

# THE ASIAN AGE

2 DECEMBER 2024

## SC halting Sambhal survey sets a welcome precedent

It's time the charade of surveys a section of Hinduva peddlers is using to undermine the citizen's fundamental right to freedom of religion, which are otherwise guaranteed by Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution, is halted with immediate effect. And honouring the order of the Supreme Court last week asking the advocate commissioner to keep aside his findings of his survey of a Mughal era mosque in Sambhal in Uttar Pradesh in a sealed envelope plus its directive to the district court there not to go ahead with the proceedings should be the first step in this direction.

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act passed by the Parliament in 1991 aims to preserve the character of all religious structures in India. Even if it preceded the monumental damage dealt to the foundations of the republic by the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the law "declared that the religious character of a place of worship existing on the 15th day of August, 1947, shall continue to be the same as it existed on that day." The legislative intent of the law was clear to all right-thinking Indians: It did not want this nation to engage in the dangerous business of righting the wrongs of history. Participating in the discussion, Rajmohan Gandhi, then member of the Rajya Sabha, cautioned everyone that "the ringing lesson of the Mahabharata down the centuries is those who seek to right the wrongs of history with an attitude of revenge will only produce destruction and more destruction."

The Supreme Court, in its observations in 2022, had come up with a curious interpretation of the law, however, saying that it did not bar the determination of the religious character of places of worship. The logic still holds, though, because the character of a structure can be retained only after determining it! The Allahabad high court applied the same logic while ordering a survey of the Shahi Idgah at Mathura. At present, there are a number of surveys at various levels across the country seeking to redefine the religious character of many places of worship of Muslims.

The Supreme Court, while hearing a petition seeking stay on the order of the survey of the mosque in Sambhal, said it undermined the need to preserve peace. And the court was perhaps reading the minds of the people as peace is the precondition for progress of a country. And, too, India, where 80 of its 143-crore people survive on free food grain provided by the government, needs it more than any other nation.

There are people in this country who have discovered the value of religion as a tool to capture power and then retain it. But this nation cannot afford advocate commissioners holding survey orders received from courts blithely going about checking the religious character of places of worship across the country. It will be in the interest of peace if the apex court ponders over the 1991 Act, explains its legislative intent from its historical and current perspectives and dissuades the Hinduva peddlers and some courts from further engaging in this survey entrepreneurship. That can perhaps persuade the people to understand the ethos on which this country is built and the principles on which its Constitution is based. It's up to the court to speak loud and clear now, and then walk the talk.

## Slowdown due to global effects

The Indian economy or the gross domestic product (GDP) has posted the lowest growth rate in nearly the last two years at 5.4 per cent in the quarter ending on September 30, pulled down by manufacturing, mining and quarrying, utilities and construction. The economic growth in the year-to-date period was 8.1 per cent.

The growth slowed down in manufacturing to 2.2 per cent as compared to 14.3 per cent in Q2 FY24, mining and quarrying contracted by 0.1 per cent as against 11.1 per cent growth witnessed in the year-to-date period, utilities grew 5.3 per cent vis-a-vis 10.5 per cent, and construction activity increased 7.7 per cent as against 13.6 per cent.

The slowdown in a primary sector like mining and the entire secondary sectors which encompasses industrial activity reflects a spillover effect of the global slowdown and dumping of excess production in other parts of the world. For example, domestic steel production remained stagnant while steel consumption has increased.

Another reason for the unexpected slowdown in the economy is the lower government consumption expenditure, whose growth declined to 4.4 per cent compared to 14 per cent in the year-to-date period. The growth in net taxes also declined to 7.9 per cent as against 13.1 per cent in Q2 FY24, which would severely affect the ability of the government to bankroll its measures to support the economy. The government should, therefore, take steps to protect the local companies by invoking anti-dumping measures.

Government data on GDP also has a reason to cheer. Private final consumption expenditure, which has been the primary growth engine of the Indian economy till a few years ago, bounced back to six per cent compared to 2.6 per cent in the second quarter of the last fiscal. While it is good, one needs to check granular data to understand the source of this growth — the super-rich or debt — in the wake of muted wage growth for several years.

Subhani



## Ties with Dhaka: Domestic politics & diplomacy clash



K.C. Singh

**If an interim government led by a pro-West Nobel laureate is unable to control the increasing communal polarisation, the situation under a likely BNP-Jamaat government may be worse**

Since Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to flee her country and seek refuge in India on August 5, after escalating student-led protests, India-Bangladesh relations have frayed. Seeing Sheikh Hasina's fall, the Jamaat resumed activities. Endorsing of close allies, while disregarding their domestic politics, has a long history.

The United States often held its nose to back despotic authoritarian governments for geopolitical advantage. One US President justified this on the grounds that the ruler was, after all, "our son of a bitch." The US has as a consequence suffered occasionally. The 1979 ouster of the Shah of Iran by Islamic forces, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, then exiled in France, is a prime example. It upended the "twin pillars" American policy, using Iran and Saudi Arabia to stabilise the Gulf, after the British exit in 1971. The US is still wrestling to restore that.

Perhaps the Indian government got blindsided by its domestic majoritarian bias, which aligned with a Muslim majority nation battling Islamic elements. The irony of supporting secularism in the neighbourhood while ignoring it at home was missed. The US had been warning Bangladesh about democratic regression, sanctioning its elite police unit in 2021 and a former Army chief in 2024. India saw it as unnecessary meddling in a nation that it felt was on the right track.

Sheikh Hasina ruled for 30 of the past 38 years, including being in power continuously since 2009. During 2009-16, Bangladesh became a model of economic growth. The population in extreme poverty fell by two-thirds. Many indices topped India's, including per capita at market prices. Sheikh Hasina

also managed to defang the Jamaat-Islami, which opposed the interim government led by Md Yunus unshackling the BNP and Jamaat leaders. Immediately after Sheikh Hasina's self-exile in India, her party Awami League's senior members and cadres were attacked and arrested, with nearly 1,000 dying. A three-member International Crimes Tribunal is now prosecuting those allegedly involved in killings of protesters, especially students. Amongst those arrested are 11 ministers, one judge and a senior bureaucrat. December 17 is the new deadline for the tribunal's award, which has issued warrants for Sheikh Hasina and 45 others on October 17. In fact, the tribunal explained the delay as making the verdict compatible with the extradition treaty between India and Bangladesh. An extradition request may become a new bilateral dispute.

Therefore, the arrest of Chinnoy Krishna Das Brahmachari, formerly belonging to Iskcon, on a sedition charge reflects popular anti-Indian sentiment, now metamorphosing into anti-Hinduism. The Indian government asking the Bangladesh government to protect minorities sits poorly alongside slogans in Maharashtra electioneering of "Katagoty to Batagoty". Prime Minister Narendra Modi correctly

modified it without condemning it. More Hindu priests have been arrested subsequently. Bangladesh has an estimated 10,000 Indian citizens, besides 14 million Hindus. Unlike in western India, where Punjabi Muslims abandoned their language and culture to dominate Pakistan, Bengali Muslims remained attached to their language and culture. The Awami League drew support from this vast majority. But in recent years, as Bangladesh's economic miracle faltered and communal tensions worsened, the popular sentiment swung against her secular coalition.

There are reports of Pakistan becoming more active, but China is best positioned after the exit of India-friendly Hasina. While China is Bangladesh's largest trade partner, in South Asia India takes that credit. Over the last eight years, India extended four lines of credit, totalling \$8 billion. On March 18, 2023, the PMs of both countries inaugurated remotely the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, a 100 km gas pipeline. On Nov. 1, 2023, two rail corridors were inaugurated. The Maitree Super Thermal Plant was also inaugurated. Five pre-1980 rail links were rehabilitated. Bangladesh is importing 1160 MW of power from India. Invited to the India-based G20 summit in September 2023, Sheikh Hasina signed three MoUs on agricultural research, digital payments and cultural exchange.

Thus, the Indian strategy to help Hasina's rule was to bolster Bangladesh economically and increase connectivity, power and military links. Internationally, Bangladesh is arguing that its government protects Hindus. Their permanent representative in Geneva, speaking at

the 17th session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues, said: "The entire society of Bangladesh came forward to protect its minorities following our long tradition of communal harmony." The security of every citizen remains, he added, "the cornerstone of the interim government of Bangladesh". However, following the death of a Muslim lawyer in protests when bail was denied to Chinnoy by a Chittagong court, 31 Hindus have been named as suspects.

If an interim government led by a pro-West Nobel laureate is unable to control the increasing communal polarisation, the situation under a likely BNP-Jamaat government may be worse. The protests reflect the anger as Bangladesh needs the \$4.7 billion IMF bailout. The European Union can also lobby as it is Bangladesh's largest export destination. In addition, the tariff concessions offered by them end in 2029. Japan remains the biggest donor to a now beleaguered nation. Naturally, everyone awaits the Donald Trump presidency to see what role, if any, the US plays to guide Bangladesh back to responsible and democratic governance. The BJP's own increasingly majoritarian and authoritarian regime is ill-equipped to preach moderation in a nation that sees it as complicit in the Hasina-created mess. A student leader from the protests reflects the dangerous reduction in the health of such assets and arrive at strict follow-up measures. They should monitor the end use of all disbursements.

This writer has maintained that foreign and domestic policies cannot be in separate silos. Their conflict last affected India's relations with the Maldives. Rudyard Kipling wrote that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". So far, the BJP has managed to keep diplomacy and domestic politics distinct. It seems the "twain" has again overlapped in Bangladesh, another South Asian nation.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkeshingh.

## LETTERS

### LONG WAY TO GO

On Patna high court judge's comment that a widow has "no need to put on make-up", the Supreme Court said that the remark "is not commensurate with the sensitivity and neutrality expected from a court of law". Interestingly, the apex court made this observation on September 25, which is a day before the birth anniversary of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, who got the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act decreed in 1856. Vidyasagar's statue was destroyed by a saffron-attired group on May 14, 2019, in Kolkata, but the man who bowed his head neither to high ranking British officials' colonial mindset nor to inhumane rituals is still showing us the light.

Sujit De  
Kolkata

### LOANS TO ADANI

WITH MANY reputed rating agencies downgrading the ratings of almost all the Adani Group companies to negative post the indictment of the group's founder, Gautam Adani, by the US authorities in an alleged \$265 million bribery scheme, one is really worried about the fate of the loans granted to the group by public and private sector banks to the tune of billions of rupees. One really wonders whether the banks have strictly adhered to the lending norms prescribed by RBI. It is time all the lenders set together to assess the health of such assets and arrive at strict follow-up measures. They should monitor the end use of all disbursements.

Tharcus S. Fernando  
Chennai

### TOO MANY GAMES

THE RECENT Assembly election results in Jharkhand threw up some questions for the BJP-led NDA. Why did the arrest of CM Hemant Soren backfire, turning tribal support towards the Opposition? How does the NDA regain its traditional votes that have drifted to JMM and Congress? Along with this, what new strategies would the NDA be adopting to redress local issues effectively, so that it would not err again in future elections? These are questions that the leadership of the NDA needs to address carefully.

Anshu Bharti  
Bhagalpur, Bihar

\*\$500 for the best letter of the week goes to Sujit De (Nov. 30). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

## THE ASIAN AGE

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Bhopinder  
Singh

## As Trump readies to target Beijing, Delhi seems least assertive in Quad

America's President-elect Donald Trump, who will return to the White House on January 20, 2025, has fired the first salvo against the People's Republic of China by suggesting that he will impose sweeping new tariffs on its first executive order. If Mexico and Canada (both his pet peeves) have been called out for a proposed 25 per cent import tax, an additional 10 per cent thereon is ostensibly reserved for China. Earlier, on his campaign trail, Mr Trump had threatened tariffs in excess of 60 per cent for all Chinese imports. While these threats are still in the realm of Mr Trump's usual rhetoric and one can never be sure of what exactly will happen given the inevitable and spiralling inflationary impact for American citizens, should such a threat be carried out. But it is clear, that Mr Trump will up the ante with China, once formally in the Oval Office.

While Mr Trump's non-interventionist approach, such as on Ukraine, and on radically rethinking "Nato's purpose and Nato's mission" may redraw American foreign policy in a very fundamental sense, China will remain perhaps the only major foreign policy issue of consequence to see a steady continuation (possibly even escalation) from the Joe Biden era policies. Mr Trump's proposed Reciprocal Trade Act can give him the necessary "bite" to take aggressive action. From questioning the Most Favoured Nation status for China to enacting "aggressive new restrictions on Chinese ownership of

any vital infrastructure in the US", Mr Trump has all but promised to take on China decisively.

Beyond tariffs, it is the strategic counter-balancing framework of the Quad grouping (US, Japan, Australia and India) that has emerged as the most significant framework to take on Chinese belligerence and expansionism. Revived in Mr Trump's first term and nurtured in Mr Biden's subsequent term, the Quad even offers the multilateral possibilities to pool in the resources of "four leading maritime democracies" to checkmate the Dragon, as it seeks to redraw territorial contours in a wary neighbourhood. All four Quad nations have had vital interests threatened by the Chinese, but only India, which has drawn blood in its LAC, in the summer of 2020. Ironically, India has also been the least aggressive in tenor and approach against the Chinese, out of the four Sino-war Quad countries.

Following the last Quad meeting at Mr Biden's hometown of Wilmington, Delaware, the Chinese were quick to slam the "ganging up" to "contain China" by the supposed alliance of the "China threat narrative".

However, India's wounded borders will confirm that the danger of a territorial "China threat narrative" is for real, and not predicated on the US ambition of a unipolar world. In recent times, the territorial row between China and the Philippines too had turned dangerously violent as it was deemed a "new" "nine-dash-line" interpretation by China that

usurps the EEZs (Exclusive Economic Zones) of the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia. However, none of these countries have the wherewithal to stand up for themselves — necessitating the Quad. The Philippines banks on the Mutual Defence Treaty with the US to safeguard against any possible Chinese aggression while the Taiwanese have been assured of direct US support in case of a Chinese invasion.

Given that the challenges are not just military but also in areas like trade, commerce, geopolitics, technology, infrastructure investments, etc., only a collective effort can effectively take on the Chinese juggernaut. The Japanese have increased their defence spending substantially, deepened security collaboration with the US, and emerged as the foremost enabler of the security architecture to counter China. From upgrading the US military outposts in the command structure on Japanese soil to collaboration on developing advanced weaponry, Japan has led the localised aggression within the Quad.

Australia too has prepped up like never before by committing an unprecedented \$350 billion plan to counter Chinese expansionism. From nuclear-powered submarines, frigates and drones, investing \$12 billion in missile manufacture is the sharpest uptick in military preparedness and spending. The elephant in the room of Australian imagination and fears is singularly China.

Even diplomatically, the language from Canberra has been fiery, with Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese calling Beijing's conduct "unacceptable". The fear of Chinese intrusion (even a possible invasion) into Australia's backyard forced the typically pacifist Australian political class to posit substantially into addressing the specific Chinese threat. Perhaps not satisfied with the pace of Quad developments, Canberra signed a trilateral and parallel security partnership with the US and Britain, abbreviated as AUKUS. Expectedly, the Chinese slammed the move as "cold war mentality" by being "militarily assertive". Meanwhile, the Japanese have announced regular deployments of Japan's amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, along with US forces, on Australian soil.

Amid such developments, India, despite its hyper-nationalistic politics, is strangely subdued on China. Indeed, multiple rounds of border talks are underway, and some progress was reported recently, but the critical revert to the original status quo ante as it existed prior to 2020 remains unconfirmed. India remains the oddity within the Quad for its lowest decibel and the least assertiveness on China, and this could well become an issue if Mr Trump walks the talk on China.

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## Urgent Action Needed to Protect Elephants

The death of Deegadanthu 1, a majestic tusker from Kala Wewa, is a tragic reminder of the deep failures in Sri Lanka's wildlife conservation efforts. Electrocuting by an unauthorised power line, Deegadanthu's death symbolises not only the loss of an animal but also the erosion of the country's natural heritage. As elephants in Sri Lanka continue to fall victim to illegal electric fences, Hakka patas, gunshots and train accidents, the authorities remain alarmingly silent. The current state of affairs, where such majestic creatures are left unprotected, is a national disgrace and this issue demands urgent action. The Wildlife Department's failure to protect these iconic animals, despite the immense cultural and economic value they bring to the country, has led to a sharp decline in their population. With the elephant deaths continuing at an alarming rate, it is time for the government to take full responsibility.

