordinate a trafficking ring. Only by recognising shared responsibility can we build resilience.

From Celebration to Vigilance
Independence Day is a celebration, but it is also a checkpoint. We look back in gratitude, but we must look ahead in readiness. The Republic's most dangerous enemies may no longer march in columns or fire across borders. They may instead be a set of co-ordinates entered into a drone's navigation system, a line of malicious code, or a voice on the phone persuading someone to click a link.

These are not threats that brute force can solve. They require agility, intelligence, collaboration, and above all, public trust. If we fail to align ourselves with this new reality, we risk defending the future with the tools of the past—and losing ground we can ill afford.

The flag we raise each August 15 symbolises more than sovereignty; it symbolises responsibility. The responsibility to protect our people not only from what we can see, but from what we cannot. The threats are evolving. Our defences must evolve faster.

Because in the age of networked crime, freedom is not only guarded at the border—it is guarded in every byte, every drone interception, every trafficking victim rescued, and every citizen who knows and uses the systems built to protect them.

By-OP Singh
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