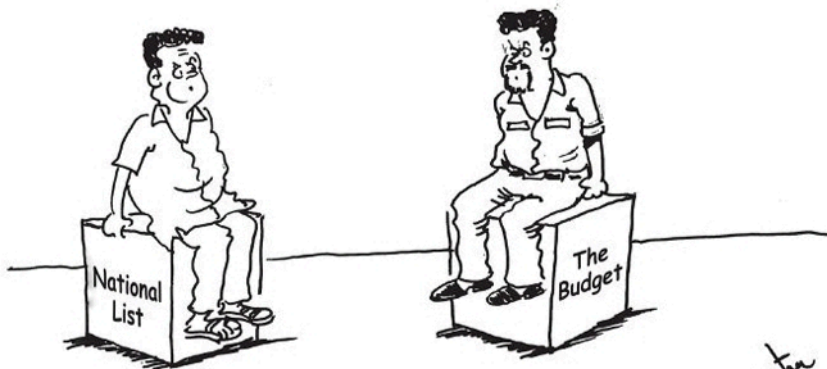
Deegadanthu 1's death, while deeply saddening, is not an isolated incident. The tuskers of Sri Lanka, such as Kawanitissa and Mahasen, now face similar threats from unauthorised electric fences, speeding trains, and poor conservation policies. The government must urgently intervene to protect these endangered animals before they are lost forever. In contrast to Sri Lanka's inadequate protection measures, countries like Kenya provide 24-hour security to protect their endangered species, including elephants like Ahmed, a famous tusker who lived from the 1900s to the 1970s. Ahmed's life was safeguarded through continuous, government-led protection, with security teams ensuring his safety from poaching and other threats. Why, then, can Sri Lanka not provide similar protection to its own elephants? The Sri Lankan Government must ask itself why it is unable to offer 24/7 security for elephants like Kawanitissa and Mahasen, whose lives are constantly at risk, much like Ahmed's in Kenya. The fact that other countries can afford such protection highlights a stark contrast to Sri Lanka's lack of urgency in wildlife conservation.

The failure of the Wildlife Department to prevent these tragic deaths is a reflection of a much deeper issue. The department's indifference to the urgency of wildlife protection is not just an oversight; it is a systemic failure that must be addressed immediately. The Wildlife Director-General must be held accountable for this neglect and step down from the position. It is clear that the current leadership is unable to handle the responsibility of safeguarding Sri Lanka's natural heritage. A new, competent person must be appointed to take charge of the department, someone who can implement strict wildlife conservation policies and ensure that the country's elephants are given the protection they deserve.

The time for mourning is long past. Sri Lanka must take action to prevent the deaths of more elephants. Measures such as strengthening legal frameworks to penalise the illegal use of electric fences, introducing a licensing system for their installation and enforcing the Sri Lanka Electricity Act are long overdue. The government must also establish wildlife conservation zones and raise awareness in rural communities about the dangers of illegal fencing, promoting safer alternatives like solar-powered fences. These steps would not only protect Sri Lanka's elephants but also ensure the safety of rural communities and preserve the country's biodiversity.

The death of Deegadanthu 1 and the on-going threats to elephants like Kawanitissa and Mahasen demand a re-evaluation of the way Sri Lanka approaches wildlife conservation. Elephants are not just animals; they are symbols of Sri Lanka's cultural and religious identity. Their protection should be as integral to the nation's heritage as the preservation of ancient temples or monuments. The government must recognise that wildlife conservation and cultural heritage are deeply intertwined and should be treated as one. Without urgent action, Sri Lanka will lose its elephants and with them, a significant part of its identity.

We call on the President to intervene immediately and ensure that the Wildlife Department is restructured to prioritise the protection of Sri Lanka's endangered species. The loss of another iconic elephant must not be allowed to happen. The government must act now, not just to protect the elephants but to ensure that future generations will have the chance to witness these majestic creatures. Let us not wait until it is too late, before these elephants become nothing more than a memory.



# BHARAT MATTERS FOR INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS

Foreign policy of Gorbachev, defined by the tenets of "perestroika" and "glasnost"

BY DR SRIMAL FERNANDO

"Jai Hind" signifies Victory to Hindustan. "When friends come calling, our hearts light up. We are delighted to have you in our midst," as stated by Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, who warmly welcomed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev during a momentous visit in 1986. The diplomatic visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to India, while Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was in office greatly strengthened the ties between India and the Soviet Union. This culminated in the establishment of the Delhi Declaration, a pivotal global document that advocated for the total elimination of nuclear arsenals by the century's end and underscored the necessity of addressing issues through peaceful means. He made two official visits to India during his administration, the first in 1986 and the second in 1988. As the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) shared in a new era of political and social change in the Soviet Union. The primary aim of perestroika was to revitalise the Soviet economy and boost its efficiency. Gorbachev carried out reforms that focused on market-oriented strategies. Throughout his tenure, he enacted several reforms that profoundly influenced both domestic and international policy. In terms of foreign policy, Gorbachev's strategy was characterised by an openness to collaboration and communication with other nations. The doctrine of foreign policy established by Gorbachev, referred to as "New Thinking," signified a change towards a more collaborative and peaceful interaction with the West. Gorbachev's initiatives had a considerable effect on international relations and were instrumental in bringing about the end of the Cold War. Throughout his tenure, Gorbachev endeavoured to enhance diplomatic relations with Western nations, notably the United States and various European countries. Gorbachev's leadership also played a crucial role in the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. A significant accomplishment of Gorbachev

was his involvement in the negotiation of arms control agreements with the United States, which resulted in a considerable decrease in nuclear arsenals and a reduction in hostilities between the two superpowers. Gorbachev's leadership also played a crucial role in the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Nobel Peace Prize conferred upon Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, The Nobel Peace Prize conferred upon Mikhail Gorbachev was a merited tribute to his efforts in advancing peace and diplomatic relations on a global scale. The support Mikhail Gorbachev extended to non-aligned movements, along with his endeavors to fortify connections between countries in the Global South, was perceived as a significant stride toward achieving a more just and balanced international order. Overall, Gorbachev's legacy with the Seychelles, Mauritius, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Reunion can be summarized as one of promoting peace, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Gorbachev's foreign policy notably influenced the dynamics of the Indian Ocean Islands. Gorbachev understood this and endeavoured to foster closer relationships with these countries to promote Soviet objectives in the region. Throughout Gorbachev's leadership, various forms of assistance were rendered, particularly in infrastructure and education, with a focus on enhancing trade relations between the two countries. This initiative was instrumental in fostering goodwill between the Soviet leadership and the Indian Ocean islands, setting the stage for future collaborative efforts. The legacy of Gorbachev as a reformer and peacemaker is still acknowledged and examined by historians and political analysts across the world.

### Gorbachev's vision on Sri Lanka

Mikhail Gorbachev stands as a significant historical figure, recognised for his pivotal contributions to transformative changes within the Soviet Union, which ultimately culminated in its dissolution. His legacy is characterised by his commitment to reforming the Soviet system and advocating for increased openness and democratic principles. While the implications

of Gorbachev's legacy may seem distant to many countries worldwide, his influence remains evident in various forms, including in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was among the nations that reaped benefits from Gorbachev's more liberal foreign policy approach. A significant aspect of the collaboration between the Soviet Union and Sri Lanka during Gorbachev's administration was focused on economic development. The Soviet Union extended technical assistance and investments to Sri Lanka in sectors such as infrastructure, agriculture and industry. This support contributed to the enhancement of Sri Lanka's economy and the elevation of living standards for its citizens. Beyond economic aid, Gorbachev aimed to fortify cultural connections between the Soviet Union and Sri Lanka. Cultural exchanges and educational initiatives were initiated between the two nations, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's cultural heritage. Gorbachev's impact on Soviet diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka is regarded as a favourable one. Gorbachev's contributions to diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka exemplify the critical importance of cultivating strong ties with other countries, emphasising mutual respect and collaborative efforts.

### Gorbachev and The Maldives

This modification in Soviet foreign policy resulted in notable ramifications for nations located far from Moscow, including smaller island states such as the Maldives. Gorbachev's initiatives of transparency and reform created new avenues for diplomatic interaction with nations that had previously been beyond the reach of Soviet influence. A significant aspect of Gorbachev's legacy on Soviet-Maldivian relations was the enhancement of cultural exchanges and the provision of educational opportunities. The endeavours of Gorbachev to encourage communication and partnership in international matters were instrumental in creating a more interconnected global landscape, allowing even minor nations like the Maldives to participate in shaping global dynamics.

### The Seychelles, Mauritius and Reunion

Gorbachev's legacy in international diplomacy extends beyond major powers to include smaller nations such as Seychelles and Mauritius. His initiatives aimed at enhancing relations with these countries significantly bolstered the Soviet Union's influence in the region while fostering economic growth. The Soviet Union's support for Mauritius encompassed various sectors, including education, healthcare, and infrastructure, which contributed to the nation's economic advancement and improved living standards for its citizens. Gorbachev's commitment to diplomacy and global collaboration established a foundation for ongoing engagement, marking his contributions to Soviet relations with Seychelles and Mauritius as a noteworthy aspect of international cooperation and understanding.

### Visionary leadership

A crucial component of Gorbachev's legacy is his New Political Thinking. The Indian Ocean Islands, as small island nations in a strategically significant region, can look to Gorbachev's example of bold and visionary leadership, as well as his commitment to addressing complex challenges through peaceful means. By remembering Gorbachev as an exemplary leader, the Indian Ocean Islands can take pride in his legacy of socialist democratic reforms and innovative foreign policy thinking.

About the author: Dr. Srimal Fernando received his PhD in International Affairs. He was the recipient of the prestigious O.P. Jindal Doctoral Fellowship and SAU Scholarship under the SAARC umbrella. As a Lecturer, he focuses on the comparative politics of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Dr. Fernando is a specialist in International Relations and an adviser on New Regional Diplomacy. He has received accolades such as the 2018/2019 'Best Journalist of the Year' in South Africa, (GCA) Media Award for 2016 and the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) accolade. He is the author of 'Politics, Economics and Connectivity: In Search of the South Asian Union'.



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## Sharp slowdown

Solutions will need to go beyond interest rate cuts

The gross domestic product (GDP) data, released by the National Statistics Office (NSO) last week, has surprised analysts. While most anticipated the slowdown in demand to reflect in the GDP data, no one expected the economy to expand just 5.4 per cent in the second quarter — a seven-year low. Economists at the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) are likely to be particularly disappointed, having projected a 7 per cent growth rate for the quarter in the October monetary policy review. With the economy growing only 6 per cent in the first half of the financial year, the RBI needs to revise its full-year growth projection of 7.2 per cent. During the second quarter, growth was constrained by the manufacturing sector, which expanded 2.2 per cent, year-on-year, compared to 7 per cent in the first quarter. Activity also slowed in the construction sector while the mining sector registered a contraction during the quarter. The agricultural sector, meanwhile, grew 3.5 per cent compared to 1.7 per cent in the same period last year.

A growth rate lower than expected has increased complications for policy managers and raised several questions. It is worth noting that this is the last GDP number before the presentation of the next Union Budget. Although the NSO will release the first advance estimate for this financial year in early January, the inclusion of additional information in these estimates would be limited. Economic performance in the first half of the year poses at least two big policy challenges. Fiscal management is the first challenge. Notably, nominal growth in the first half of the year was 8.9 per cent. The Budget projections for the year are based on a nominal growth assumption of 10.5 per cent. If the trend continues in the second half, the fiscal deficit in absolute terms will need to be contained at a lower level to meet the target of 4.9 per cent of GDP. This would mean lower government expenditure, assuming that revenue targets hold. According to the latest data, as of October, receipts of the Union government were at \$37 per cent of the Budget Estimates. The comparable level last financial year was 38.6 per cent. On expenditure, while there is time to make adjustments, a slower pace of capital expenditure should worry policy managers. In the first seven months of the financial year, the government spent only 42 per cent of the allocation, which partly explains the slower growth.

The second policy challenge is to revive the pace of economic activity in a sustainable manner. Some economists believe that a pickup in government capital expenditure will help accelerate growth. The assumption may materialise to an extent in the second half of the year. However, the question is how long the Indian economy can depend on higher government capex for growth. Given the fiscal constraints, it would be difficult to push up capex consistently. The allocation is worth 3.4 per cent of GDP this financial year. To sustain higher growth, other drivers, particularly private investment, will need to pick up. From a medium-term perspective, external uncertainties will make things difficult. The victory of Donald Trump in the United States presidential election has increased complications. In terms of policy, pressure on the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to reduce the policy interest rate will only rise. The MPC would do well to stay the course in its meeting later this week. A knee-jerk reaction can complicate matters, particularly given the latest inflation reading of 6.2 per cent. In any case, solutions to the slowdown will need to go well beyond token policy-rate reductions.

## Unintended consequence

The poor face the brunt of pollution control

As civic authorities in the Delhi-National Capital Region (Delhi-NCR) imposed the highest level of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP 4) when air quality slipped into the "severe" category, thousands of construction workers became the victims of pollution twice over. Among other things, GRAP 4 proscribes construction activities. Though the decision ostensibly reflects concern for public health, its ad hoc imposition without notice not only stalls construction projects and pushes up costs but leaves thousands of workers, the bulk of them migrants and daily-wage workers, without a livelihood for an indefinite period. The unintended consequences of this well-intentioned but poorly thought through veto was amply demonstrated last week when hundreds of construction workers protested outside the Delhi lieutenant governor's office, demanding compensation for their enforced idleness as a result of GRAP 4.

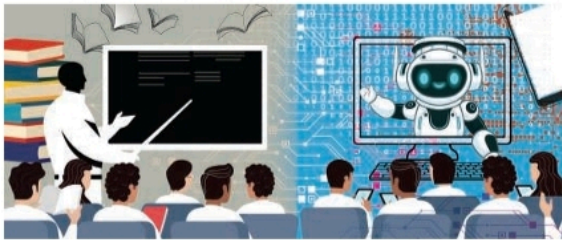
This protest, organised by the Building Workers' Union, an affiliate of the left-oriented All India Central Council of Trade Unions, underlines how public policies often overlook the concerns of vulnerable sections. Construction workers are the most vocal (and better-organised) section of disadvantaged people to be impacted by GRAP 4 bans. Less noticed are the bans on the impromptu fires, which warm hundreds of guards and construction workers in the open as the nights turn colder and bans on coal stoves used by poorer households. The irony of the increasingly draconian restrictions recommended by the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) is that they do not appreciably improve air quality. Despite GRAP 4, the needle on air quality has moved from "severe" to "very poor" and, on occasion, "poor". These changes are deemed "improvements" but insufficiently optimum to justify removing GRAP controls. The conundrum facing civic authorities is that atrocious air quality persists even though incidents of paddy-stubble burning, once deemed the key cause of winter air pollution, have notably diminished, thanks to actions, though belated, by state governments. In this respect, two other issues are emerging to this seemingly insoluble post-Diwali problem. The first is poor and inept policing to enforce the sale and burning of crackers from Diwali through the long wedding season.

The second is an inability to improve traffic management so that vehicles do not idle for an inordinately long time at traffic signals. The inadequacy of public-transport infrastructure adds to the crisis. Given that construction bans are becoming the norm each winter, it is incumbent on state authorities to design a mechanism to compensate temporarily unemployed workers. Since 2020, all three NCR states have been charging a labour cess of 1 per cent of the cost on construction projects, ostensibly to spend the amount raised on labour-welfare schemes. The figures are not small: In 2023, for instance, Delhi collected 44,200 crore from labour cess. Compensating workers laid off due to the GRAP 4 rule would be a good way to spend this money rather than on ephemeral welfare schemes that benefit few workers. The means to do so now exist via the database on the e-shram portal, on which unorganised sector workers can register, and compensating them should not be difficult, with states moving towards cash transfers. As with the pandemic lockdown, which impacted migrant labour for months to come, the most vulnerable sections of society should not be made to bear the consequences of what is clearly a policy failure.

# Time for AI in education

...like when printing emerged

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY



"Teachers: AI is coming for your job!" says one news headline. "Will AI kill meaningless jobs in universities?" asks another headline. "Students use AI to cheat in university exams," says a third. Every day, nowadays, headlines like these are thrown at us, not just by online newspapers but by journals from some of the most reputed educational institutions in the world. How to make sense of all that is being said about the role of AI, artificial intelligence, is going to play in the world of school, college, and postgraduate education?

If you reflect for a while, what is being said is that the field of education is on its way to a revolutionary makeover and a worry as a person strongly anchored in the Indian middle-class belief that a good education system is the most important driver of progress as well as economic well-being is this: Are we as a country doing the right thing with AI in our schools, colleges, Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), Indian Institutes of Technology, and medical colleges?

Till now, one has lived calmly in the belief that AI, like other technology innovations of the recent past such as computers and the internet, functions as a useful tool to assist the current education system we live with. But what is facing us now is that the time-tested methods of human learning and teaching, our institutions of schools and colleges and universities, and systems of exams and tests may have to be fun-

damentally changed, thanks to AI.

My personal view as a person who spends five hours a day on python programming, testing many of the emerging algorithms for my entertainment (for me, the equivalent of what most of my friends do, watching cricket matches on TV or mobile phones), so far has been that a lot of the headlines about AI are hype and astonishing news such as Microsoft paying \$14 billion for a stake in OpenAI (the company behind ChatGPT) was merely an attempt to get technology that would help them beat Google in search that business which gushes billions of dollars in revenue, but now I am starting to worry that there is more at stake in AI technology than just market share and revenue, particularly in crucial areas like education.

I myself use ChatGPT many times a day for things that occasionally befuddle me, for example my question: "How many minutes does an adult man have to walk in the evening to keep good health?" And ChatGPT's answer: "An adult man should aim for 30 to 60 minutes of brisk walking in the evening to maintain good health. Walking at a pace that raises your heart rate but still allows conversation is ideal for cardiovascular health, weight management, and stress relief." That comforted me because it confirmed what I had been doing based on my doctor's recommendation was on the right track.

If I had asked a similar question to a search engine, it would have given me an unending set of links to

AJIT BALAKRISHNAN

## Two markets in one: Not seen earlier

Over the past two months, in four separate columns, I have highlighted the significant slowdown in the Indian economy, which is now clearly reflected in the stock prices of major sectors such as passenger cars, consumer goods, banks, financial services, and infrastructure. The two key market indices, the Nifty and Sensex, peaked on September 27 and have since shown little momentum. A sharp two-day rally, a day before and after the Maharashtra election results, was seen as a lucky break for foreign institutional investors (FIIs) to resume their selling. While each such wave of selling will be countered by some buying, the bullish fervour is missing. The traditional year-end rally is due, especially because the past two months were dismal. But there is a more intriguing aspect of the market, hidden behind the Nifty moves.

Between September 27 and November 29, the Nifty was down 8 per cent. However, amazingly enough, both the Nifty and BSE smallcap indices were down only 3 per cent and the Nifty microcap such as electronics manufacturing services (EMS), recycling, smart metering, and data centres are dominated by small companies. These hot sectors are not represented in the indices in any manner except partly through one company, Larsen & Toubro, which has been a surprisingly tepid performer. The Nifty and Sensex consist of big banks (stake bank and highly growing), consumer companies (not growing), software companies (average growth in single digits), and commodity

companies, some of which are from the public sector. All these sectors are struggling against the headwinds of high interest rates.

Bank credit is not growing because companies are still focused on deleveraging their balance sheets, while higher interest cost is squeezing the net interest margins of banks. Meanwhile, the stock markets are more than willing to fund any reasonably promising growth story, making equity capital far more attractive than bank credit. Consumer companies are grappling with weak demand, driven by stagnant income growth among the middle class and below. Software companies get growth boosters mainly with disruptive cycles such as dot-com, back office automation, or banking software and finance operations.

The last significant cycle was driven by the adoption of technology to manage the challenges posed by pandemic restrictions on companies, employees, and consumers. It remains uncertain whether the current AI boom will benefit or disrupt Indian software companies. Note that ChatGPT is a small engineering company based in the US with a market cap of \$100 billion and a growth rate (CAGR) in profit of 28 per cent. The only bright spot in the Nifty and Sensex is pharmaceutical companies, although the fastest-growing ones are outside these indices.

This tech-heavy investment landscape is a very exciting place for investors. They comprise businesses that are easier to understand and their market liquidity is high; foreign portfolios are full of them. But they pale in comparison to smaller companies, which today come from an array of sectors mentioned above. They form the second and far more dynamic market, which is eclipsed by the headlines made by Nifty behemoths. For example, a small engineering company based in India, with a market cap of just 44,000 crore, exports 65 per cent of its output and has notched up a 54 per cent CAGR growth rate in net profit over the past five years. A pharmaceutical company which avoided the beaten track of rushing into Western markets and concentrated on South America has recorded a CAGR in profit of 42 per cent over 10 years. Another listed EMS company has recorded a CAGR in profit of 39 per cent in 10 years. Its market-cap is pushing

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websites, which I would then have to open, read, and absorb. Human-conversation mode, I guess, is one key reason we all run to ChatGPT and similar AI tools often.

Then there are questions I don't even know who to ask, for example "Please tell me why there are so many unoccupied high-rise buildings in Bombay?" ChatGPT's answer: "Unoccupied high-rise buildings in Bombay result from high property prices, regulatory delays, unsold inventory, developer bankruptcies, and limited affordability for middle-class buyers amidst urban challenges."

Such an answer helps me understand the basic underlying issues.

Today, the worry the world over is that students, at school or college, can use ChatGPT or tools like that on their mobile phones to beat any type of exam questions, be they essays to be written, or multiple-choice questions, or computer programming puzzles posed. As a result of this, carrying mobile phones into exam rooms has been prohibited by law for practically all levels of exam in India, be it the exams of the Central Board of Secondary Education or IIM entrance tests. But all this is making me wonder whether a more fundamental change is in the pipeline. The "teach" and "examine" in schools and colleges. The current system is that students sit passively in classes for many hours each day and go to active academic work like reading and writing at home ("homework"). There have been suggestions from many quarters (among them from Sat Khan, the founder chief executive officer of the Khan Academy in the US) that the "teach" and "examine" in schools and colleges. 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# THE IDEAS PAGE

## When court undermines itself

By failing to uphold an earlier SC ruling on Places of Worship Act, judiciary has paved the way for deepening divisions between communities



DUSHYANT DAVE

THE PLACES OF Worship Act, which was enacted by Parliament in 1991, protects and secures the fundamental values of the Constitution. The law imposes two unwavering and mandatory norms. A bar is imposed by Section 3 on the conversion of a place of worship of any religious denomination. The law preserves the religious character of every place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947. Towards achieving this purpose, it provides for the abatement of suits and legal proceedings with respect to the conversion of the religious character of any place of worship existing on August 15, 1947. Coupled with this, the Act imposes a bar on the institution of fresh suits or legal proceedings.

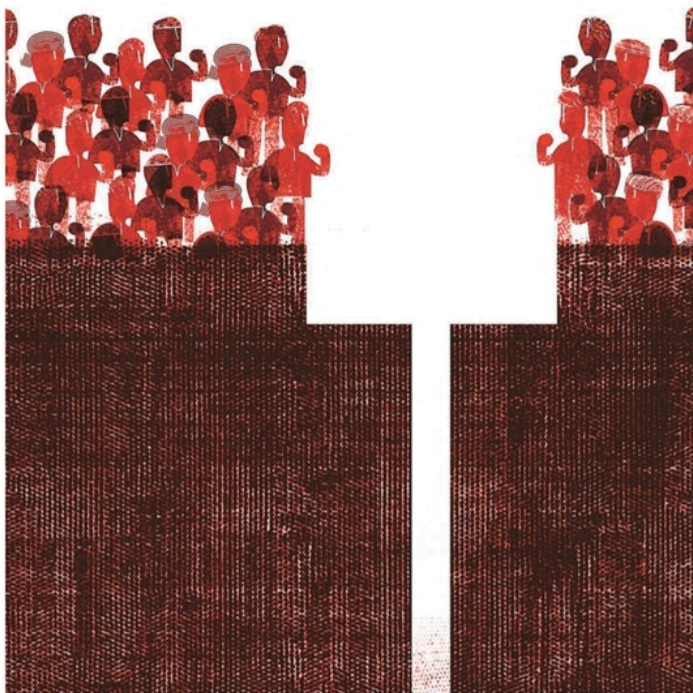
"The law addresses itself to the state as much as to every citizen of the nation. Its norms bind those who govern the affairs of the country at every level. The state has, by enacting the law, enforced a constitutional commitment and operationalised its constitutional obligations to uphold the equality of all religions and secularism, which is a part of the basic features of the Constitution. Historical wrongs cannot be remedied by the people taking the law into their hands... In preserving the character of public places of worship, Parliament has mandated in no uncertain terms that history and its wrongs shall not be used as instruments to oppress the present and the future." This is the law, laid out by five judges of the Supreme Court in the Ram Janmabhoomi temple case.

The Supreme Court set aside the following finding by Justice Sharma of the Allahabad High Court: "Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 does not debar those cases where declaration is sought for a period prior to the Act came into force or for enforcement of right which was recognised before coming into force of the Act." The apex court declared that "the above conclusion of Justice DV Sharma is directly contrary to the provisions of Section 4(2)."

To my mind, there is a clear and categorical declaration of law by the Supreme Court concerning the 1991 Act.

The Court held that "Parliament determined that independence from colonial rule furnishes a constitutional basis for healing the injustices of the past by providing the confidence to every religious community that their places of worship be preserved and that their character will not be altered." It went on to assert: "This court cannot entertain claims that stem from the action of Mughal rulers against Hindu places of worship in a court of law today. For any person who seeks solace or recourse against the actions of any number of ancient rulers, the law is not the answer." The Court, apologetically held, "On 6.12.1992 the structure of the mosque was brought down and the mosque was destroyed. The destruction of the mosque took place in breach of the order of status quo and the assurance given to this court. The destruction of the mosque and the obliteration of the Islamic structure was an egregious violation of the rule of law."

Yet, a series of suits and appeals are being filed and entertained with impunity by courts across India, including the Supreme Court, concerning various mosques across the country — from Varanasi to Mathura to Sambhal



CR Sankumar

and even the dargah in Ajmer.

Chief Justices S A Bobde and D Y Chandrachud presided over benches, with other learned judges, that undermined the Court's previous rulings and cleared the ground for dangerous situations. Likely taking a cue from such interventions, judges at the district and high courts are intervening at the instance of litigants who themselves are prohibited under the law from filing such suits. Far from furthering it, these judges may well be striking the death knell of secularism. Given this, one wonders if it is possible for a court to be in contempt of itself, especially when it is quick to haul up others for contempt of its orders. Significantly, these suits, and the courts allowing them in defiance of the law, resonate with the politics of those in power. All of this at what cost?

The divide between the majority and minority communities has been widening in recent years. Peace and harmony are being compromised on a daily basis in the name of "love jihad", "land jihad", "vote jihad", "bulldozer 'justice' and mob lynching. Four innocent lives were lost at Sambhal, arguably because of the judiciary's actions — or lack thereof. BJP governments appear all too ready to implement questionable orders of the Court with unusual promptness, while orders that help ordinary citizens may take months and years. Perhaps the judicial leaders need to be reminded of the words of great Indians during Constituent Assembly debates.

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On May 25, 1949, Sardar Patel said, while submitting the Minority Report: "... it is for us who happen to be in a majority to think about what the minorities feel, and how we in their position would feel if we were treated in the manner in which they are treated."

B R Ambedkar, fearing that some members were prepared to go to war, said on December 17, 1946: "It will be a war on Muslims. If there is anybody who has in his mind the project of solving the Hindu-Muslim problem by war... in order that Muslims will be subjugated and made to surrender to the Constitution that might be prepared without their consent, this country would be involved in perpetually conquering them." Again on November 4, 1948, he warned that "It is for the majority to realise its duty not to discriminate against minorities. Whether the minorities will continue or will vanish must depend upon this habit of the majority. The moment the majority loses the habit of discriminating against the minority, the minorities can have no ground to exist. They will vanish."

India needs to develop, socially, economically and politically for the betterment of its people. It does not need violence. Peace alone can lead to prosperity. The sooner those at the helm of the nation — in the legislature, executive and judiciary — realise their duties, the better it is for We, the People.

The writer is a senior advocate practising before the Supreme Court of India

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"MPs were right to allow for further detailed scrutiny... to ensure the terminally ill adults (end of life) bill addresses both ethical concerns and practical safeguards effectively. The desire to alleviate suffering is deeply compelling."

— THE GUARDIAN

## The Gilgamesh solution

Message on Ancient Sumerian tablets for Corporate India: Conflicting forces can be made to generate a positive sum outcome



OVER THE BARREL  
BY VIKRAM S MEHTA

THE OLDEST SURVIVING tablets of written text are from the Sumerian civilisation. They date back 4,200 years and tell the story of King Gilgamesh of Uruk. Gilgamesh was a tyrant who brutalised his subjects. The people were unhappy and appealed to the pantheon of Sumerian deities. In response, the gods created an exact double of Gilgamesh called Enkidu with comparable power and authority. The result was the creation of a "narrow corridor" in which both checked and balanced each other into cooperating rather than competing. Uruk returned to peace.

The "Gilgamesh solution" is to create a space in which conflicting forces can work together to generate a positive sum outcome. I learnt of this solution from Nobel Laureates Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson. They wrote about it in their book *Why Nations Fail* in the context of the relationship between an autocratic state and society. I decided to apply it to a contemporary corporate dilemma.

The key factors for business success in the 21st century are fundamentally no different than those that brought wealth and power to the American robber barons of the late 19th century. Andrew Carnegie, John D Rockefeller, and Cornelius Vanderbilt made their fortunes by focusing on cost control, quality, operational excellence, innovation and leadership. These factors remain the necessary ingredients for success. But they are not sufficient. One additional factor has come into play — ESG. Businesses will not succeed if their operations despoil the environment (E), they are insensitive to social needs (S) and/or they are unethical in governance (G). ESG was not a consideration for the robber barons. Most international companies today would lose their license to operate if they ignored it.

ESG reflects the paradigmatic shift that has taken place since Milton Friedman pronounced that the "business of business is exclusively business". Corporate boards and CEOs now have to navigate the cross currents of stakeholder (social) interests built around sustainability, social responsibility and ethical governance, shareholder expectations for dividends and return on equity, and management aspirations regarding career, recognition and wealth creation. The Gilgamesh solution offers a conceptual compass to steer through these currents.

I have been an independent, non-executive director of a number of companies for the past decades. My experience covers multiple domains including FMCG, aviation, engineering, auto, media and hospitality. One thread runs through the companies. They are determined to integrate ESG into their corporate norms. This effort is not to "do good" or "feel good". They expend it because it is good business. They know the failure to integrate would hurt corporate reputation, erode share prices, raise capital costs and deter investors and talent.

This effort is, however, not easy to sustain. The market is a powerful counterforce. To illustrate: International petroleum majors have been under societal and investor pressure to cap their production of fossil fuels and invest disproportionately in renewables. Exxon has resisted this pressure while Shell and BP announced they would slowly but steadily reduce the production of crude oil. Between 2019 and 2023, Exxon's share price rose by 70 per cent, that of Shell by 15 per cent while BP's declined by 15 per cent. The median return in renewables over the same period was 2 per cent. This signal from the market has been difficult to ignore and in 2023, Shell and BP lifted the cap.

The point is societal interests, shareholder expectations and individual aspirations do not naturally converge. This is because of conflicting human and market dynamics. To align them towards a common goal requires a well-structured plan. The "Gilgamesh solution" suggests that such a plan adopts, *inter alia*, a two-pronged approach. One, it endeavours to build institutions that facilitate cooperation and not competition. The Sumerian gods created such institutions by investing Gilgamesh and Enkidu with equal powers and authority. Corporate India will have to handle this task without divine support. A first step would be to persuade regulators to stop parachuting mandates from above. Regulators must appreciate that the costs of compliance are high and all too often, the value added is marginal.

Companies, for example, are required to provide annual progress reports on ESG. Many of them create such reports for their own internal purposes. They do not need the regulator's nudge. But those that do not can easily turn the mandate into a tick-the-box exercise on virtuous signaling. They are in command of the information and methodology for processing this information. They can decide what and how to present the facts, for instance, GHG emissions, waste matter recycling, green energy use, water management, diversity and inclusiveness. The regulator does not have the expertise or time to establish the veracity of this information.

The point is that such compliance measures do not alter the reality on ground. They detract from more productive efforts and skew the playing field in favour of larger corporates that have the resources to comply. Regulators should adopt the principle of "trust and verify". If nothing else, this would help create institutions that facilitate convergence.

Two, squeezed between the demands and expectations of society, shareholders, and the regulator, there is a "narrow corridor" in which divergent interests can be balanced. The effort should be to find this corridor and move into it. This requires not just the institutions that check the innate human tendency to seek more power but also a process by which all parties agree to walk down this corridor together. The conditions precedent for such a process is the presumption of co-equality and continual "interaction".

Corporates face a hard truth. There is no trade-off between profits and principles. Whilst they cannot afford principles without profits, they do not deserve profits without principles. The "Gilgamesh solution" helps crack this conundrum.

The writer is chairman and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress



NANDITESH NILAY

I DON'T THINK we can solve our environmental problem in a hurry. Every politician can promise jobs, money in schemes, national prestige, global power, and great infrastructure. But it will take quite a while before a politician will get up on stage and say vote for me because this is my plan to clean your air and rivers, beautiful parks for your children to play in, your parents to walk in, and ensure that the sky above you is blue. Because, let's be honest, we wouldn't believe that net.

This is because, in the market society where we are used to buying our way to better things. We know this works: Pay a higher fee, get a better school; pay more, get a hospital with an air-conditioned waiting room and a shorter queue; pay for Vande Bharat, escape the three-tier sleeper coach with unclean toilets at either end.

So, we will seal our apartments from the outside world with double-plated glass windows. Buy an air purifier for each room; switch on the one in the car. Get the government to announce a work-from-home system and let our children study from home. Ban construction, lock away old cars, buy EVs, or order a cab. After all, we have the pandemic model. So we can create our

## We don't breathe the same air

Pollution does not affect everyone equally — it's time we address this

non-polluting bubbles and live inside them. But, just like the virus, the air has a sneaky habit of entering through cracks in our windows, through the pores of the masks we wear. If we aren't able to fly away to Goa or Bangalore, picking our destination on the basis of its AQI, we will need to live with this. And we will use our credit cards to find a solution.

There's one little problem. Unlike in the case of Covid, there is no vaccine to inoculate us against poor AQI. Even our Rs 25-crore apartments in Gurgaon, unless we seal them up like an ICI, will let the air in. Of course, those who work for us will commute to our homes, and cough and fall ill, unless we agree to let them live with us in these sealed chambers. The poor suffer more. Pollution is not the great leveller many think it is. We blame everyone for this mess except ourselves — usually those who are lower down in the social and economic pyramid than us.

We blame the farmers. Of course, stubble burning pollutes the air. But year after year, we hear the same arguments and name-calling rather than a concerted national action plan to support them in ending this practice. Construction churns out

dust so we say ban it, not knowing that in an economy like ours, this means hardship for the millions of daily-wage workers who make their living at these sites. Burning of garbage, two-wheelers and coal-fired chulhas are all behind the toxic air and are all indispensable elements of daily life for many. We don't think twice before welcoming work from home and study from home, ignorant of what this means for the majority who don't have reliable wifi at home, whose children will fall behind on the learning curve, who may lose their job if they don't show up at their employer's door.

What is the way forward? We need a national plan that touches each of us and that requires each of us to make a sacrifice. The poor and the marginalised need to be incentivised with material resources, not punished. This is exactly what we argue at every COP, when the developed nations lecture us, saying "don't do this, don't do that." And just as we argue, with reason and moral power, that the Global South should not be made to pay for the greed of the North and to arrest its own development plans, we need to do the same here. We cannot have an action plan that does not take into account the inequality in our

society — as if a person with an SUV and central air conditioning makes the "same sacrifice" as their driver or domestic help. As if everyone has the same history and the same access to resources — the same ability to withdraw into a bubble.

The Global South is our local neighbourhood: It is the farmer, the daily-wage worker, the child in a government school, the first-generation college student, the young person looking for a job and the domestic help cycling to our apartment complexes each day. It is those who can't afford inhalers and masks, and all those who work to make our lives better. They may not breathe the filtered air, they don't have the many masks that we can buy off any shelf. The only thing they have is the same right to life, right to dignity, right to equality as per the Constitution. This calls for a governance of compassion and a governance of ethics.

As we celebrate the 75th year of the Constitution, all we can do is take a deep breath and hope for change.

The writer is the author of *Being Good, Aaiye, Insaan Banen and Ethics, He teaches and trains courses on ethics, values and behaviour*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### STAND TOGETHER

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Don't let old India kill the new" (IE, November 30). The controversies surrounding the Sambhal and Ajmer Sharif mosques demand urgent attention. The timing of these disputes is particularly sensitive, as it coincides with the 32nd anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition. The recurring disputes over places of worship risk reopening old wounds and disrupting social harmony. Let this anniversary serve as a call to strengthen our resolve for unity and inclusivity.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "No winners in Pak" (IE, November 29). Things are falling apart in Pakistan again. The "do-or-die" protest by jailed ex-PM Imran Khan's party has been quelled brutally by the Shehbaz Sharif government. The political turmoil triggered by Khan's arrest in May last year has worsened. The ruling PML-N, in cahoots with the military establishment, has left no stone unturned to keep Khan out of power. Their credibility has been hit by allegations of stealing the February mandate. The government must realise that repression won't solve the nation's problems.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "No winners in Pak" (IE, November 29). Despite the crackdown, PMT possesses enormous street power and Imran Khan's calls for jail for protests have set the parties to wars as a showdown. This is happening at a time when Pakistan is struggling to stabilise an economy battered by hyperinflation, a falling currency, and depleting reserves. The government's "might is right" approach will push Pakistan deeper into anarchy and unrest. It must realise that this no-holds-barred repression will not solve the beleaguered nation's political and economic problems.

Sankar Paul, Nadia

### THE OLD PLAYBOOK

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Ghost in the machine" (November 29). The Congress is once again playing on its old playbook of blaming the EVM for its electoral defeats. Instead of adopting new strategies and crafting a compelling narrative, the party has confined itself to criticising the BJP, particularly PM Modi. By now, it should recognise that such an approach is unlikely to yield success. To regain relevance, the Congress must work to match the BJP both in strategy and execution. An inspiring vision that resonates with the aspirations of the people is the need of the hour.

Vijal Pant, Hampur



# 10 The EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

WHEN YOU HAVE EXHAUSTED ALL POSSIBILITIES, REMEMBER THIS: YOU HAVEN'T.

—THOMAS EDISON

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

### HIT AND MISS

Cash transfer schemes may contribute to election wins. That's not the end of the story

FROM LAKSHMIR BHANDAR in West Bengal and Ladli Behna in Madhya Pradesh to Maiya Samman in Jharkhand and Ladki Bahin Yojana in Maharashtra — all these women-targeted schemes, providing Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,500 per month to eligible beneficiaries, appear to have paid political dividends by helping re-elected ruling parties in their respective states. According to Axis Bank, 14 states now have income transfer schemes that cover roughly a fifth of India's adult female population, with an annualised spend of Rs 2 lakh crore. Fiscal purists may balk at such transfers — even seen as a precursor to the Universal Basic Income outlined in the 2016-17 Economic Survey — but they may have eased the pain of inflation for those worst affected in these times. Nor can one underestimate the positive impact of an assured monthly payout on reducing insecurity and promoting independence in decision-making — according to some readings of the final tallies, women voters have signaled as much in the recent Maharashtra and Jharkhand Assembly polls.

That said, these schemes aren't without drawbacks. To start with, their effect on boosting incomes and consumption demand may not be as much as one would assume. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Ladki Bahin beneficiaries in Maharashtra have responded to the Rs 1,500/month grant by choosing to work less days/hours and using more of that freed-up time at home. The scheme may have not added to, as much as substituted for, income that would have been earned from tilling the fields and harvesting produce. On the other hand, the reduced supply of labour has pushed up production costs for farmers and small business owners, eating into their earnings and spending power. The multiplier effect of government transfers, in terms of putting more money into the hands of households and stimulating private consumption expenditure, therefore, may be quite limited. These payments should ideally be pegged at levels offering a modicum of protection against inflation, without undermining or crowding-out incentives to work.

Not less serious a concern relates to cash transfers emerging as an alternative to building state capacity. Technology — be it Aadhaar-seeded bank accounts or point-of-sale machines — makes it possible today to transfer cash directly and make available free foodgrain to targeted beneficiaries at population scale sans much leakage. Governments, too, find it more expedient to deliver these than investing in public education, healthcare, irrigation or agricultural research and extension that take time to yield results. When voters also turn increasingly transactional and short-term — seeing for themselves the deteriorating standards of government schools and hospitals and, therefore, not believing in the state's ability to do good beyond the immediate — that's when the culture of freebies ("revdi") becomes entrenched in the system. The cost of it is not just fiscal. India badly needs government policy aligned with long-term national, not near-term electoral, interests.

### A TIME TO REBUILD

Failure to create trust in minorities could erode credibility of Muhammad Yunus-led government in Bangladesh

IN THE FIRST week of August, after a student-led movement forced the then Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to step down, micro-finance pioneer Muhammad Yunus had described the moment as the country's "Second Liberation". But if the uprising kindled hopes of reviving democracy in Bangladesh, it also exposed the country's communal fissures and faultlines. In the three months since he took charge of Bangladesh's interim government, Yunus has spoken of "national unity" and visited Hindu temples several times. But his gestures do not appear reassuring in the face of the continuing attacks on homes, businesses, and places of worship of minority communities. Bangladesh's interim government, in fact, seems to have aggravated the disquiet by cracking down on people who have taken to the streets to ask for safety against looting and arson. Last week, the police arrested a former member of ISKCON, who has been at the forefront of protests demanding swift trial in cases involving persecution of minorities and compensation and rehabilitation of the victims. The protestors have claimed that two more monks have been taken into police custody, but the Bangladesh government hasn't confirmed these arrests. Its failure to own up to the crisis invites questions about the Yunus-led government's sincerity in rebuilding the trust between communities which is necessary to bring about the reconciliation Bangladesh urgently needs.

All communities participated in Bangladesh's Liberation Movement against Pakistan, and its vision for an inclusive society is well-documented. Yet almost every moment of crisis in the country has been accompanied by an increase in the discrimination faced by minorities. Religious nationalism, conspicuous during the long periods of military rule in Dhaka, heightened the insecurities of Bangladesh's Hindus and Christians. When democracy returned in the 1990s, these communities became collateral victims in the struggles between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Though the League professed secularism, religious extremism increased under Sheikh Hasina's watch, especially in the past 10 years. Instead of attempting to strengthen the social fabric and addressing the underlying causes behind the discord, Hasina responded with increased authoritarianism, which only deepened the divides.

According to a report by the Bangladesh branch of the Berlin-based Human Rights group, Transparency International, minorities have been targeted in more than 2,000 incidents of violence since Sheikh Hasina fled the country. Last week, the Bangladesh High Court said that it expected the country's government to "maintain law and order and protect the lives and property of people". The Yunus government must pay urgent heed to these words. Failure to do so will erode the international goodwill it had gained after replacing the Hasina regime.

### FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



RAJANI SINHA

INDIA HAS BEEN enjoying high economic growth even in the midst of global turmoil. After a strong growth of 8.2 per cent in 2023-24, followed by 6.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2024-25, GDP growth has decelerated to 5.4 per cent in the second quarter. While growth was expected to moderate, as was indicated by some of the high frequency macro-economic indicators and muted corporate performance, the quantum of deceleration turned out much sharper than anticipated. The important question to answer now is whether this is a temporary brake or should we brace for a lower GDP growth rate going forward.

The sectoral break-up shows that growth has been pulled down mainly because of poor industrial sector performance, specifically mining, manufacturing and electricity segments. Industrial sector growth has decelerated to 3.6 per cent in the second quarter, compared to 8.3 per cent in the previous one. On the other hand, with a good kharif harvest, the recovery of the agriculture sector continued, while the services sector also maintained its broad momentum.

The expenditure-wise break-up of the GDP data showed moderation in consumption, investment and exports. Private consumption growth moderated to 6 per cent, but remains relatively healthy compared to the 4 per cent growth recorded in 2023-24. High frequency economic indicators like FMCG sales volume, two-wheeler sales have been signalling improvement in rural consumption, supported by healthy agriculture production. However, urban consumption seems to be moderating after the sharp jump seen post Covid. High food inflation is having a bearing on overall consumption spending. Slackness in the urban job market, specifically related to the IT sector, is also resulting in poor growth in household income. Moreover, the recent tightening of retail lending norms would have also had some bearing on consumer spending.

Investment in the economy was being strongly supported by the government sector. However, government capex contracted sharply in the first quarter due to election re-

## A push for growth

Global environment is likely to remain uncertain. It is critical for government to strengthen domestic demand

Let's now come to the critical issue of what to expect going forward. After the sharp drop seen in the second quarter, we expect GDP growth to pick up in the second half of the year. Consumption growth is likely to see some improvement in the coming quarters supported by healthy growth in agriculture production and rural demand. A likely moderation in food inflation in the coming months would be another factor supportive of consumption. However, we need to be wary of global developments and the risk of imported inflation.

Government capex that had been weak in the first half is likely to pick up strongly in the second half. In the first half, the central and state governments (consolidated) have only reached 37 per cent and 28 per cent respectively of their budgeted capex for the year. Hence, we can expect a strong pick up in the second half of the year. Even for private investment, there are some positive signals coming from the order book of capital goods and road development companies. The order book of a representative sample of capital goods companies increased by 24 per cent in 2023-24 as against a growth of 4.5 per cent in the preceding four years. In the first six months of this year, the order book of

related restrictions and has been slow to recover. Centre's capex has fallen by 15 per cent in the first half of this year, while the consolidated capex by state governments has fallen by 11 per cent during this period. Investments by major central public sector enterprises also contracted by 11 per cent in the first half, though there has been some improvement in the second quarter.

Coming to the external sector, growth in exports of goods and services has also moderated. Monthly trade data shows that while merchandise exports have been relatively muted in the midst of low global economic growth, services sector exports have sustained their healthy growth momentum.

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this representative sample has further increased by around 10 per cent. Similarly, we find that for a representative sample of road development companies, the order book has picked up by a sharp 20 per cent in the first six months of this financial year. This could be an indication of a likely pick up in capex in other sectors too in the subsequent quarters. However, the challenge of excess capacity in China and consequent flooding of other markets like India will remain a deterrent for capacity expansion in the country.

Overall GDP growth for this year is likely to be lower at around 6.5 per cent. While this growth number is still healthy, it is concerning as India moves lower from 7-8 per cent growth recorded in the last two years. It is also time to introspect as to what is required to push up India's potential GDP growth. In the last few years, the government focussed on investment and that boded well for economic recovery post the pandemic. However, there is a need to now give a boost to consumption and more importantly widen the consumption base, ensuring that all segments participate in India's growth journey. There is a need for fresh triggers to boost consumer sentiments and household spending. A strong push to job creation could provide that trigger. This is especially critical when there are concerns around job creation due to automation.

In the upcoming budget, the government could also look at providing some tax benefits to households to spur consumption. A spurt in domestic consumption would also provide the required trigger for a sustained pick up in private capex. The global environment is likely to remain uncertain in the coming year with implications for the Indian economy. The Donald Trump government in the US and a likely trade war will add further volatility to the global scenario. This makes it even more critical for the government to strengthen domestic demand to ensure sustainable growth.

The writer is Chief Economist, CarEdge Ratings



KAUSHIK DAS GUPTA

THE WORST is over for Navjot Kaur Sidhu. So announced Navjot Singh Sidhu, her partner for more than 30 years, and the one who shared, perhaps most intimately, the pain and difficulties that cancer brings. Every suffering is an incursion of stoicism and privacy. A life-threatening disease demands barring bodies to surgeons, nurses, and hospital staff, standing naked before X-ray machines, exposing ourselves to scans and biopsies, wrecking even the strongest resolve to be the sole author of our story. Human beings, in any case, were never hard-wired to suffer alone. There is, therefore, unalloyed humanity in leaning on someone close in the face of the intrusions and indignities inflicted by invading cancer cells and the indiscriminate destruction wreaked by chemotherapy — persistent nausea, nerve damage, hair loss, depression. We can only guess that Navjot Kaur Sidhu, a doctor and politician herself, chose her husband to relate her lived experiences with the Big C. By all accounts, it was he who was with her through most of the trying times. Her story is his too — at least a large part of it.

Jaagris and sobanis to Sidhu Pooji. It's wonderful that he reached out with the good news — the relief and joy of the Sidhus are ours too. On social media, and over a press conference, the cricketer-turned-Congress leader shared details of Navjot Kaur's recovery: A "disciplined" lifestyle, with a prominent role for yoga, and food habits during her recovery — lemon water, apple cider vinegar, neem leaves, beetroot juice, walnuts, tea with cinnamon, cloves, a pinch of jaggery. The cancer had metastasized, he said, almost implying that the dietary changes had upturned a sentence pronounced by doctors.

## HUGS, SIDHU PAAJI

But do tell the full story behind your wife's cancer recovery

Perhaps Sidhu deserves the benefit of the doubt. Even though he has a record of shooting his mouth off, the person in the videos online is, after all, the companion and caregiver of a patient who was battling a life-threatening disease a few weeks back. There is something much more elemental than relief or a show of triumphalism when people let the world know how they put difficult times behind them.

That was unfair, not just to the physicians and medical community who helped tide the Sidhus through the worst, but also to decades of painstaking research that has ensured in many cases, therapy outpaces the growth of cancer cells in the bodies of patients. A growing number of metastatic cases are being cured, a reversal of fortunes that seemed unthinkable even a decade ago. Chemotherapy, drugs, and radiation drive cancer narratives — increasingly that of survivors like Navjot Kaur. Oncologists are trying their best to be minimally intrusive and using the human immune system, instead, to fight off malignancy.

Perhaps Sidhu deserves the benefit of the doubt. Even though he has a record of shooting his mouth off, the person in the videos is, after all, the companion and caregiver of a patient who was battling a life-threatening disease a few weeks back. There is something much more elemental than relief or a show of triumphalism when people let the world know how they put difficult times behind them. Behind Sidhu's social media posts and press conference, also lies the innately human urge to save others from suffering — and as a politician, he possibly feels even more compelled to be a do-gooder. The problem is that in a social-media universe, where lines between the prescriptions of the specialist and the citizen doctor are blurred, this impulse can do more harm than good. Especially in the Indian cancer ecosystem, which teems with myths and misconceptions. Desperate patients and their families often succumb to the allure of "alternative medicines". Less than a week after Sidhu's announcement, a Google search throws up "Key Points" of the "Diet Plan" he had re-

vealed amidst the exhilaration and relief of his "Nona" being "cancer free". Videos surfaced in which Sidhu declares that he scanned the internet to devise the method to "kill cancer" by stopping carbohydrates. Neem and haldi, well within the reach of the poor, are antidotes, he says. The fundamental medical caveat, that every cancer patient is different and requires individualised treatment plans, is not even a footnote in these stories.

Sidhu has since clarified that Navjot Kaur's recovery was driven by a team of doctors, who he holds "in the highest esteem". The diet chart was only a "facilitator". And, even before his statement on the lifestyle changes Navjot Kaur made during recovery, he had said that his wife had received most of her treatment at government hospitals, including Government Rajendra Medical College in Patiala.

Should we then let the matter rest? Hugs again Sidhu Pooji. We wish you and Navjot Kaur many more healthy years. But do amplify the message that a team of oncologists at a government hospital in a Tier 3 city was behind her cancer recovery. As a politician — and a cricket commentator — you know that ultimately what matters most is how you say something and with what force. Especially, when you are trying to build a narrative for good. That would be in the spirit of sharing in which you had put the videos.

Perhaps, one day, Navjot Kaur will tell her story for the time being, on we, at least, expect a message that a sole recourse to "natural remedies" like neem and haldi can lead to missed chances for timely medical intervention in patients with the life-threatening disease?

kaushik.dasgupta@expressindia.com

## DECEMBER 2, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### RAJIV'S POLL CAMPAIGN

RAJIV GANDHI LAUNCHED the Congress-I election campaign with a whirlwind tour of several UP towns and a violent attack on the opposition, which he said was backing forces trying to break the nation. Making a dramatic entry in a blue and grey IAF helicopter, the 40-year-old Prime Minister had the crowds listening to him in keen silence.

### OPTIMISM ON INDIA-US

THE FOUR-MEMBER American Senate delegation expressed optimism about the future

of Indo-American relations at the end of their two-day visit. The Senators said: "We leave with a renewed sense of friendship between our two nations and people and look forward to returning to this impressive country."

### ZIA'S REFERENDUM

CHIEF MARTIAL LAW Administrator General Zia-ul-Haq, surprised his political detractors by announcing a nationwide referendum on December 19 to seek people's approval to continue as president of Pakistan for another five years. General Zia, who seized power seven years ago in a military coup, said that people

would be asked to give their verdict on whether they approved his regime's policies and Islamisation drive since 1977.

### ASSASSIN TESTIFIES

SATWANT SINGH, the surviving assassin of Indira Gandhi, said he was motivated by Beant Singh to kill Indira Gandhi after Operation Blue Star in the Golden Temple, special investigating agency sources said. In a statement before the additional chief metropolitan magistrate, Satwant said that first Beant Singh fired shots at Indira Gandhi from his revolver. After 30 seconds, he opened fire at her with his sten gun.











# STRANGE ARE THE WAYS OF OPPOSITION PARTIES

WHY is it that the politicians are losing balance in the country and crossing all limits of decency while making public statements? In November, the Trinamool Congress leader (TMC) and West Bengal minister Akhilesh Kumar Ghosh made questionable remarks against the President of India Droupadi Murmu. The TMC leader faced strong criticism from BJP and even from his own party after he made comments about President Murmu's appearance. Not only the minister, the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee also had to apologise for them.

After the major blow suffered by Congress-led Maha Vikas Aghadi in Maharashtra, the opposition, particularly the Congress, has come up with the 'Ba-

hanā' (alibi) that EVMs had failed. They did not stop there. One of the Congress leaders Bhaji Jagtap commented, "EC is a dog sitting outside the PM's house".

The Congress high command which was a copy of the Constitution saying that they only can protect it did not apologise, nor did it pull up the leader who made such a comment. One of their spokespersons on TV said one should not take it literally and went on to question the surge in poll percentage after the time for polling was over. This despite the EC's explanation a day earlier on why the percentage figures differ. What's more, till Sunday Congress did not file any complaint with the EC.

The Congress had no complaints about EVMs when it won

the Karnataka elections. EVMs worked perfectly when they won the Telangana and recent Jharkhand elections. They also worked very well when the Congress won in Himachal Pradesh and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra got a record victory in West Bengal. The same EVMs have become villains in Haryana and Maharashtra polls. In April 2024, when the opposition raised the issue of malfunctioning of EVMs, the ECI in a written affidavit to the Supreme Court said that no mismatch had been detected ever between the votes counted in the Electronic Voting Machines and the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail slips (VVPATs). It said that it matched the EVM votes with more than 4 crore VVPAT slips and no instance of mismatch was found.

Still, the opposition is not willing to accept their failures.

Let us look at the political scenario in the two Telugu states. There is a lot of buzz in the BRS in Telangana and YSRCP in Andhra Pradesh that Januli elections (One nation one election) would happen soon, and that they are going to be back in power anytime now. Who told them that elections will take place now? Are they fooling themselves or trying to fool the voters? There is no doubt, the BJP wants to get the bill on 'One Nation One Election' passed in the winter session of the Parliament. That does not mean that the elections would be held immediately. There is a long process before it can be implemented.

Moreover, if 'one nation one election' becomes a reality, it

would be for 2029 elections. It is hard to believe that these political parties which swear to protect the Constitution do not know this reality. Apparently, they are trying to mislead their party rank and file and the people of the country.

But they should understand that the parties and the leaders cannot mislead the voters. They are much more intelligent and informed than political parties. The YSRCP and the BRS seem to be working in tandem. The YSRCP chief is even planning to go on district tours saying they are sure to be back in power very soon. It's high time these leaders came out of dream land and worked for the welfare of the people. They should first learn to respect people's verdict by attending the Assembly sessions.

## LETTERS

### Very disturbing court orders

A local court order on a plea to conduct survey in the shrine of Khawaja Garib Nawaz in Ajmer, claiming that it was previously a temple, is a very disturbing court order. The petition filed by Hindu Sena President Vishnu Gupta is nothing but to gain cheap publicity, by referring a book of Har Bilas Sanda and his own "research" of two years that there was a Shiva temple where the dargah. The court ordering a survey is nothing but opening a Pandora box. Smaller Courts are ordering surveys of Majlis like Gyan Wapi mosque, Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal and now in Ajmer Dargah. These types of issues will have destabilising effect on the country. Governments should follow the Places of Worship Act 1991.

Zakir Hussain, Kazipet

### India's growth rate decelerates

INDIA'S real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth slumped to a seven-quarter low of 5.4 per cent in July-September, falling much lower than the consensus estimates of 6.5 per cent. A "sluggish growth" in manufacturing and mining, along with continued slow pace of government expenditure and weak private consumption weighed on the economic growth, shows data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO). The government should take cognisance of the causes and take up remedial measures at the earliest.

C K Ramani, Chennai

### Bangla Hindus face persecution

INDIA has been telling Pakistan to protect minorities since Independence, but to no avail. And since 1971, the same rhetoric was repeated with Bangladesh and again the result is negative. The present dispensation in Bangladesh under the pro-USA Prime Minister Mohammad Yunus would do nothing to stop attacks on Hindus and their religious places in that country. It is hoped things might change after Donald Trump takes over as the 47th President of the USA in January 2025; until then nothing is going to change where persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh is concerned.

Govardhana Myneddu, Vijayawada

THE rising attacks on religious minorities and their places of worship in Bangladesh are alarming. The Yunus-led government seems to be doing pretty little to control the spreading of hatred. India should take initiative to persuade Bangladesh government not to be a mute spectator to the worsening law and order situation there. Though it's not India's policy to intervene in the neighbor's internal matters, it is high time for it to find ways to protect the interests of minorities there. Also, the comments of Shaikh Hasina, who fled her country and took refuge in India, against the Bangla government would not do any good.

Dr DVG Sankar, Rao, Vizianagaram

It is surprising that the people of Bangladesh are continuing protests in a violent way to demand ban on ISKCON even after their court dismissed the petition to do so. Don't they have the practice of respecting their judiciary? If the law has no power there, what is the use of calling that area a country? How long should Hindus be persecuted there with police connivance? Maybe it is better for India to invade Bangladesh and create a separate country for Hindus there as it did in 1971 for opponents of Pakistan.

M Chandrasekhar, Kadapa

### Gukesh Vs Ding: A battle of wits

THE ongoing WCC (FIDE 2024) is showcasing a gripping battle between Indian GM D Gukesh and Ding Liren of China, as they are redefining the art of the game. Both players have demonstrated a blend of caution and brilliance with each accumulating 2.5 points so far. Played in a best-of-14 format, the first to reach 7.5 points claims victory. Though a win still feels distant halfway through, both players are displaying remarkable resilience, making this contest a fascinating and unpredictable spectacle.

P V Prakash, Mumbai

### Cong must prove charges before EC

ECI has called upon Congress for a personal hearing on its complaints. It is a good chance for Congress to question ECI on adding 76 lakh voters after 5 pm, not taking proper action on PM for his polarising speeches, EVM tampering, unprecedented increase of voters after Lok Sabha elections. It is felt that EVMs were helping BJP to show more votes than the votes cast in its favour, and this is so even when Congress had won viz., Karnataka, Wayanad. The explanations by ECI notwithstanding, I.N.D.I.A. bloc must insist on paper voting for all upcoming elections.

P R Ravinder, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Orange alert issued for seven districts in K'taka

BENGALURU: Cyclone 'Fengal' forming along the Tamil Nadu coast, has impacted Karnataka, prompting the India Meteorological Department (IMD) to issue an orange alert for seven districts in the southern interior region.

The districts of Chikmagalur, Hassan, Kodagu, Mandya, Mysuru, Shivamogga, and Chamarajanagar are under an orange alert for heavy rainfall on Monday. A yellow alert has also been issued for Bengaluru Urban, Bengaluru Rural, Kolar, Ramanagara, Dakshina Kannada, and Udupi districts.

According to IMD Regional Director C.S. Patil, heavy to very heavy rainfall is expected in Mysuru, Chamarajanagar, Shivamogga, Chikmagalur, Hassan, Kodagu, and Mandya. Moderate rainfall is likely in Bengaluru, Kolar, Chikballapur, and Ramanagara, while light rain is forecast for parts of north interior Karnataka.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

# 'HEARTBREAKINGLY DEVASTATING'

JESSICA CORBERTT

## US Reportedly Plans to Approve \$680 Million in Arms to Israel

JUST hours after a ceasefire between the Israeli government and Lebanese group Hezbollah took effect, the Financial Times revealed that "US President Joe Biden has provisionally approved a \$680 million weapons sale to Israel," which has also spent the past nearly 14 months decimating the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip.

Citing unnamed people familiar with the matter, the British newspaper reported that "U.S. officials recently briefed Congress on the plan to provide thousands of additional joint direct attack munition kits to Israel, known as IDAMS, as well as hundreds of small-diameter bombs."

The Biden administration's decision to advance the sale was subsequently confirmed by Reuters, which reported that "the package has been in the works for several months. It was first brought to the congressional committees in September then submitted for review in October." Human rights advocates criticise of Israel's assaults on Lebanon and Gaza - which has led to a genocide case at the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant - responded with alarm to the new reporting. "If

these reports are true, it's heartbreakingly devastating news," said Amnesty International U.S. "These are the weapons that our research has shown were used to wipe out entire families, without any discernible military objective."

Amnesty highlighted a trio of resolutions from Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) that would have halted some arms sales to Israel. Although they failed to pass the Senate last week, the group was among several that noted over the course of three votes, 17, 18, and 19 senators supported halting weapons sales, "sending a clear signal that U.S. policy must change."

"Yet, the Biden administration seems to be ready and willing to keep piling more and more, despite Gaza descending into what President Biden just yesterday described as 'hell,'" Amnesty added Wednesday. "Sending more weapons that have been used to maim and kill with impunity doesn't just put in jeopardy Palestinian lives and the elusive cease-fire the president is seeking, but also President Biden's own legacy."

The Institute for Middle East Understanding Policy Project declared Wednesday that "President Biden is spending the final days of his presidency going against the will of most



According to western assessments, around 1,15,000 to 1,60,000 Russian troops have died, 90% of the personnel it had at the beginning of the war. While another 5,00,000 have been injured. To offset these losses, Russia has been recruiting 20,000 new soldiers a month. Recruiting soldiers into the army has never been that easy in Russia even during peacetime. Relying on the North Korean military offers another solution, but North Korean troops have no combat experience

Americans, U.S. law, and international law. The weapons included in this package have been used by Israel in numerous apparent war crimes," the organization noted. "On July 13, 2024, Israel attacked a so-called 'safe zone' in al-Mawasi, in which internally displaced Palestinians were sheltering, killing at least 90 people and injuring hundreds more. A CNN investigation found that Israel carried out this attack with at least one IDAM." John Ramming Chappell, an adviser on legal and poli-

Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Democracy for the Arab World Now, pointed out that "aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity is itself a crime for which U.S. officials may (and should) face prosecution at the ICC."

Neither the U.S. nor Israel is a state party to the Rome Statute of the ICC, though Palestine is. Both the Biden administration and President-elect Donald Trump's pick for national security adviser have at times declined the warrants for Israeli leaders.

In a speech to Israelis on Tuesday, Netanyahu said that one of the reasons for the cease-fire in Lebanon "is to give our forces a breather and replenish stocks. And I say it openly, it is no secret that there have been big delays in weapons and munitions deliveries. These delays will be resolved soon. We will receive supplies of advanced weaponry that will keep our soldiers safe and give us more strike force to complete our mission."

According to the Financial Times: U.S. officials have denied there is any explicit link between the cease-fire deal and approval for the latest weapons delivery. While the cease-fire deal includes a so-called side letter from the U.S. to Israel, setting out Wash-

ington's support for a certain freedom of Israeli action, people familiar with the text said it included no guarantees of weapon sales.

U.S. officials also deny that there have been deliberate delays to weapons shipments, aside from shipments of 2,000-pound bombs, which Biden paused earlier this year over concerns about their use in densely populated areas of Gaza.

The Times of Israel reported that Biden's State Department declined to confirm the advancement of the package but said that U.S. support for Israel in the face of Iran-backed threats is "unwavering" and all weapon transfers are carried out in line with federal law.

"We have made clear that Israel must comply with international humanitarian law, has a moral obligation and strategic imperative to protect civilians, investigate allegations of any wrongdoing, and ensure accountability for any abuses or violations of international human rights law or international humanitarian law," the State Department said. As of Wednesday, officials in Gaza said the death toll had hit at least 41,282 Palestinian civilians, with another 104,880 people injured.

(<https://www.common-dreams.org/>)

## INDIA'S WORKFORCE TRANSFORMATION

# A Rising Tide of Female Participation

AS more women join India's workforce, the country stands on the brink of a transformative economic shift that embodies the spirit of inclusivity and opportunity. As women step into roles across sectors—their technology, healthcare, education, or manufacturing—they bring fresh ideas, skills, and dedication that fuel economic growth and enhance workplace dynamics.

**Unstoppable rise**  
Between 2017-18 and 2023-24, India recorded a remarkable increase in the Female Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) and Work Participation Rate (WPR) for women, coupled with a drop in the female unemployment rate. This shift speaks not only to economic progress but also to India's drive toward creating an equitable, vibrant labor market where women play a leading role in shaping the nation's future.

Female work participation rate (WPR) has nearly doubled, reflecting a powerful wave of women entering various sectors of the workforce. This shift aligns with a similar upward trend in the female labor force participation rate (LFPR), show-

ing the growing number of women actively seeking and securing employment. Additionally, a notable decline in the female unemployment rate signals an increase in job availability, with women capitalizing on these opportunities, reflecting both enhanced employment access and growing job satisfaction among women.

### What's driving the change?

The transformation in female workforce participation is fueled by several significant factors, including educational advancements, structural shifts in India's economy, and improved measurement in labour data. One of the most notable drivers is educational advancement, which has created a U-shaped trend in the female labour force participation rate (LFPR), with women pursuing education, their participation in the workforce reflects this U-shaped curve. Women with lower levels of education often enter the workforce out of necessity, filling roles in informal or lower-wage sectors. At the opposite end, women with advanced degrees secure professional careers, resulting in higher



LFPR at both low and high ends of educational attainment. This curve reveals a dip in workforce participation at the mid-level education (secondary level) but a rise as women achieve higher qualifications. The pattern underscores the importance of advanced education in empowering women to enter meaningful careers, often with better financial stability and job satisfaction.

Investing in higher education for women, therefore, emerges as a strategic approach to unlocking the full potential of the female workforce. By promoting educational attainment, society can ensure that more women not only enter the workforce but also thrive in roles that fully utilize their skills and capabilities.

Structural shifts in India's economy also play a significant role in enhancing female participation. As

Female Labor Force Metrics (2017-18 vs. 2023-24)		
Metric	2017-18	2023-24
Work Participation Rate (WPR) (%)	22%	40.3%
Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) (%)	23.3%	41.7%
Unemployment Rate (%)	5.6%	3.2%

the economy has expanded, growth sectors like services, technology, and manufacturing have created new opportunities beyond traditional agriculture. These sectors are particularly appealing to women and offer diverse job roles that were previously limited, broadening the landscape for female employment.

### At the heart of India's growth

The economic contribution that women not only add depth to India's labour force but also help diversify perspectives in various industries, stimulating fresh ideas and approaches. This shift is more than just numbers; it signifies a strengthening economy that is better equipped to face global competition and adapt to changing economic trends.

As more women find employment opportunities, the nation witnesses a steady

growth towards gender equality. Women's increasing financial independence creates a ripple effect that uplifts families and communities, bringing about meaningful social change. When women contribute financially to their households, families are empowered to invest more in education, access better healthcare, and explore new opportunities. This empowerment is transformative. Financially independent women are more likely to make decisions that benefit their children's futures, and communities gain when women have the resources and influence to create lasting positive impacts. The shift towards a more equitable workforce enriches the social fabric, setting a foundation for inclusive growth.

With India's population growth expected to slow in the coming years, women's participation in the workforce will be vital to meeting the country's future labor demands. Encouraging





THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Steering clear of Trumponomics would serve other countries well

The US president-elect's policy plans will hurt more than help the US and policymakers elsewhere must recognize the risks



**JIM O'NEILL**  
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Given Donald Trump's nominees for key cabinet positions so far, it appears that the US president-elect is determined at least to try to deliver on many of his campaign promises. If so, the current news cycle may have come as a welcome surprise to those who have grown tired of elected leaders making promises they have no intention of keeping. But as a longtime student and practitioner of the dismal science (economics), I see no reason to believe that Trump's policies will do what he and his supporters think they will do.

For example, aggressively enforcing a country's immigration laws might well be a good idea. But aggressively pursuing illegal immigrants who are already in the country is another matter, and if it is done in a way that discourages immigrants more broadly, the United States could lose one of the key advantages that it has over many of its advanced-economy peers. With demographic trends putting downward pressure on the populations of Europe, Japan and many other countries, the US must be careful to not join them. Additional workers who can preserve the size of the labour force need to be found somewhere.

Or consider Trump's two other major campaign promises: Significant tax cuts and new 10-20% tariffs on imports from the rest of the world, with the rate rising to 60% for goods from China. While it is easy to find economists who will disagree with each other on just about any economic-policy question, tariffs might be the one big exception. Few economists think they are a good idea, mainly because there is zero evidence that they can help reduce a country's trade deficit. Worse, all the additional costs and other negative consequences that they produce are well known.

Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* demonstrates this clearly in a recent commentary. A country's balance of payments, he explains, is an accounting identity (an equation that must always balance out). Thus, any deficit on trade (which typically dominates the current-account balance) must be matched by a surplus of capital inflows. That is how the overall balance is reduced.

While the US could use tariffs to reduce its imports from country A, it will have to import more from countries B and C, unless it reduces the consumption, investment or government expenditure that drives its demand for those imports in the first place. In fact, this is exactly what happened after the US imposed tariffs on imports from China during Trump's previous term. The US continued to import the same goods, but from other countries, many of which increased their own imports from China. If Trump goes ahead and slaps punitive tariffs on those countries too (and he recently suggested he



would impose a 25% tariff on Mexico and Canada, though as punishment for letting immigrants and drugs slip into the US), the same pattern would repeat itself.

There is no way around it: If the US truly wants to reduce its aggregate imports, it will have to reduce overall domestic demand; or more precisely, it will have to raise domestic savings relative to its investment needs, which in turn would mean receiving less net capital from abroad.

Now consider Trump's promises to cut taxes and hand out various other goodies for those who helped elect him. Such measures, if all else remains constant, will boost domestic demand; and if they are applied together with tariffs, they will increase the cost of living. The inflation that soured so many voters on Joe Biden's administration has eased, but Trump's agenda could send prices soaring again. And that is before accounting for retaliation by other countries, most of which would introduce their own tariffs to hurt US exporters (as China and others did previously when they targeted US agriculture).

What can other countries' leaders learn from America's bizarre experiment? With Trump's unorthodox approach to politics now very much in vogue, we can expect to see more mini-Trump initiatives popping up around the world. But

insofar as they are Trumpan, they too will fail to achieve their intended purposes. Since all other countries have the same balance-of-payments identity as the US, those with large trade surpluses necessarily export more capital relative to their current domestic investment needs.

Faced with Trump's return, wise foreign leaders would start thinking about how to tackle their countries' own long-standing domestic economic challenges. Those with excess savings, for example, ought to consider how to boost investment at home or reduce the domestic savings rate. Given their own current troubles, Germany and China both would be well served by such a strategy. Not only would it boost their economies and increase the appeal of their leaders; it also would reduce their exports of capital to the rest of the world, including the US.

Many other constructive policy changes could then follow. China, for example, could reform its financial sector and allow its currency to acquire more of the features that have been so central to America's ability to attract capital from the rest of the world.

Future US leaders might then be less cavalier about dictating terms to others, not least because others would no longer be so dependent on the US and its currency.

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# Saudi Arabia's popular culture is changing with liberalization

Riyadh's moves to open up the kingdom have had a positive impact



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It has long been a developed country in terms of infrastructure. © GETTY IMAGES

Saudi Arabia's unprecedented attempt to diversify from an oil economy to something more sustainable seems to be churning along nicely. The female labour participation rate has nearly doubled to 36% from 2016, the year Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman laid out his Vision 2030. Unemployment is at a record low. Last year, the number of domestic and foreign tourists exceeded 100 million for the first time.

Headline statistics aside, what's Saudi Arabia really like? Curious, I did some sightseeing, taking advantage of a new route between Hong Kong and Riyadh. The two financial centres have been strengthening economic ties, cross-investing and offering exchange-traded funds on each other's bourses. Cathy Pacific started a direct flight late last month. Before the trip, my friend and I were fussing over our outfits, worrying that we might get stopped on the street for not dressing conservatively enough. We were also a bit nervous about our road trip—after all, women were forbidden from driving until mid-2018.

What we found was an open and friendly nation that welcomed visitors. We blended in as well as any foreigners would in Abu Dhabi or Dubai, and we didn't spot the much-feared religious police. In Medina, we accidentally roamed into the courtyard of the Prophet's Mosque, not knowing it was for Muslims only. When a policeman asked us to leave, his tone was apologetic.

Entertainment options have ballooned in a nation where the median age is 30. Perhaps because of the desert heat, nightlife is booming. From Riyadh's Boulevard City, a sprawl that includes an amusement park, outdoor cinemas and retail stores, to Jeddah's Red Sea waterfront, people crowded the streets, singing, dancing and hanging out in cafes and hookah lounges well into the night. Female drivers are commonplace. And while most Saudi women still wear long flowing abayas as well as face coverings, fashionistas have tossed off their hijab and are wearing their abaya like a cloak. No-one casts disapproving glances.

What about men? We took plenty of Uber rides and talked to Saudi drivers. One quipped that traffic in Riyadh got worse after women began driving. A 69-year-old in Jeddah said he was okay that two of his five adult children were unmarried. One 22-year-old said he was a huge fan of Eminem, who'll perform in Riyadh soon. And people just assumed we were in the Kingdom for business.

Anecdotes aside, there's also statistical evidence that cultural and social reforms

are profoundly changing families and how they live and consume. The share of spending on restaurants, hotels, recreation and culture has increased from about 12% in 2017 to nearly 20% this year, according to Capital Economics. Home ownership among Saudi citizens has increased to 64% of households from 47% in 2016, when the government slashed payments for mortgages and tax landowners who left plots undeveloped. Mortgage lending now accounts for nearly a quarter of banks' total outstanding credit. As testament to the buzzing economy, rents are growing at a brisk 1%, amid sustained inflows of expatriate workers and large redevelopment plans in Riyadh and Jeddah. As part of Vision 2030, Riyadh aims to lower the Saudi unemployment rate and increase small businesses' contribution to the economy. It's making progress on both fronts, while a cultural opening is giving young Saudis incentives to work.

The prince is falling short on some of his metrics, and the nation's human rights record remains a serious concern. Women who post online about gender inequality can suffer decades-long jail sentences. The 2022 Personal Status Law requires women to obtain a male guardian's permission to marry. This perhaps explains why Saudi Arabia is not getting as much foreign capital as Riyadh desires. In 2023, Norway's largest pension fund KLP blacklisted some of Saudi's telecom and real estate companies, citing "human rights abuses."

Last year, net foreign direct investment accounted for only 1.2% of GDP, well below Vision 2030's 5.7% target. In addition, foreigners are still mostly visiting Saudi Arabia for the Islamic pilgrimages of Hajj and Umrah, even though the country is building ambitious ski slopes in the desert and lavish resorts by the Red Sea that cater to non-religious tourists. The government is aiming for the sector to account for 10% of non-oil GDP.

Foreign fund managers have likened Saudi Arabia's 2016 opening to China's. I don't think that's fair, because Saudi Arabia is already a developed country with good infrastructure. Its roads are good and malls are full of American chain stores—nothing like the 1980s China I knew. But if we look at the speed of cultural change, the parallel is eerily accurate.

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MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM

# Welcome Elon Musk, shadow president-elect of the US

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Leading members of the US political and economic establishment are either ecstatic or nervous about Donald Trump's second term, depending on their respective world-views. Many imponderables cloud the horizon, given some of the unknown quantities in the Trump cabinet or the difficulty in predicting the gap between pre-pol rhetoric and actual policy roll-out.

One such X-factor (pun unintended) is Elon Musk. The businessman has been a vocal Trump supporter and now sits at the centre of Trump's policy universe. There is intense speculation over Musk's new role, as well as attempts to understand the man, his psyche and his likely impact on the incoming administration. There are multiple ways to skin this, just like the proverbial cat.

The first persona is one with an official role. Officially, he has been designated as co-head of the department of government efficiency (DOGE), a new ministry designed to trim federal flab. Musk will share responsibilities with Vivek Ramaswamy, whose sur-

vival instincts, after his failed presidency bid, drove him into Trump's arms. A fog blankets DOGE's exact role; in a co-authored article for *Wall Street Journal*, Musk and Ramaswamy wrote: "The two of us will advise DOGE at every step to pursue three major kinds of reform: regulatory rescissions, administrative reductions and cost savings."

His second identity revolves around his actual vocation: tech entrepreneurship with large investments spread across social media, space, artificial intelligence and electric vehicles. This part of Musk's character has given rise to guesswork on whether he will be able to maintain a distance between his government role and his businesses, or he will use one to further the other.

For example, he looks inches away from closing two crucial deals with the Indian government before officially moving into his new role. In the first instance, the Indian telecom ministry announced in October a willingness to allocate broadband spectrum to Musk's satellite service, Starlink, without it having to participate in an auction, the resource-allocation process followed for terrestrial operators (such as Jio and Airtel). The Indian government's "willingness" is expected to be converted into a licence if Starlink adheres to the Indian government's

security concerns over satellite telephony and data residency. With Musk now firmly ensconced within the new regime, it will be interesting to see the give-and-take between the Indian government and Elon Musk.

A second deal was consummated on 19 November, a few days after Donald Trump's election victory. Musk's SpaceX transported and successfully inserted into geosynchronous transfer orbit an Indian communication satellite, GSAT-2. While the launch marks a departure from India's self-reliant and indigenous satellite launch programme, it seems to have been necessitated by GSAT-2 being heavier than what Indian launch vehicles can bear; but it is the choice of SpaceX at this juncture that raises eyebrows.

What might rise are the hackles of Musk's cabinet colleagues over the businessman's China exposure. Electric car manufacturer Tesla's Shanghai plant has an annual capacity of 950,000 vehicles, two-fifths of the company's total capacity of over 2.35 mil-

lion. As China hawks within the inbound administration sharpen their talons, the fate of Tesla's China expansion plans looks uncertain and will test Musk's balancing skills. Meanwhile, Tesla's snow-on-now-off plans for India could get a rethink.

But Musk seems to be doing much more than busy himself with DOGE or his quotidian business interests. And this gives rise to his third identity. According to economists Noah Smith and Erik Torenberg, who jointly anchor the podcast *Econ 102*, Elon Musk should be called the shadow president of the US.

According to various reports, Musk has been busy contacting and talking to various government leaders and officials in Russia, China and Iran even before the new government has been sworn in, thereby giving a new meaning to back-channel talks and track-II diplomacy. In some other reports, Musk even reportedly attended meetings in which Trump interviewed candidates for cabinet positions. Musk, by the way, can

never be US president because he was not born stateside; hence, shadow president.

The word "shadow" has interesting Jungian associations. According to the *Dictionary of Psychology* from the American Psychological Association, the shadow is an archetype within Carl Jung's analytical framework of psychology that represents the darker, unconscious side of the human psyche, "which may comprise anything (e.g. a trait, desire or emotion, whether positive or negative) that is unacceptable to an individual's conscious ego and as such remains unexpressed and hidden in the unconscious." An inability to deal with the unconscious or darker side can lead to unpredictable behaviour; combined with what looks like Trump's own whimsical approach, it presents a risk. *The Economist* has it down pat: "He could also fall before he even starts, because of the combustibility of the Trump-Musk combination. The fusion of Silicon Valley libertarianism and techno-utopianism with the MAGA nationalism of Mr Trump's world is inherently volatile." It will be interesting to see what dominates: whether political power catyphes Musk's sinner desires or whether he eventually comes to personify Trump's shadow, projecting the president-elect's repressed ideas, desires and instincts.





## OUR VIEW

## MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION



## India's slowdown awaits a well-crafted response

The second-quarter loss of economic pace has underlying trends that risk reinforcing its key causes. Indian policy must support private investment, employment and consumption

Public managers in the BJP must be heaving a sigh of relief: the underwhelming gross domestic product (GDP) data for the July-September 2024 quarter has been released well after the Maharashtra assembly polls were done and dusted. Logging disappointing year-on-year growth of 5.4%, the GDP data print for the second quarter of 2024-25 is not only much below consensus estimates from leading economists and analysts, but also offers a contrast from the economic narrative presented by top bureaucrats and economic administrators. While there is no saying if it would have affected the poll outcome in Maharashtra, where a BJP-led coalition won handsomely, news of a slowdown often has a way of acquiring contagion characteristics, countering feel-good messaging or negating the income effects of political handouts. Bad news always travels faster, and, given the eroding credibility of the political class, people are more inclined to lay great store by negative developments than accept news of progress at face value. The GDP print confirms some major apprehensions.

The immediate anxiety stems from a slowdown on the demand side: both consumption and investment demand growth were listless this quarter, confirming suspicions of a structural decline. While private final consumption expenditure has grown 6% year-on-year, it masks the fact that in absolute terms the quarter is below both the third and fourth quarters of 2023-24. Seasonality apart, consumption data over the past 12 quarters has remained largely range-bound, with only minor variation between quarters. This raises concerns of whether the economy stares at a major structural weakness. With private consumption

accounting for close to 60% of GDP, any slump here is a worry. The other saviour that had kept GDP ticking along all these quarters—gross fixed capital formation—has also lost pace, with state governments joining the private sector's reluctance to carry the capex baton. Slowing consumption and investment is mirrored on the supply side. Manufacturing inertia (2.2% growth this quarter) and a slump in net tax collections (2.7%) also reflect slower growth.

Beyond these signs of uneven expansion, what should really be worrying authorities are the second-round effects that can loop back and further depress growth. The stasis in manufacturing, which has also shown signs of being range-bound, is sure to impact unemployment, which is rising in urban conurbations and could further dampen both consumption and overall economic growth. For now, cash transfers by states and the Centre have managed to somewhat narrow the income gap and keep the consumption meter ticking, albeit at a slower pace. But handouts are not sustainable over the long term. The budget for 2025-26, just 60 days away, presents the Centre with an opportunity to undertake some policy shifts. The government must not lose faith in capital expenditure, while ensuring that the policy environment becomes more conducive for private sector investment. It is also vital for the Centre to re-engineer its production-linked incentive scheme to stimulate higher labour absorption. But before that is the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy committee (MPC) meeting of 4-6 December. While the rate-setting panel's members are indeed caught in a cleft stick, what would be truly path-breaking is for the MPC to publicly acknowledge India's slowdown and act accordingly.

## Social movements need to lead India's fight against air pollution

We must generate the social capital required for people to act collectively towards a common cause



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

Public attention is like the smog itself. It materializes as winter sets in, envelops the discourse for a few months and begins to dissipate early in the new year. Once out of sight, it is out of mind. At times like this, when the pollution in New Delhi and its surrounding region is at its most intense, there is a clamour for judicial dictats, draconian regulations and strong enforcement. By the end of January, most people move on to other issues. A relatively small number of environmental activists fight on, but the rest of society is no longer too concerned. Until Diwali, when a debate over banning firecrackers triggers the next Sisyphean cycle.

It's not just Delhi. Every Indian city has its own big bad pollution story that follows a similar pattern. I do not think we ask ourselves why we are unable to arrest the deterioration in our living environment. It does not help that ideological point fingers at things like neoliberal capitalism, development models or this-or-that political party and its corruption. Holding these 'usual suspects' responsible gives us the mental comfort of having found the bad guys so that we can punish them, and more importantly rest the investigation. But if we pursue the case to its end, we will find that both the pollution and our failure to control it is due to a lack of social capital. As I have repeatedly

pointed out in these columns, 'we' do not have a sense of 'us.' In fact, it is debatable if the 'we' that I refer to in the lines above exists at all.

Pollution is what economists call a negative externality. Its extent is an indication of how much self-interest is overriding the common interest. To tackle the smog, it is necessary to arrive at a new balance between selfishness and public-mindedness. Tackling negative externalities is a cooperation problem. Enough numbers of people have to work together to prioritize the problem, identify solutions and—this is the most important bit—accept the inevitable trade-offs that ensue. Solving the cooperation problem gets harder as the city gets more populous. It also becomes more complex when the population is more diverse. The scale, structure and dynamics of society make India's cooperation problems hard and unprecedented, if not unique.

Unfortunately, we do not have functioning social mechanisms to engender greater cooperation. That's because building such mechanisms itself is a cooperation problem. This is the place we must start. We need to build social capital around our civic communities. People must trust each other across community boundaries. Without such generalised trust, it is impossible to get the minimum cooperation necessary to combat problems like the smog.

Democratic politics is destroying social capital. Its dominant logic is one of differentiation. It thrives on othering. One party divides on religion, another on caste and yet another on class. It is unrealistic to expect them to try and bridge the very divides that they rely on for their success. Yet, unless these divides are bridged, the smog will get worse. The judiciary or executive are cut of the same cloth as the population and cannot just wave a wand if society does not believe in its magic.

The answer lies in social movements that bond people into communities.

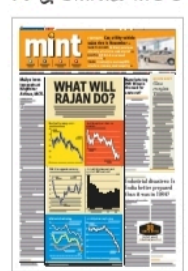
Climate is a superordinate threat that affects everyone. It can be the stimulus for us to focus on rebuilding Indian society around pluralism, tolerance and a common national identity. History tells us that India achieved its greatest triumphs on the back of social movements. Environmental activism must move away from its technocratic preoccupation with big forums like CoP-29 and global climate goals, and instead think about how Indians can be made to think as Indians.

Translating global commitments needs society to make painful adjustments: some industries must shut down, some occupations will have to disappear, some people must move, some people must pay and so on. If we cannot do this for an immediate, palpable and decidedly hazardous like the smog, what chance do we have of meeting our net-zero commitment? Where is the social capital for it? Therefore, the message is 'If you care about environmental goals, participate in a social movement that builds community.'

Obviously, it is not going to be easy. It will take years and decades. So will many global climate goals. Donors, social entrepreneurs and activists are prepared to invest patient capital to pursue technocratic approaches. Where they do consider social approaches, they are narrowly focused on specific climate goal-related outcomes. It is unlikely that any climate policy or solution will succeed unless there is a parallel initiative to create broad-based social capital. Like what they say about trees, the best time to start a movement to build social capital was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.

There are a number of things the state can do about the smog. Closing factories, preventing stubble burning, controlling vehicular traffic and regulating construction debris are sensible practical measures that can work. They will be effective and sustainable only if there is adequate social capital.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

We should keep on going along the path of globalization. Globalization is good... when trade stops, war comes.

JACK MA

## MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

## A right that women don't have is the right to mediocrity

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

In a few weeks, when Donald Trump takes over as US President once again, people will wonder if things might have been different had his opponent been someone other than Kamala Harris. By which, they also mean someone with a better game, who was not so ordinary. There is an implication in this view that one has to be exceptional to become America's leader or reach the top of other fields. Yet, they would struggle to list what is exceptional about Trump. A way of the world is that it punishes the ordinariness of women and is more understanding of the mediocrity of successful men. A right that women do not have is the right to mediocrity. I call it a right because it is what most people are, by definition, and people have the right to be themselves.

There was a Trump before Trump, and her name was Sarah Palin, a former governor of Alaska who was a vice-presidential nominee when John McCain ran for president. She once said that she could see Russia from her house in Alaska. She said things an aver-

age person would. While Trump was rewarded for that quality of discourse, she did not survive the torrent of ridicule.

The word 'mediocrity' has come to mean something demeaning, but it is intended to describe something between excellence and terrible—the common output of an average person. Ideally, a characteristic of most people, their ordinariness, should not be held against them. And it often is not held against male leaders. If anything, their ordinariness makes them endearing to others. But when female leaders slip up, or are just dull or mediocre in other ways, they face much more severe scrutiny.

When feminists speak of what the world does not grant or allow women, they often speak of how exceptional women are not given opportunities. In my view, this is not true. It is hard for the world to suppress exceptional women because it is in the self-interest of society to let them thrive. In any case, exceptional people are rare, and they constitute a tiny proportion of women, too. The real bias against women is in how the world perceives the ordinariness of ordinary women as opposed to the ordinariness of ordinary men. All around us are ordinary men in leadership positions getting away with being ordinary.

The movement to set things right for women had no choice but to glorify success and brilliance. As a result, it is easier today for a man to be unambitious, to choose an ordinary, quiet and healthy life, while it is complex for a woman to overtly say that she wants to achieve nothing. Even Barbie had to become more than an alluring girlfriend and get dressed in career uniforms and other ambiguous clothes of success. Mediocrity is not only about the capacity of one's mind; it is also about the ordinariness of aspiration. Most people do not aspire to anything extraordinary, and it is easier for men to be that way or even say that they want to be that way. In the film *Barbie*, a character tells the CEO of Barbie's maker Mattel that it should create an ordinary Barbie who just wants to be a mom. But the film is nervous to state what it seems keen to say: that women have a right to be ordinary.

There is a stigma attached to mediocrity and even to wishing for an ordinary life. The very bias against women is rooted through

allegations of their ordinariness; so their champions feel they should never speak of that. As a result, no one speaks of the actual place where the bias is cruel, where a woman has no defence because what she is accused of may be true, even if it is an unfair charge because a man in her position would get away with it.

When I say that exceptional people are rare, I mean that exceptional people are rare among the successful. Being exceptional is not the prerequisite for success that the world pretends it is. The educational system, self-help books and motivational talks all suggest that people must prepare to be exceptional to succeed. But people succeed because of ordinary reasons like social network and dumb luck and because they are so ordinary that they are likeable, fun and belong to a tribe. While there are advantages to being ordinary, there are drawbacks too. Ordinary people are sometimes caught out of depth. That happens all the time to men in power, but they survive unscathed com-

pared to women in the same position. At first glance, it may appear that Indian female politicians are an exception. Isn't it true that the Indian public forgives their failings? Some women have held real power for many years and still do.

I grew up in Tamil Nadu, where J. Jayalalitha defeated powerful men and held on to power for long. That could happen, I believe, because her gender was not a factor in her political appeal. Women knew that they were voting for a woman, but men had to defy her, as someone more than just a woman, to grant her power over them.

As a politician, she was enormously popular at one point. But when the aura began to fade and her popularity began to slip, when she was faced with corruption charges and could not stave off her political adversaries, she fell faster and harder than men because suddenly she was revealed as a mortal woman, and questions of her mediocrity in ethics had a greater consequence.

The bias against ordinary women exists only in roles that were traditionally held by men. For instance, the captain of a female football team will not be particularly vilified for her ordinariness. Nor a housewife for her ordinariness within the boundaries of what is expected of her in this role.

**It's not just Harris. Women are judged far more harshly than men for not being exceptional**



# Imran's street politics hardens battlelines in Pak



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PAKISTAN witnessed another socio-political crisis as a protest by former Prime Minister Imran Khan's supporters, who came out in thousands and marched towards Islamabad's D-Chowk, turned violent last week.

The protesters demanded the release of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader and other party functionaries. Rallies, sit-ins and protests have been a signature move for the cricketer-turned-politician, who is incarcerated in Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail and is embroiled in over 150 cases. Imran had issued a 'final' call to his supporters for a protest on November 24; this time, the faces behind the protests were Bushra Bibi, Imran's wife, who, till now, had abstained from public appearance, and Ali Amin Gandapur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister and a close aide of Imran. The protesters faced a severe crackdown

by the security forces. There have been conflicting reports on the number of people dead and arrested as a result, but the fact remains that it was the use of brute force that resulted in the protesters' retreat.

Imran enjoys immense popularity and support within Pakistan and has demonstrated great resilience by not opting to go into exile, which has been a customary conduit for former political (and military) leaders in Pakistan. Imran's mass appeal has been driven by his unwavering claim and position to stand for Pakistan against the corrupt dynastic politics and his blatant challenge to the all-powerful Pakistan military, which has been held responsible for most of the economic and political woes of Pakistan.

This is ironical since Imran's tenure as Prime Minister from August 2018 to April 2022 was marked by glaring misjudgments, lack-hunting of opponents, wick of governance, faulty decisions/projections, economic downfall and misconstrued foreign policy choices. Imran was the military's favourite at one point and its choice for the 2018 General Election, when he enjoyed the full patronage of the military to win the elections and trounce Nawaz Sharif. In 2018, Imran was projected as a clean and corruption-free leader, driven by a welfare



**PUBLIC SUPPORT:** Imran Khan's wife Bushra Bibi (centre) at a Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf rally. Imran enjoys immense popularity and has shown great resilience by not going into exile, neurons

agenda, and one who would alter the course of Pakistan's growth and its image on the global stage. Eventually, his strains with the deep state resulted in his scandalous exit from the Prime Minister's office in 2022.

After his exit, he has kept the momentum of his support base going, even when he was not allowed to contest the 2024 elections and his party was denied the election symbol. His support base has expanded from the urban middle class to all levels of society, where the masses see him as fighting for Pakistan, even though his track

record demonstrates a complete inability to manage Pakistan's complex political, economic and security challenges.

The current crisis is primarily a fight between Imran and the Army chief, Gen Asim Munir. They have a well-known history of hostility. The controversial and much-debated 2024 elections brought the Sharif's in power and they currently enjoy the trust and support of the military establishment. The weak civilian regime in Pakistan, which lacks credibility, has no intention of asserting itself against the military's writ

and will prioritise its own survival in power. Critical constitutional changes have been made with the passing of the recent 26th Amendment Act, with the intention to manage the functioning of the judicial system and ensure Imran's political isolation. Gen Munir, the most powerful man in the country, has got an extension and he will continue to serve till 2027, if not beyond.

The protests have resulted in the resignations of the top brass of the PTI and the faultlines within the party are expected to deepen. Frustrations within the party will grow, given the arrests of PTI workers. Imran might seem to have limited options left after his call for the November 24 march. But given his obsession with street politics, he is unlikely to give up soon and his next call for a protest might not be far away. But whether he will be able to steer the same support after the experience of the latest protests remains a question.

Imran's release seems unlikely anytime soon, unless there is an agreement between him and the establishment. While his allegations against the political and military elite may have succeeded in triggering the sentiments of the masses, they are unlikely to trigger a major change in the power dynamics or bring him any respite from the legal cases.

The establishment has

expanded its powers and strengthened its control on the state institutions where Imran, in the recent past, enjoyed fractional support. The current crisis once again presents an old game with different actors in Pakistan. The actors change, intensity varies, tactics differ, but the bottomline remains unaltered — a military-run state with sufficient power and resources manages to crush any rebellion or opposition questioning its legitimacy and power.

Pakistan is experiencing a multi-dimensional crisis: the economy is struggling to recover from the combined fallout of fiscal deficit, high inflation, unsustainable energy prices and meeting the requirements of the structural restructuring set up by the International Monetary Fund; a series of terror attacks by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan targeting security personnel; relentless opposition by the oppressed Baloch and Pashtun in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa even as their voices have been suppressed by the use of brute tactics, including forced disappearances.

A nuclear state with a multifold crisis does raise serious concerns regarding not only how Pakistan will shape up in the coming years but also throws up larger regional implications.

## Multi-pronged strategy can make children safer online



**SHARAD S CHAUHAN**  
DGP & MD, PUNJAB POLICE  
HOUSING CORPORATION

NEW Australian law mandates social media platforms to verify users' age and restrict access for those under 16. The aim is to safeguard children by delaying their entry into social media, a move supported by proponents who argue that it would reduce harm and lessen parental burdens.

However, critics view this as a 'patchwork' approach, saying policing by guardians is more effective than government-imposed rules as they are better positioned to manage their children's online presence.

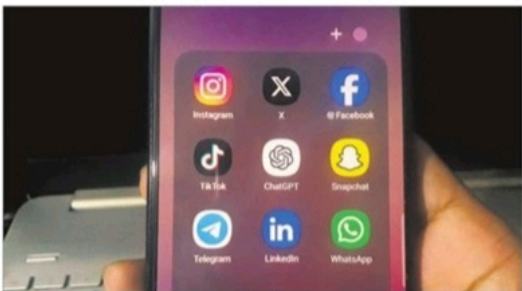
Further, the law fails to tackle the fundamental issue of ensuring that social media companies properly remove harmful content. Also, concerns about enforcement arise as the law leaves age verification methods open-ended, potentially relying on government documents or technologies like facial scanning or behavioural tracking, which raise privacy issues.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to an increased screen time among children, leading to

behavioural and health issues and delinquency, as highlighted by various studies. UNESCO's 2023 report calls for a global school ban on smartphones, citing research that shows their mere presence can disrupt learning and that children take up to 20 minutes to regain focus after engaging with non-academic content.

The US Surgeon General's 2023 advisory warns that social media can harm adolescent brain development, affecting emotional regulation and impulse control. It proposes warning labels on platforms, similar to those for cigarettes. The algorithm-driven content of social media fosters a form of digital addiction. As in drug problems, effective regulation should focus on supply-side measures as controlling individual behaviour (demand-side) is challenging.

In 2022, India reported 32 per cent increase in cyber-crime against children with 1,823 cases, including cyber pornography (1,171 cases) and cyberstalking (158). Offline crimes against children also saw a worrying increase, with over 1,62,000 cases reported, up by nearly nine per cent from the previous year. This highlights a broader concerning trend of rising crime against children that is not solely tied to the Internet. The overall surge in both online and offline crimes calls for a comprehensive approach to child protection across all environments. Similarly, in



**HARMFUL:** In 2022, India reported 32 per cent increase in cybercrime against children, stock

the UK, a rise in cybercrime among children aged 10-16 shows that some children, often unknowingly, are engaging in illegal activities, underscoring the need for both preventive and educational measures.

The dilemma centres on whether to ban social media for children or impose stricter regulations on platforms.

An alternative to a ban on platforms involves implementing robust age verification for content moderation, which could be enforced at specific barriers to restrict access to harmful content. Restricting children's Internet access entirely may seem like a protective measure, but it is impractical in today's digital age. Instead, the focus should be on promoting safe online practices, digital litera-

cy and tools that foster responsible Internet use that would let children access general features while saving them from harmful content, offering a more targeted and feasible solution.

A strong parallel exists in the case of a rise in cybercrime across all sectors, involving adults and businesses. Banning specific websites is a short-term fix that overlooks the broader issues, such as digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness and effective online monitoring. A comprehensive solution is necessary to target its root causes, not just limit access to the Internet.

Implementing such a ban for those under 16 in India will face major challenges due to the country's large population and technological diversity.

Teenagers could bypass such bans using VPNs, fake credentials, proxy websites or lesser-known platforms.

In the Indian context, the 2020 report from the Singapore-based DQ Institute serves as a crucial resource for enhancing child online safety, with its survey covering 63 per cent of the global population. This think tank has established standards for digital intelligence to ensure safety, empowerment and well-being. Its Child Online Safety Index (COSI) evaluates digital safety across six key areas: cyber risk, disciplined digital use, digital competency, guidance and education, social infrastructure and connectivity.

India ranks highly in several categories, securing the second place in tackling cyber risk, third in disciplined digital use, first in digital competency and second in guidance and education. India also tops the rankings for its children's ability to cope with cyberbullying, highlighting their resilience in handling online threats.

While India lags in connectivity, its strong performance in managing cyber risks and online safety education provides a window of opportunity to enhance its COSI as connectivity improves, without resorting to bans. India's children excel in online safety education, scoring 68/100 — 30 per cent higher than the global average of 52/100.

Interestingly, lower-income countries tend to score better in online safety education (55/100

on average) than high-income nations (51/100 on average), emphasising the crucial role of education in helping children navigate online dangers. However, the data is biased towards public schools, so India must focus on improving online safety education in government schools and rural areas.

Despite efforts to limit children's screen time, modern life offers fewer opportunities for real-world experiences. Playgrounds are rare, academic pressures high and social structures more impersonal due to nuclear families. This trend leaves children valuing their devices for connection. Limiting technology alone won't restore the outdoor play and socialisation earlier generations enjoyed, unless broader societal issues are addressed.

A three-pronged strategy can enhance children's online protection. First, tech companies should prioritise child safety in their platform designs. Second, their collaboration with schools and government-backed cyber-bullying prevention programmes is vital. Lastly, parents must actively monitor and reduce their children's exposure to cyber risks. The police must also fulfil their duty by promptly addressing cyber-crime cases involving children, ensuring accountability and justice in the digital realm.

In an increasingly technological world, society must ensure safe spaces for children to grow, learn and thrive, both online and offline.

### QUICK CROSSWORD

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8 9

10 11 12

13 14 15

16 17 18 19

20 21 22 23

24 25

**ACROSS**

1 Good-natured (7)  
5 Repair clumsily (5)  
8 Held back for future use (2,7)  
9 Small child (3)  
10 To a great extent (4)  
12 In a manner of speaking (2,2,4)  
14 Lawsuit (6)  
15 Quite lacking (6)  
17 Country of central Europe (8)  
18 Gather as harvest (4)  
21 Confess (3)  
22 Stop the proceedings (4,4)  
24 Dirty-looking (5)  
25 Momentous (7)

**DOWN**

1 A self-evident truth (5)  
2 In favour of (3)  
3 Lie back in sunshine (4)  
4 Exit (6)  
5 Short pause for rest (8)  
6 Prominent (2,3,4)  
7 Rash impulsive person (7)  
11 Reduce consumption of (3,4,2)  
13 Kingdom (8)  
14 Depart hurriedly and secretly (7)  
16 Wood for cricket bats (6)  
19 Small-minded (5)  
20 Cab (4)  
23 A forest tree (3)

**Saturday's solution**

**Across:** 1 Play safe, 5 Aged, 9 Chafe, 10 Leaning, 11 On a knife-edge, 13 Ration, 14 As well, 17 Disputations, 20 Go ahead, 21 Evade, 22 Like, 23 Recovery.

**Down:** 1 Pace, 2 Against, 3 Speak volumes, 4 Fillip, 6 Grind, 7 Doggedly, 8 Take a shine to, 12 Prodigal, 15 Emulate, 16 Dangle, 18 Slack, 19 Deny.

### SU DO KU

3 9 6

5 8 3 5 7

5 2 3

2 8 4

1 6 7 2

7 1 9

**SATURDAY'S SOLUTION**

5	4	7	1	8	2	6	3	9
6	1	9	4	3	5	8	2	7
3	8	2	9	7	6	1	5	4
1	3	4	6	9	7	2	8	5
2	6	5	3	4	8	7	9	1
7	9	8	5	2	1	3	4	6
4	7	1	8	5	3	9	6	2
8	5	6	2	1	9	4	7	3
9	2	3	7	6	4	5	1	8

**CALENDAR**  
DECEMBER 2, 2024, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Marghresh Shaka 11
- Marghresh Parvatisht 17
- Hijri 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 1, up to 12.44 pm
- Diwali Yoga up to 4.01 pm
- Jyeshtha Nakshatra up to 3.46 pm
- Moon enters Sagittarius sign 3.46 pm

**HARD**

### FORECAST

WEDNESDAY		TUESDAY		07:03 HRS	
CITY		MAX		MIN	
Chandigarh		28		10	
New Delhi		27		11	
Amritsar		24		10	
Bathinda		29		12	
Jalandhar		24		10	
Ludhiana		25		11	
Bhivani		26		11	
Hisar		25		09	
Sirsa		29		14	
Dharamsala		21		07	
Manali		14		03	
Shimla		17		08	
Srinagar		10		-02	
Jammu		22		10	
Kargil		03		-10	
Leh		03		-07	
Dehradun		25		09	
Mussoorie		18		08	



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### GDP hits a low

Manufacturing slump dents growth

INDIA's economic growth in the second quarter of FY25 has decelerated to a disappointing 5.4%, the lowest in seven quarters. This figure, significantly below last year's 8.1% for the same period, underscores the mounting pressures on the country's economic resilience. The manufacturing sector, traditionally a growth driver, is at the heart of this slowdown, grappling with declining output and subdued demand. The decline in Gross Value Added (GVA) in manufacturing to 2.2% from 14.3% a year ago highlights the sector's vulnerability to inflation and weak consumer spending. While the Chief Economic Adviser has downplayed concerns, brushing off this dip as a "one-off", there is need to remain cautious. Private final consumption and gross fixed capital formation together shaved off 1.5 percentage points from the overall growth, signalling waning confidence in household and business spending.

On the brighter side, the services sector expanded by 7.1% and the agriculture sector grew by 3.5%, driven by improved rural demand. However, these gains were not sufficient to offset the drag from manufacturing and exports, which slowed to 2.8%, reflecting global uncertainties and weaker petroleum exports.

The government's underwhelming capital expenditure — just 37% of the budgeted target for the first half — adds another layer of concern. Public spending is critical to kickstarting private investments, particularly when high borrowing costs stifle corporate growth. As India faces the dual challenge of sustaining growth while managing inflation, a robust fiscal push is imperative. Without increased public investment and strategic support for manufacturing, the risk of falling below the projected 6.5% annual GDP growth looms large. The upcoming fiscal policy decisions will thus be crucial in steering the economy back on a stable growth trajectory.

## AIDS burden

States such as Haryana must get their act together

ACHIEVING the global goal of ending the AIDS pandemic as a public health threat by 2030 requires a significant contribution from India, one of the worst-affected countries outside Africa. It is worrisome that the total number of HIV patients in India reached 16.89 lakh in 2023-24, an increase of 7.3% over the previous year. In Haryana's case, the count of such patients under treatment has more than doubled in the past five years. States such as Punjab and Himachal Pradesh have also recorded an appreciable rise in the caseload from 2019-20 to 2023-24, while Chandigarh has witnessed a welcome decline.

It is apparent that the majority of the HIV-infected people are readily coming forward for treatment and the stigma associated with AIDS is becoming a thing of the past. India has done well to reduce AIDS-related deaths by around 80% since 2010. This is attributed to greater collaboration between the authorities and the community that has bolstered the 'test and treat' programme of the National AIDS Control Organisation. The availability of free lifelong treatment is a big plus. Annual new HIV cases have seen a 44% drop in more than a decade, but the absolute numbers remain on the higher side. Haryana and other underperforming states must get their act together.

Spreading awareness about HIV/AIDS holds the key to the success of preventive measures. Sustained interventions are needed to protect vulnerable groups such as sex workers, migrants, drug addicts, long-distance drivers and transgender people. Community-led organisations are in the best position to reach at-risk populations. There should be no dearth of resources at their disposal, while red tape must not be allowed to impede their efforts. World AIDS Day, observed on December 1, underlines the integral link between combating this pandemic and ensuring universal health coverage as well as the right to health. Equitable healthcare access can help in reducing India's HIV burden.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1924

### Governor's reply to Mr Das

AT last, the Governor of Bengal has seen fit to give a direct and categorical reply to Mr CR Das. The occasion was not ill-chosen. St Andrew's Dinner in Calcutta cannot, of course, be compared with the Lord Mayor's Banquet in London, but in the one case, as in the other, the occasion has again and again been availed of by the chief guests for making pronouncements of considerable interest and importance to the public. Lord Lytton's speech, though it enunciated no new policy, was no addition to the list. The theme of the speech was the most burning of all Indian topics at the present time, and the man whose views on this subject His Excellency took it upon himself to controvert is the accredited leader of the most powerful political party in India today. When, however, we turn from the importance of the subject and the occasion to the nature of the speech, we are bound to confess to a feeling of disappointment. The most plausible part of the speech is that in which His Excellency attempts to answer the allegation of Mr Das that the government, while accepting his diagnosis of the situation, refused to apply his remedy; and it is unhappily also the least convincing part of the speech. "The reason why I do not accept Mr Das' remedy," said His Excellency, true to the parable in the Bible, quoted by him in an earlier part of the speech, of the husbandman among whose good crops the enemy sowed tares during the night, "because he is not my gardener; and has no responsibility for the consequences of his advice."

# Empower military with strategic heft

It is imperative to look beyond the Cabinet Committee on Security paradigm



MANISH TEWARI  
LOK SABHA MP AND FORMER  
UNION MINISTER

A significant development that has gone unnoticed and unmentioned upon is the involvement of military commanders in trying to ostensibly resolve the 54-month-old standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that forms the de facto border between India and China.

Beginning June 6, 2020, Indian and Chinese military commanders held talks in the Chushul-Moldo region following the violent confrontation on May 5, 2020, between Indian and Chinese troops in Pangong Tso.

The second round of talks between Lt Gen Harinder Singh and Maj Gen Liu Lin, Commander of the South Xinjiang Military District, were held on June 22, 2020, in the wake of the unfortunate Galwan conflagration. Since then, 19 more rounds of talks have been held till February 19, 2024. The 22nd round has still not been scheduled.

This was perhaps after a long time that the military was so overtly involved as a concurrent track in efforts to resolve the question of Chinese transgressions into Indian territory or our perception of the LAC. Of course, there have been flag meetings on India's border with the frontier forces or militaries of the neighbouring countries. Over the past 54 months, the Ministry of External Affairs has been issuing readouts on a regular basis after each round of talks.

Is this a good or a bad thing? If one looks towards the past for guidance or even at the practice that is followed in other coun-



TOP BRASS: CDS Gen Anil Chauhan (third from right) and other officers at Parliament House on the opening day of the winter session on November 25. There is a need to institutionalise the military's role in politico-strategic affairs, he

tries, one would find that the military has been intrinsically embedded in politico-military strategic diplomacy.

The military representatives of India and Pakistan met in Karachi from July 18 to 27, 1949, under the auspices of the true sub-committee of the United Nations Commission for the establishment of the ceasefire line in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Indian delegation consisted of Lt Gen SM Shrinagsh, Maj Gen KS Thimayya and Brig SHFJ Manekshaw, while the Pakistani side was represented by Maj Gen WJ Cawthron, Maj Gen Nazir Ahmad and Brig M Sher Khan. Bureaucrats and Foreign Office functionaries were only observers. HM Patel and V Sahay C from the Indian side and M Ayub and AA Khan from Pakistan made up the quorum of the civilian component.

On December 11, 1972, senior military commanders of India and Pakistan met at Sushetgarh to sign and exchange maps delineating the 800-km Line of Control in J&K, extending from the Chhamb sector to the Partur sector, in accordance with Paragraph 4 (II) of the Simla Agreement dated July 2, 1972.

Unlike in India, the military is embedded in the politico-military hierarchy of democracies around the world.

This agreement was a sequel to the understanding reached between the Army Chiefs of India and Pakistan at their second meeting in Lahore on December 7, 1972, where Pakistan conceded to India's claim that Thako Chak formed a part of the International Border and that it should withdraw its troops from there. The maps were exchanged between Lt Gen PS Bhagat on behalf of India and Lt Gen Abdul Hamid Khan representing Pakistan.

It is noteworthy that there was a summit-level meeting between Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, followed

by a meeting between then Chief of the Army Staff Gen Manekshaw and his Pakistani counterpart Gen Tikka Khan before the operational-level exchange of maps between Lt Generals Bhagat and Hamid Khan.

After that, the role of the military in the politico-strategic-diplomatic arena was either recessed or took a back seat till the time it briefly seemed to have emerged in May 2006 to ostensibly oppose the demilitarisation of Siachen.

India's former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran records in his book, *How India Sees the World: Kautilsa to the 21st Century*: "When the CCS meeting was held on the eve of the defence secretary-level talks, [Mr] Narayanan launched into a bitter offensive against the proposal, saying that Pakistan could not be trusted, that there would be political and public opposition to any such initiative and that India's military position in the northern sector vis-à-vis both Pakistan and China would be compromised. [Gen] JJ Singh, who had happily gone along with the proposal in its earlier iterations, now decided to join Narayanan

in rubbing it in."

The reference is to then Army Chief Gen JJ Singh, who ostensibly along with former National Security Adviser MK Narayanan had opposed the proposal to turn the Siachen glacier into a mountain of peace in the most productive years of the India-Pakistan relationship after the ceasefire agreed upon by then Prime Minister Vajpayee on November 26, 2003, in the aftermath of Operation Parakram that ended on October 16, 2002.

Unlike in India, the military is embedded in the politico-military hierarchy of democracies around the world. Though under very strict civilian control, the six US theatre commanders report directly to the American President through the Secretary of Defence. Though the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the US is the Principal Military Adviser to the President, he has no executive authority to command combatant units. This meshes various streams of the military into the political decision-making process on critical questions of national security.

In China, the theatre commanders report directly to the Central Military Commission that is headed by the Chinese President and the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party thus institutionalising their role in the strategic decision-making process. Similarly, in the Russian system, the Chief of the General Staff does not exercise direct operational control over Russian forces; the superintendence is vested in the President in terms of Articles 4 and 13 of the Federal Law on Defence.

It is, therefore, imperative that beyond the CCS (Cabinet Committee on Security) paradigm, the role of the military in the national security decision-making framework is also formalised, given that India has a Chief of Defence Staff and is moving towards theatre commands, though the only functional and integrated theatre command as yet is the Andaman and Nicobar Command.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

A piece of spaghetti or a military unit can only be led from the front end. —George S Patton

## The patent story of runaway boys

SATISH KUMAR SHARMA

THE 12-year-old boy who claimed to have escaped from his kidnappers thought he had a foolproof story. But the police knew that it was the patent tale of most runaway teenagers who return home after encountering the reality of the world.

I was serving as a Deputy Commissioner of Police in Vadodra city in September 1995. We had barely solved the sensational kidnapping for ransom of the six-year-old son of a cardiologist when the above incident was reported.

The victim had gone to school on a bicycle but had not returned home from after the classes ended. In the late afternoon, the Vadodra police control room received information that the boy had been found at Karjan railway station — 40 km south of Vadodra. He had approached a constable on duty at the railway platform for help. He told the cop that four masked men had kidnapped him and boarded a train, but when it halted at Karjan, he had dodged them and escaped.

On being brought back to Vadodra, the boy gave us the details: after school, he was cycling back home when the masked men pulled him into an autorickshaw and put a handkerchief smelling of some chemical over his mouth, after which he passed out. When he regained consciousness, he was on a train. We knew the rest of the story. He said he could not identify his kidnappers because they were wearing masks.

But there were two holes in his story — his bike had been found parked at the cycle stand of the railway station and the constable from Karjan said the boy had not come to him running but had approached him calmly.

My officers were sure that the story was false but could not get the boy to tell the truth. So, I called his father, an employee of the state electricity board, and told him to try to find out what had actually happened.

The next day, the father came to my office with the boy. First, he met me alone and said the son was repeating the story. He said he, too, felt that the boy was lying but was helpless. So, I sent him out and called the boy in.

I told him, "I have not told your father as yet but we have caught your kidnappers. But they are saying that they were not wearing masks. If you identify them from among similar-looking men, we will arrest them and give you a certificate of bravery. But if you cannot, we will arrest your father for filing a false complaint." The boy was completely puzzled.

Realising that things had gone too far, he spilled the beans and started pleading to spare his father. He said he had run away because his parents did not allow him to watch TV and pressured him to study. But once the train started moving, he panicked and got down at the next station. He had made up the story to escape punishment.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Boost grassroots-level politics

Refer to Priyanka consolidates Gandhi fief (The Great Game). Priyanka Gandhi's presence in the Lok Sabha will certainly bolster the morale of the Congress. She is quite articulate and is able to strike a spontaneous rapport with the masses. But Congress leaders must not depend only on the Gandhis for creating a strong mass base for the party. Instead of criticising PM Modi, they should learn from his grassroots-level politics. Many veteran Congress leaders left the party as they felt sidelined. Rahul Gandhi has evolved his own vision and philosophy as a top leader; yet he needs to close the yawning gap between party workers and its elitist high command.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

#### Congress must introspect

With reference to Priyanka consolidates Gandhi fief, the writer has raised a pertinent question: Why are the Gandhis so special and cannot be challenged? The answer is that the Congress has not introspected even after losing the Lok Sabha elections thrice. Its rout did not stop here as the grand old party has tasted defeat after defeat in the state elections as well, including the recent losses in Haryana and Maharashtra. The party has failed to prepare a second-rung leadership, and is unable to come out of the shadow of the Gandhis. The Congress should give a chance to leaders who can bring out the party from the deep morass. Blaming EVMs for defeats will keep lowering its position in the eyes of the public. It is time to act and learn from past mistakes.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

#### Prioritise electorate over legacy

Apogee of Priyanka consolidates Gandhi fief, the party's inability to introspect continues to empower its adversaries. Priyanka Gandhi's consolidation within the family fiefdom underscores this stagnation. While her charisma might energise some, it does little to challenge the perception of a dynastic stronghold pulling strings behind a symbolic leadership. The Gandhis' refusal to embrace accountability erodes the party's credibility and fragments opposition unity. Re the Congress to regain relevance, it must democratise leadership and prioritise the electorate over legacy. The nation demands leaders, not figureheads.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

#### Need stern action for cybercrime

Refer to 'Beyond bans', smartphones are proving catastrophic for everyone. No doubt these have made our lives easy, but we are paying heavily for this convenience. Children have access to all types of content on social media, which has resulted in issues such as anxiety, depression and bullying. Australia has taken the bold step of banning social media access for children under 16. Doing the same in India is a Herculean task, but we need a concrete solution to this problem. Collaborative efforts by parents, educational institutions, the government and the service providers is the need of the hour. At the same time, the government must take strict action against the perpetrators of cybercrime who are misusing technology.

BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI, SANGRUR

#### Online content should be filtered

Apogee of 'Beyond bans', an outright ban on social media is not a viable approach for any country. It is true that social media has a profound effect on the impressionable minds of children. However, it should not be overlooked that it has been a boon for both academicians and students during the Covid-19 pandemic. The government should emphasise the need for vigilant cyber security mediators-cum-experts for social media content. It should be filtered efficiently before live-streaming on various platforms. Through collaborative efforts, we can curb the menace of unwanted content that inadvertently appears on online platforms and causes harm to young minds.

RUPINDER KAUR, AMBALA CANTT

#### Curb communal violence

With reference to 'Targeting mosques', it is surprising that civil courts across India have ordered an archaeological survey of mosques. Such an order violates the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. What is the logic of finding the nature of a religious place when a change of its character is prohibited under the law of the land? The question of suits being barred under the 1991 Act is pending before the apex court for more than four years. Its prompt decision is the need of the hour to stem the menace of increasing cases of communal violence across the country.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA