

## A comprehensive review

GST Council must consider all aspects

The group of state finance ministers (GoM), led by Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Chaudhary, formed to recommend measures for rationalising the structure of goods and services tax (GST), is reported to have finalised its recommendations, including significant adjustments to the tax rates of 148 items. However, some of the recommendations, as reported by this newspaper, are not in the right direction. In this regard, it is worth recalling why the process is being undertaken. There are at least two big reasons. First, the system has underperformed over the years, partly because of premature rate reduction. Last financial year, tax collection, including the compensation cess, was roughly equivalent to the revenue generated in the pre-GST period from taxes subsumed into the GST structure. The potential was much higher.

Second, the compensation cess, which was to be collected only in the first five years after GST came, was extended to repay the loans raised to compensate states for the revenue loss during the pandemic. Once loan repayment is completed next financial year, collection will stop unless legal adjustments are made. Another GoM is looking into this aspect. The GST Council would do well to make changes after discussing the recommendations of both the GoMs to minimise disruption. The Council's primary objective in undertaking the broader rationalisation exercise should be to move to a revenue-neutral rate while simultaneously reducing the number of tax slabs. The Ministry of Finance has informed Parliament that the average GST rate in 2023-24 was 11.6 per cent. The revenue-neutral rate, suggested by an expert committee at the time of GST implementation, was 15-15.5 per cent. A lower average tax rate has affected revenue mobilisation.

Although the full set of recommendations of the GoM on rate rationalisation is not known, the reported suggestions don't seem to be following the broad principle. It has been reported that the committee intends to recommend a new slab of 35 per cent for items such as tobacco products and aerated drinks. This would increase the number of slabs. Further, it intends to recommend taxing textile items at different rates, depending on their price. There are similar recommendations for other products as well. This is likely to complicate the tax structure further and increase disputes in terms of input credit. The GoM seems to be aiming to make the GST system progressive. However, there are limits to achieving this in the indirect tax structure.

The idea should be to simplify the structure. This will increase compliance and reduce disputes. That will not only improve the ease of doing business, particularly for small businesses, but also help increase revenue. The Council should not repeat the mistakes that are plaguing the tax structure. Notably, the government has also informed Parliament that while tax collected at different rates cannot be calculated, estimates show 70-75 per cent of GST collection came from the 18 per cent slab last financial year. The 12 per cent slab yielded 5-6 per cent. Merging the 12 per cent slab into the 18 per cent slab thus should lead to minimal disruption. More such possibilities should be explored and evaluated. Overall, it is important for the Council to examine all relevant information to simplify the GST structure. That will benefit all stakeholders, including the government. The opportunity to address the shortcomings in the indirect tax structure should not be missed.

## Strengthening cooperatives

Building capacity will increase opportunities

Ever since cooperatives became legal entities in India in 1904, member-owned enterprises have worked towards enabling marginalised communities to secure livelihoods and participate in the economy. Members pool resources to derive shared benefits and create institutions that empower local communities. In this context, a recent report released by Primus Partners, a consulting firm, does well to look at the sector's potential to fuel growth in India. The report suggests that cooperatives can create up to 55 million direct jobs and 56 million self-employment opportunities by 2030. Their impact on gross domestic product is expected to be 3-5 per cent by 2030, and even surpass 10 per cent when both direct and self-employment opportunities are considered.

The data from the National Cooperative Database shows of the more than 800,000 cooperatives in the country, around 41 per cent are in the primary sector, particularly in agriculture and allied activities. These include dairy cooperatives, primary agricultural credit societies (PACS), fishery, livestock and poultry cooperatives, and agro-processing cooperatives. Nearly 20 per cent of the cooperatives operate in the credit sector, including PACS, cooperative banks, and credit as well as thrift societies. In this sense, cooperatives are an important institutional mechanism to augment farm incomes and disburse credit to people who may not otherwise have access to them, thereby addressing the twin problems of rural indebtedness and poverty. However, despite this huge potential, limitations are holding back cooperatives. The report suggests that they face problems, including inadequate capacity building, both human capital and institutional capacity; technology and market access challenges; and financing constraints. This sector is currently plagued by a low adoption of technology and a general aversion to digital transformations, limiting access to digital banking and online markets. Moreover, 40 per cent of the PACS lie defunct, implying that many of the rural poor are still cut out of banking. Problems related to marketing and branding products, coupled with governance and regulatory challenges, further lower their chances of success.

At this juncture, it is critical to extend support to cooperatives for their long-term survival and sustainability. Accordingly, as the report suggests, introducing professional training for members of cooperatives, equipping them with computers and digital mobile-banking solutions, mandating maintenance of digital records, and taking them on board as sellers in online marketplaces will help a great deal. In this regard, the National Council for Cooperative Training is developing courses and targeted training programmes that incorporate best industry practices, helping cooperatives stay competitive and informed. The sector should also mould its compensation structure suitably to attract talent. The government has also undertaken multiple initiatives to strengthen the cooperative sector. These include unveiling the world's largest grain storage facility, distributing Rupay Kisan Credit Cards to cooperative members at relatively low interest rates, relaxing expansion and lending norms for cooperative banks, and formulating a new National Cooperative Policy, which is set to be launched in the coming months. Clearly, to keep up with the changing times, cooperatives need to adopt technology and build capacity.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

## Demography without a TFR obsession

We should be seeking solutions to falling birth rates through means other than just exhorting women to have more children

Ever since politicians and public intellectuals internalised the truth embedded in the statement "demography is destiny", they have been trying to roll back the tide. In Europe and America, they have tried to do this by focusing on restricting illegal immigration, which is impacting their demography, and in India, we think it is all about raising the total fertility rate (TFR). A TFR of around 2.1 live births per woman is considered ideal to keep population levels stable.

In October, the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu fretted about falling TFRs in their two states, and indicated that they may incentivise families to produce more children. According to data from the latest National Family Health Survey and other reports, while Tamil Nadu has a TFR of 1.8, Andhra has 1.7. Bihar leads the table with a massive TFR of 3, while Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand figure lower at 2.4 and 2.3, indicating that even in parts of the populous Hindi belt, rates are falling.

A few days ago, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief, Mohan Bhagwat, raised the same issue and suggested that women should opt to have three children. Though he did not specifically say so, he was probably referring to the relatively low TFRs among Hindus compared to Muslims.

For the southern states, which will lose Lok Sabha seats after the next Census and delimitation exercise, raising birth rates seems like a priority. It's not going to work, for women may not choose to have more children just to receive some incentives or for political reasons. Birth rates start falling when economic conditions improve and women receive good quality education and take up jobs. As one's economic situation improves, the cost of raising children also rises disproportionately, as schooling and healthcare costs zoom. So, merely receiving cash bonuses or more maternity leave is not going to cut it for them.

Politicians and social scientists think they have the tools to dictate or incentivise human behaviour, but outside coercive states like Mao's China or Pol Pot's Cambodia, they have no such power. The short point

is not that you cannot influence private behaviours by instituting a reasonable system of incentives and penalties, but that focusing too much on that alone will ultimately be counterproductive. Consider how much damage was done by the late Sanjay Gandhi's forced sterilisation programme during the Emergency when population growth was considered a huge problem. The real problem was not population, but inadequate food production. Once the Green Revolution took off, the population problem also became less worrisome. Today, just because we think the opposite is the problem, it does not mean we are going to be any more successful. We must focus more on the solutions to depopulation, rather than fixating on raising TFR levels.

Here are several reasons why trying to control demography by targeting TFRs may not work too well. It may also lead to more social tensions.

First, if a government incentivises, say, more births per woman, what is the possibility that the message will resonate more with the better off sections than with the poor or illegal immigrants? Do we want the poor to have more children, or the rich, given that it is the latter who can afford to provide their progeny with a good start in life?

Second, trying to influence TFRs primarily because a state may lose Lok Sabha seats (in proportion, if not in absolute terms) runs contrary to what the Constitution actually supports: Raising seats for some categories and groups when their share in the population rises. The reserved seats for SCs and STs were increased from 79 to 84 and 41 to 47 in the Lok Sabha based on their rising share of the population in the 2001 Census. If this is acceptable, opposing an increased share for Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, or Jharkhand based on the same logic is faulty. The interests of the southern states can be protected by other means—say, by raising the threshold for constitutional amendments, or giving them a few more Rajya Sabha seats.

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**BEYOND IDEOLOGY**  
R JAGANNATHAN

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## EU-CBAM: The way forward

Developing countries face a disproportionate impact from climate change, despite being historically less responsible for it. They are equally subjected to climate measures initiated by developed countries, with transborder developmental consequences. The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is one such measure that compromises the developmental pursuits of most developing nations. Incorporating poor countries' developmental aspirations becomes even more critical in the backdrop of minimal atmospheric space left to accommodate carbon emissions for meeting the Paris Agreement target of limiting temperature increase with 2 or 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. In order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations by 2030, equity-based development at all levels is of critical importance.

The economies of least developed countries (LDCs) are fragile, with little diversification and shallow export baskets. Many LDCs export a substantial share of their goods to the EU, with these exports often concentrated in product areas covered by the CBAM, which constitute a significant portion of their gross domestic product (GDP). For example, nearly 60 per cent of Mozambique's and 29 per cent of Zambia's total exports to the EU consist of CBAM-covered commodities. In 2023, Mozambique's CBAM-covered exports accounted for approximately 6 per cent of its GDP, with over 50 per cent of its total aluminium exports destined for the EU. India also exports a significant share of CBAM-covered goods to the EU, comprising about 11 per cent of its total exports to the region.

The stated objective of the CBAM is to arrest carbon leakage. The EU is experienced commodity. It started its cap-and-trade programme in 2005. However, from an equity perspective, the CBAM in its current format is not the best method to deal with the carbon leakage problem. The fundamental principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibility and Respective Capacities (CBDR-RC), which forms the bedrock of all international environmental nego-

tiations, does not align with such unilateral application of measures. Moreover, it goes against the spirit of the "Enabling Clause" and Part IV of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) titled "Trade and Development", which include provisions for granting exemptions to LDCs and providing special and differential treatment to developing countries.

The CBAM in the present form would have a distributional impact. Firstly, many developing countries would lose their competitiveness in products of their genuine competitive advantage; secondly, the resources would flow from the poor countries to developed ones (EU) because of increased costs by importers in the EU from year 2026; thirdly, several developing countries would lose revenue because they lack capacities to put together an indigenous market mechanism and use such revenues for green transition.

On the positive side, a study conducted on the Turkish economy concludes that if some proactive measures on energy-efficiency are taken, the carbon border tax can increase private and social welfare by improving economic gains and environmental and health conditions (Acar et al. 2021).

Many developing countries lack the capacity and capability to design and implement effective carbon pricing mechanisms, and correctly measure, report, and verify carbon emissions—the hallmark of effective trading schemes. The developed countries can help these economies in doing so. It makes enormous sense to exempt LDCs from the CBAM and apply special and differential treatment for some other developing countries, under the World Trade Organization's "enabling clause".

The EU can provide different transition periods to different sets of countries on the basis of their developmental status. There is a good case for like-minded developing countries, including LDCs, to take a coordinated position on the subject and open negotiations with the EU to bring down the extreme impact of the regulation on their economies.

It is noteworthy that only a limited number of prod-



**RAJEEV KHER & ANSHUMAN GUPTA**

their populations in line with the national goal until recently, the goalposts have now changed. In terms of falling TFRs, they are actually underperformers relative to what the nation needs. The country's TFR-based "demographic dividend" is coming from the Hindi belt, not the South. It is the North that must be rewarded for keeping the country's TFR flag flying.

Fourth, the real problem in changing demography is the social tension it causes if most of the population deficit is met by immigration from cultures that are alien to the host country or society. That is what needs tackling. So, what is one driving at? Simple. It is foolish to follow demographic trends at the level of family decisions alone. It is better to take declining TFRs as a given and focus on what needs to be done.

When it comes to retaining more Lok Sabha seats, the South would be better off inviting more permanent settlers from the Hindi belt and encouraging them to learn Tamil or Telugu so that the migrants can merge more seamlessly with local culture. This is a far more realistic goal than trying to incentivise TFRs, though there is no harm in making the state more family-, women- and child-friendly. That can never be wrong.

Countries and states with falling TFRs should seek more investments in technology and businesses that cater to an older population. They can consider raising retirement ages for government and private sector staff while also promoting higher savings rates during one's working life. Pensions cannot be shrinking when the number of new contributors is exorbitant, and this includes pensions for government staff and the armed forces. Governments can also, selectively, encourage more automation to help senior citizens cope with their needs when there are fewer children around to take care of them.

The real issue is the rate of demographic change, especially through immigration, which brings social instability and unwanted tensions. States would be wise to dump the old liberal attitude to immigration and focus on regulating it. They should insist that people migrating from other cultures should compulsorily adapt and learn the culture of the host country. In Denmark, if you are seeking citizenship by naturalisation, you have to know the language and the culture of the country. You also have to declare allegiance and loyalty to Denmark and Danish society, and follow fundamental Danish values, including Danish democratic norms.

In India, where the majority community fears efforts by religious groups to convert Hindus, one condition for allowing immigrants in should be that they do not engage in any conversion activity and respect Hindu culture and values. New immigrants cannot be allowed to form ghettos where they live as separate cultural islands—this is what creates the separatist mindset. Also, work permits without ultimate citizenship rights can be liberalised to allow for the natural flow of labour from low-wage countries to higher-wage ones.

Demography may be destiny, but the solutions do not lie in blaming immigrants to take more than they already have. Not in a country where the burden of raising a family has fallen heavily on their shoulders, and they are only now beginning to taste the first whiff of freedom and independence.

The author is a senior journalist

ucts are covered in the first tranche of the regulation, with more to be included over time. Similar regulations are being considered in other developed countries. Therefore, the Global South must unite to address their common concerns.

On the firm level, the CBAM should not be applied to small-scale enterprises up to a certain level of production value. Hand-holding of small and medium scale enterprises by governments is necessary to meet the CBAM requirements. The revenue earned by the EU through CBAM should also be used to mitigate climate change impacts, primarily in poor and developing countries.

In some countries, including India, the internal tax on fossil fuels is already very high. Fossil fuels' taxes should be included in the calculation of carbon price in the country of origin. Alternatively, the government could adopt a revenue-neutral strategy to address the CBAM challenge by balancing fossil fuel taxes with the potential carbon price. This approach can help in retaining the international competitiveness of the affected products. India needs to include petroleum products under the goods and services tax. India is expected to start its cap-and-trade carbon emission scheme from 2026, the year when CBAM would become chargeable. The collected revenue could be shared objectively with the states to offset any losses.

Industry associations have a proactive role to play in educating businesses, particularly small enterprises, about the implications of the regulation. The EU will concede to any changes in the applicability of the regulation in the ongoing FTA negotiations. India must insist on securing support for awareness-building, technology sharing, standard setting, verification systems, and capacity development. The climate change is no more an esoteric concept. There is unlikely to be any dilution in emerging international regulations. It would require strategic domestic policy measures and coordinated efforts on the part of the Global South to ensure that their developmental concerns are mainstreamed in global policies.

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## Heavy risks of weight-loss drugs



**BOOK REVIEW**  
CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

The health issues and social stigma associated with weight gain push obese people to try every possible solution that can help them shed unwanted kilograms. Unfortunately, many of them struggle to lose weight even with a balanced diet and plenty of exercise. This sense of failure is hard to cope with, especially in a culture that offers shame in place of support. In the face of such despair, prescription drugs seem to hold out a promise of hope.

Some financial analysts believe that the market for them could be worth as much as \$200 billion globally

by 2030... Ozempic and its successors look set to become one of the iconic and defining drugs of our time, on a par with the contraceptive pill and Prozac," writes Johann Hari in his new book *Magic Pill: The Extraordinary Benefits and Disturbing Risks of the New Weight-Loss Drugs*.

What makes the book worth reading is the author's openness to diverse perspectives. He is not a medical expert, so the information that he makes available is based on conversations with scientists, published studies, and his own experience of injecting himself with Ozempic.

Numerous Indians who were unfamiliar with the drug learnt about it thanks to jewellery designer Maheep Kapoor on the Netflix show *Padmaavati* and Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor. She called out people who use Ozempic to lose weight quickly, leading to a shortage of the drug for diabetics. Her remarks also led to speculation around filmmaker Karan Johar's recent weight loss, who took to

Instagram and stated, "Being healthy and eating well and reinventing the wheel of your nutrition! Aur Oshpimic to mile credit (And Ozempic gets the credit)!"

It is difficult to tell whether this is smart product placement or playful banter but, going by Ms Kapoor and Mr Johar's popularity, there is a need to clear up the confusion about the product's intended use. Mr Hari writes, "Novo Nordisk (a pharmaceutical company) manufactures and markets two forms of semaglutide—Ozempic for diabetics, and Wegovy for obese people. They are the same drug, sold for different purposes, and Wegovy can be prescribed at higher doses." That said, people do buy Ozempic, which is intended for diabetics, and use it for weight loss. This has led to a shortage, and the emergence of bootleg versions in the market.

Ozempic makes people eat less. The science behind how the medication works on the gut is explained in a friendly manner in this book, without too much

technical jargon, while also cautioning readers that scientists are still in the process of understanding how the drug works on the brain and the mind. The author is neither overly jubilant nor excessively sceptical. He sticks to the facts, and is honest about information gaps that exist due to a lack of long-term studies with Ozempic users. He also reveals how Novo Nordisk responded to his queries.

While Mr Hari's research is commendable, his personal story adds much value to the book. The decision to opt for Ozempic was not easy. It felt like "cheating" because it did not involve the discipline and rigour associated with following a diet or committing to an exercise routine. Yet it also felt like something worth a shot because getting rid of excess weight could help lower the likelihood of heart disease, arthritis, kidney problems, and dementia

in later life. Six months after the author started taking Ozempic, he found that he woke up feeling not only fitter, more confident and better-looking but also

listless and emotionally dulled. Most of his acquaintances taking weight-loss drugs (Ozempic and others) told him that "their pleasure in food had plummeted, or even vanished". They ate only because they had to. Drug-induced weight loss made Mr Hari "physically healthier" but also "more psychologically vulnerable".

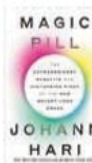
He writes, "What, I wondered, will be the effect when millions of people are deprived of the psychological protections they get from overeating?" This is not an imaginary concern for the author. It is personal because he used to derive a lot of emotional comfort from food. It is also worth noting that "there are now more than

70 anti-obesity drugs in development".

The book also looks at potential risks associated with the new weight-loss drugs. They can lead to loss of muscle mass, malnutrition, pancreatitis, and stomach paralysis. The Food and Drug Administration in the United States advises people with a history of thyroid cancer in their family to not use these drugs. The European Medicines Agency has issued a warning that taking Ozempic can increase thoughts of suicide and self-harm in some people.

The author reminds us that the culture obesity crisis is closely linked to the processed food industry that pumps chemicals into our bodies to make us feel hungry and ask for more. The appeal of artificially manufactured flavours and tastes might seem difficult to resist but we can take heart from the fact that initiatives aimed at fighting obesity are coming up gradually to promote healthy food more widely available to people across socio-economic groups.

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Opinion

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# Neither good, nor simple

The GoM's proposals may be well-intended, but they will make the GST regime more complex

THE ONLY ARGUMENT in favour of the Group of Ministers' (GoM) recommendation of a special goods and services (GST) rate, in addition to a slew of rate tweaks for over 148 items including readymade garments, is as follows: In an environment where inflation is hurting lower income households, the GoM is right in its objective of making premium products pricier and items used by the common man cheaper. It is also being argued that it is the top end of consumption that's holding up well, but the overall consumption as reflected in the private final consumption expenditure has been growing at a subdued pace. With the GDP growth having clocked in at a seven-quarter low in the September quarter, and GST collections having moderated quite a bit, affordability must take precedence over complexity. The GoM is also probably hoping that placing a few more goods in the high-end slabs can enhance the collections and help the common man.

The problem is that the recommendations, if accepted by the GST Council, will bury all hopes of a less complex GST structure that essentially would imply a reduction in the number of tax slabs, minimal carve-outs and exemptions, easier compliance mechanism, and rates at a level at which both states and the Centre are able to safeguard their revenue streams. Consider the absurdity of multiplicity of rates which will only increase. The trigger for the most recent discussion on the continuing complexity of the GST structure was a Coimbatore-based hotel chain owner cracking a joke about the absurdity of GST rates at an industry meeting with finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, which later led to a political storm. The problem, he said, is that GST is applied differently to each item. For example, there is no GST on a bun. If you put cream in it, the GST becomes 18%. Because of this, customers say they want the bun and the cream separately so that they can apply the cream themselves to save money. It was not the first time that the multiplicity of rates has been flagged as an issue. Multiple rates, especially for different parts of the same item, often result in classification disputes. For example, tax authorities and manufacturers have previously sparred over Marico's Parachute — whether it was hair oil or just coconut oil, Nestlé's KitKat — biscuit or chocolate; and Dabur's Lal Dant Manjan — tooth powder or a medicinal drug. The GoM proposal on readymade garments brings back memories of these absurdities.

Overall, arbitrary changes to any tax structure are undesirable and the logic that today's sluggish economic growth and the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots demands these changes is fallacious. It's true no country has claimed a flawless GST and a perfect indirect tax regime ought not become the enemy of the good, but it's an undeniable fact that India's GST was hobbled in its role as "the great simplifier" by its multiplicity of rate brackets. India has the fiscal space to rid this levy of its complexity and go for simplified stability. Besides, while the slabs need a reset, India must also widen its coverage to include fuel, liquor, and other stuff left out for later consideration. That's the way to go instead of the continuing obsession of tinkering with and widening the rates and slabs. Is a "good and simple tax" a forgotten word?

# Plastics failure is a canary in the climate coalmine

YOU MIGHT HAVE missed it amid the noise of the Trump transition and the sound of the European and Japanese auto industries collapsing. But the failure of an obscure United Nations meeting in South Korea at the weekend is a sign of how the entire edifice of environmental diplomacy is crumbling.

The meeting in the port city of Busan was intended to hammer out the text of a treaty to prevent plastic pollution, ahead of a planned summit to formalise the agreement next year. It would then join existing UN conventions on biodiversity and the ozone layer — along with by far the most well-known such institution, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC.

It's common to treat these meetings as meaningless talking shops, but that's not right. As my colleague Mark Gongloff points out, these meetings wouldn't be so contentious if they didn't have real-world consequences. A single UN member country can block the entire process, and nations that benefit from the status quo have every reason to exercise their vetoes. The effects were on display at the COP29 climate change conference last month. It was hosted in the authoritarian petrostate of Azerbaijan due to a round of pre-meeting haggling causing most democratic leaders to avoid the event. Host country president Ilham Aliyev used the platform to launder culture-war tropes about "Western fake news" and petroleum as a "gift of God"; and eventual texts downplayed hard-won references to fossil fuels in the previous year's decision.

The plastics meeting ended in even more disarray. The entire process began two years ago with a UN resolution titled "End Plastic Pollution" but after hundreds of hours of discussions between more than 3,360 delegates, the thicket of qualifications and parentheses in the final text couldn't even commit to the idea that "ending" plastic pollution was still a worthwhile goal. They're going to have to hold another meeting in six months or so to complete the work that wasn't done last week.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies have acted as wreckers in recent environmental conferences. That's hardly a surprise, given their economic dependence on fossil fuels that are the most direct threat to the global environment. The US — which already produces more oil and gas than any OPEC member, and is now transitioning to an even more flagrantly pro-fossil fuel Trump administration — is rarely a reliable ally.

In the case of climate change, we are in the midst of an industrial revolution where clean power from solar panels, wind power, batteries, and electric vehicles is clearly superior in both economic, health, and environmental terms of conventional fossil technologies. Even then, however, it's a struggle because of the weight of path dependency and risk aversion. Rich democracies often find it easier to outsource their climate policies to the obscurity of UN processes rather than do the truly hard but effective work at home. Plastics are an even harder nut to crack. Oil exporters are likely to point out that we haven't yet found viable substitutes for most of them, a dramatic contrast to the situation with fossil and clean energy.

"They're putting their money where their mouths are, too. Investments in upstream oil and gas are still falling well behind the bullish talk you'll hear from the industry, because producers can see that the rise of electric vehicles and renewable power means demand for petroleum is peaking and then the status quo, investments in refineries that can convert those hydrocarbons into plastics, however, have been booming at an unprecedented rate, because the same industry can see that polymers are a rare source of ongoing demand."

The capacity for producing ethylene, the most important polymer feedstock, is rising at 4% a year, even as output of crude oil is struggling to return to its 2018 peak. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development expects plastic demand to rise 60% by 2040. Tackling that is where the real hard work needs to be done. You might lament the failure of UN delegates to come up with a text in Busan. But nothing compared to the challenge you and I face, however, in eliminating plastics from our everyday lives.



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# Can we be sure of food inflation?

TREND SHIFTS IN FOOD PRICE LEVEL AND PRICE GROWTH PORTEND PERSISTENCE, NOT REVERSION

# Can we be sure of food inflation?

FOOD INFLATION HAS now sustained for several years, attracting a range of stringent measures combined with numerous supply shocks. These developments raise several policy challenges, including monetary policy. In recent months, an increasing divergence in core and headline inflation has held back monetary easing due to strong price growth in vegetables, even as that in cereals varies 7-8% upon double digits one year ago. The current expectation is that good monsoons and crop-sowing should moderate food prices ahead with a pathway for the Reserve Bank of India to lower interest rates.

How sure can we be about such a scenario? Looking back at the five-year period from 2019 to now, there are noticeable departures in food price behaviour that could be indicative of structural breaks or trend shifts in both the level and price growth or inflation. Consider some key changes in April 2019–October 2024 relative to the preceding six years, April 2013–March 2019.

■ It is well-known that wholesale and retail food inflation averages much higher in the latter period at a respective 5.6% and 6.7% a year each month against 4% previously.

■ There's a pronounced shift in price level too, with the wholesale and retail food indices moving up an average -36 and 40 points over the pre-2019 level — a 28% and 31% rise.

■ An important difference is the lasting push of food inflation since April 2019 compared to more short-lived surges before. For example, the longest pre-2019 surge in April 2012–August 2014 lasted about two years, relieving the pressure upon headline inflation thereafter. The current one persists for more than five years to date.

■ The trough-to-peak swings are comparably bigger and because of the upward shift in the mean, the downswing reversions are comparably smaller after 2019.

■ Vegetable price spikes also differ from past patterns. Retail vegetable price growth has averaged 10% a month in April 2019–October 2024, almost double the preceding period average, 5.3%. Producer vegetables prices have paced faster at a 13.4% monthly average against the corresponding 5.7% previously.

■ Like total food inflation, not only has stronger producer and retail inflation in vegetables persisted for five years, but there is also a similar trend shift — the respective indices average 71 and 41 points higher, reflecting a 47% and 29% rise over the pre-2019 average. The price level jump is steeper in the last two years.

■ While retail-wholesale vegetable inflation volatility is higher in annual and sequential terms, the seasonal price spikes appear to have moved from the usual August–November months to November–December in the last five years. Price flare-ups are more frequent in other months, such as June–July as well. It is difficult to say if these are permanent.

These trends may or may not signify structural breaks or trend shifts, observed as they are over a five-year horizon. However, the deviations are recurrent and significant. Therefore, they do shake confidence about moderations in line with past behaviour and induce caution about the near-term path of food inflation and at longer intervals.

More importantly, the fundamental causes of these differences in price behaviours are not properly known and incompletely understood. It is commonly believed that continuous weather shocks related to climate change have been prime causes. For example, heatwaves in 2022–23 impacted wheat yields, prices, and procurement, depleting the stocks. But why should rice prices have been rising with matching strength, if not more? The

same did not happen to rice and its procurement while stocks are in excess. Then, why do cereal price pressures persist despite the stark replacement? How do the price developments relate to production, procurement, and stocks? Conversely, why does the price growth persist despite numerous and stricter supply-side measures? Since 2021, these have extended from regular market intervention such as wheat sales, rice and wheat export bans, raised import duties and minimum export prices, stockholding limits with continuous lowering of caps on wheat-rice stocks held by traders, wholesalers, retailers including big chains, and processors. The intensity and duration of such restrictions is unprecedented. Why have the unmatched open market sales of wheat — a three-fold annual increase from FY21, followed by a trebling in FY23 from 3.5 to 9.4 million tonnes in FY24 — not succeeded in countering the price rise? Why are rice stocks overflowing despite substitution for wheat in public distribution? What is the effective role of these supply measures in the persistence of pressures and volatility in food price changes?

There are many puzzling questions. The more fundamental implications of the shift in price level and elevated rate of changes are grave. For one, even if food inflation climbs down to the desired rate, 4%, the raised price level matters to households and for aggregate demand. Two, the relative price changes (food versus non-food items) point to a much longer-term correction. This, in turn, would require policy restrictions to remain longer in place than in the past. But then, little is known about causes and effects, the interlinkages and mutual feedback that remain unexplained. We are less sure about food inflation than ever before.

# The human capital imperative

Upgrading it with help from industry is crucial to bolster India's manufacturing ambitions and become an advanced economy

N CHANDRA MOHAN

The writer is an economics and business commentator based in New Delhi

India's challenge is indeed daunting as only 5% of its workforce has received formal skill training as against 80% and 96% in countries like Japan and South Korea. Although India has the advantage of a predominantly youthful labour force, this demographic dividend can turn into a curse if they lack the skills to be gainfully absorbed in manufacturing. More so, as the policy establishment has unveiled ambitions to become a leading player in sunrise industries like semiconductors, green hydrogen, artificial intelligence, robotic hardware, besides labour-intensive manufacturing. Clearly, the overriding policy focus must be on upgrading human capital so that it is more in alignment with the country's ambitions for manufacturing.

The contrast with China is striking as its better educated workforce facilitated its rise as a global export-oriented manufacturing power. Unlike India's top-down approach, China adopted a bottom-up strategy of focusing on primary mass education from the early 1900s, prior to communism. This shifted to secondary education during the 1960s–80s under communism, and later to tertiary education during the post-communist era. Nearly 25% of China's students at the secondary level and above are enrolled in vocational education as against 2% in India. China produces a higher share of engineering, medicine, and teacher training graduates while humanities dominate among graduates, reflecting a colonial bias to produce administrators.

These facts are from Nitin Kumar Bharti and Li Yang's paper, "The Making of China and India in 21st Century: Long-run Human Capital Accumulation from 1900 to 2020". India's relative neglect of primary education (till the 1990s) left much of its population without the education needed to shift from low-productivity agriculture towards manufacturing and services in the cities — a process associated with modern economic development. In 1987–88, China and India had 62% of their workforce in agriculture. Over the next 30 years, China reduced this to 13%, while India only reduced it to 40%. Of late, there has been a noteworthy reversal in terms of a migration from factories back to the farms of rural India, which complicates efforts to boost manufacturing.

The big question is what must be done to raise India's threshold levels of human development to match its aspirations on manufacturing? A useful means to integrate youth into the labour market is through skill development measures like apprenticeships. For starters, India could adopt best practices of countries like Germany which runs the most successful apprenticeship programme in the world that is linked with the higher educational

curriculum. In India, the process could start even earlier with skilling and vocational training imparted in secondary school education. The bad news in this regard is that the launch of the ambitious PM Internship Scheme on December 2 to train people in real-life skills has been postponed despite indications of a favourable response.

More than the government, the onus of improving human capital lies with Indian industry as it is not getting enough skilled labour for its operations despite a growing reserve army of educated unemployed youth. India Inc must collaborate with educational institutions so that its requirements form an integral part of the curriculum. What can perhaps nudge industry into taking apprenticeships more seriously is if training and skilling of youth constitute part of corporate social responsibility obligations. This kind of a programme could lower the dropout rate seen in other skilling programmes and improve the employability of the workforce. India Inc must ensure that the gap between China and India with regard to the average years of education for manufacturing jobs reduces much further. This was as low as 5.2 years in 1988, which narrowed down to 2.4 years in 2018 according to Bharti and Yang. Unless India's baseline of human development improves, it will not be able to raise the share of manufacturing and grow into a developed nation.

Views are personal

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

'Hell to pay'

It was hard for us to make sense of US President-elect Donald Trump's post on Truth Social in the nature of a threat that there will be "hell to pay" if the hostages in Gaza are not released before his inauguration on January 20, 2025. Does the phrase mean a massive loss of life? True to form, Trump kept a rogue tongue in his head and spoke the language of a bully. When "the more muscular than

thou" President-to-be spoke of "atrocities against humanity", he certainly might not have had in mind the atrocities and war crimes committed by Israel with US' support in Gaza and Lebanon. A statesman makes the world a safer (and more just and free) place to live. By stirring memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and compelling us to visualise a nightmare scenario with his words, "those responsible will be hit harder than anybody has been hit in the

history of the US", Trump does not inspire confidence in us that he will be a statesman and not be a hawk and a war-monger.

—G David Milton, Maruthanode

Long road ahead for RBI

With the impetuous return of Donald Trump in his second innings, the US is bound to spawn domestic inflation with its steep hike in import tariffs. Consequently, the US Federal Reserve will need to sustain elevated key rates.

This increases the demand for the dollar, leading to its overvaluation. The upcoming December review of monetary policy by the Reserve Bank of India comes in the wake of GDP plunging to 5.6% in the last quarter. Any move by the RBI for a softer rate regime could thus be pushed back, even as it battles uneven fluctuations in the rupee against the dollar.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai



## SCIENCE

# ecDNA challenges law of genetics, groundbreaking new studies find

In normal human cells, the DNA is enclosed in 23 pairs of chromosomes. Some natural processes can damage DNA; cells can also make mistakes in DNA when making copies to imbue in new cells. Such processes could cause a small part of the DNA to break away and float freely inside the nucleus. This is ecDNA

Manjeera Gowravaram

Once brushed aside as a curiosity, extrachromosomal DNA (ecDNA) is now taking centre stage in the complex field of cancer biology. Scientists first discovered it as a small fragment of genetic material in cancer cells 50 years ago. Because it was present in only 1.4% of tumours, they didn't consider it to be important.

But more sophisticated genomic techniques later revealed their mistake: one study published in 2017 revealed ecDNA is present in nearly 40% of cancer cell lines and in up to 90% of patient-derived brain tumour samples, revealing its pivotal role in cancer biology.

On November 6, three papers were published in the journal *Nature* by a team called eDyNAmiC – an international collaboration led by Stanford University professor Paul Mischel. The studies explore how ecDNA is formed and contributes to the progression of cancer and drug resistance.

Importantly, the findings also challenge a fundamental law of genetics.

## What is ecDNA?

In normal human cells, the nucleus contains 23 pairs of chromosomes that enclose the DNA. There are some natural processes that can damage DNA. For example, in chromothripsis, which occurs in some cancers, the chromosomes are broken and rearranged. Cells can also make mistakes in the DNA when making copies of it to imbue in new cells. Such processes could cause a small part of the DNA to break away from the main chromosome and form a circular structure that floats freely inside the nucleus. This is ecDNA.

One of the three studies was led by eDyNAmiC members Mariam Jamal-Hanjani and Charles Swanton, both professors at University College London. They analysed the mutation patterns in tumours before and after the formation of ecDNA. They identified various environmental factors, including smoking, exposure to certain substances, and genetic mutations, to be triggers of DNA damage that could lead to the formation of ecDNA. In the same study, the researchers attempted a comprehensive analysis of samples from nearly 15,000 cancer patients from the U.K.'s 100,000 Genomes Project, covering 39 tumour types. They validated their findings using a method called fluorescence in-situ hybridisation (or FISH), which specifically looks for certain cancer-related genes in tissue samples.

They found that ecDNA was present in



Researchers analysed samples from nearly 15,000 cancer patients from the U.K.'s 100,000 Genomes Projects. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

about 17% of tumour samples but more so in liposarcomas, brain tumours, and breast cancers. They also reported that the prevalence of ecDNA rose after treatments like chemotherapy and correlated with metastasis and worse patient outcomes.

## ecDNA and cancer growth

ecDNA present in tumours often contains multiple copies of oncogenes – mutated genes capable of causing cancer – that are required to activate tumour growth. But these oncogenes are not present in chromosomes, where scientists used to believe they lived.

A study published in 2021, led by another Stanford University professor, Howard Chang, showed that while chromosomal DNA is fixed within specific regions in the cell, ecDNA moves freely and can interact with other ecDNA to form hubs – concentrated zones where oncogenes are expressed more.

Cells transcribe DNA to mRNA to use the latter to manufacture proteins. The 2021 study also found that when cells transcribe ecDNA to mRNA, the process causes specific oncogenes to become four-times more common in the cell than if the DNA came from the chromosomes. This anomaly has the potential to accelerate the evolution of tumours and help the cancer resist drugs.

## An inheritance of loss

Another finding reported in the new studies involves a fundamental shift in scientists' understanding of genetics.

**ecDNA was present in about 17% of tumour samples but more so in liposarcomas, brain tumours, and breast cancers. Prevalence of ecDNA rose after chemotherapy and correlated with metastasis and worse patient outcomes**

Typically, when cells divide, they duplicate the chromosomes and distribute them equally among their daughter cells. In this process, researchers have known the genes on the same chromosome are inherited together while those on different chromosomes are distributed independently of one another. This basic genetic principle is called Mendel's third law of independent assortment (named after Gregor Mendel).

But in the second of the three studies, a team led by Mischel and Chang used single-cell sequencing, imaging, and modelling to report that ecDNA is passed on in clusters to the daughter cells during cell division – a violation of the third law. This clustering gives some cancer cells an advantage because it allows them to enhance gene interactions, support cancer growth, and preserve favourable genetic combinations over multiple life-cycles. The researchers have called this the "jackpot effect."

This discovery has profound implications. It overturns the idea that gene inheritance is entirely random when the genes are not linked by DNA strands. The researchers also reported that the

transcription process – from DNA to RNA – facilitates the coordinated segregation of ecDNA during cell division.

## A new vulnerability in cancer cells

But for the new threats posed by ecDNA, the third study uncovered a potential weakness in tumours that depend on ecDNA. The unusual structure of the ecDNA and its interactions with other DNA elements increase the activity of specific genes. This can lead to a conflict between the cellular machinery involved in making RNA and the activity of cancer cells that leads to DNA damage.

Cells respond to this conflict by the heavy use of a protein called CHK1, which helps fix DNA and allows the cell to keep growing. When the researchers used a drug called BBI-2779 that blocks CHK1, they found the drug selectively killed cancer cells with ecDNA, significantly reducing the number of tumours in mice with stomach cancer.

A San Diego-based biotechnology company co-founded by Mischel and Chang, called Boundless Bio, is currently working to translate these discoveries for clinical use. The company's stated aim is to give patients new treatment options that target vulnerabilities created by ecDNA. This is particularly crucial for patients with ecDNA-driven cancers, such as glioblastoma and ovarian and lung cancers, where current treatments often fall short.

(Manjeera Gowravaram has a PhD in RNA biochemistry and works as a freelance science writer. gmanjeera@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

▼ An international collaboration by a team called eDyNAmiC has discovered how ecDNA contributes to the progression of cancer and drug resistance. The findings contradict Mendel's third law of independent assortment

▼ eDyNAmiC members analysed mutations in tumours and identified environmental factors, including smoking, exposure to certain substances, and genetic mutations, to be triggers that could lead to the formation of ecDNA

▼ ecDNA in tumours often contains copies of oncogenes that are required to activate tumour growth. But these are not present in chromosomes, where scientists used to believe they lived

▼ Researchers have found a drug called BBI-2779 that selectively kills cancer cells with ecDNA. A company is now working towards clinical use. This is crucial for patients with ecDNA-driven cancers, such as glioblastoma, ovarian, and lung cancers

## BIG SHOT



This aerial view shows a school bus atop the Daniel-Johnson Dam in Quebec, Canada, on July 26. Hydroelectricity production in Canada is plummeting as extreme weather linked to climate change, including sudden swings between drought and flood, has limited output and threatened the structures of the dams themselves. A world leader in hydropower, Canada has also been forced to cut exports to the U.S., which have reached their lowest levels in 14 years. AFP

## QUESTION CORNER

### When a storm passes over land

**Q: What is landfall?**  
**A:** Once it's fully formed, a tropical cyclone (in the northern hemisphere) has a complex 3D structure. Two important parts of it are the eye and the eyewall. The eye is the centre around which the cyclone rotates. It consists of cold air descending from the cyclone's top with warm air rising in a spiral around it. The eyewall consists of high thunderstorms that bring rain, lightning, and powerful winds.

As long as the cyclone moves over water, it can draw more moisture from below to produce new clouds and rain events around it. But when the storm crosses over onto land, its moisture supply declines drastically, and the cyclone weakens.

Landfall is the moment in a tropical cyclone's life when its eye moves over land. Stormy weather brought by a cyclone is stronger around the eye, and landfall events can be deadly because they expose human settlements on land to strong winds and heavy rain. Their effects can be compounded by storm



Tidal waves triggered by Cyclone Fengal lashed the R.K. Beach in Visakhapatnam on November 30. DEEPA K.R.

surges that flood coastal areas and prevent inland areas from draining normally.

If the air over land is drier, among other factors, a cyclone weakens quickly after landfall. Depending on environmental conditions, it may dissipate completely, or it could pass over land and re-emerge on the other side. In 2021, Cyclone Gulab made landfall over coastal Andhra Pradesh, weakened as it moved across peninsular India, and re-emerged four days later as Cyclone Shaheen in the Arabian Sea.

- The Hindu Bureau

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



# Editorial

A run-through, on the Editorial and Opinion pages, of the business at the COP29 summit, in Azerbaijan



## Preparing for worse

Extreme weather events will increase in frequency in the coming years

It is not uncommon for the southern peninsula to experience heavy or very heavy rainfall during the northeast monsoon, which is also important for Sri Lanka and Maldives. But when Cyclone Fengal crossed the coast, close to Pudukcherry, on the night of November 30, neither Tamil Nadu nor Pudukcherry expected the magnitude of devastation that occurred. In a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin said nearly seven million families and 15 million individuals have been affected. Sixteen people, including four in Pudukcherry, lost their lives. A landslide in Tiruvannamalai claimed seven lives including five children. Unusually heavy rainfall (40 cm-50 cm) was recorded in many places in Pudukcherry and the northern and northwestern parts of Tamil Nadu on a single day. An initial estimate puts over 2.21 lakh hectares of farmland including 10,000 hectares in Pudukcherry to be under water. The cyclonic storm later weakened and crossed coastal Karnataka, adjoining east central Arabian Sea. Though many southern parts received rain, Pudukcherry and several districts in Tamil Nadu bore the brunt. What worsened the plight of people in some districts was the flood in the otherwise-dry South Pennar river; on Monday, it had a flow of 2.4 lakh cusecs. Mr. Stalin has sought an immediate release of ₹2,000 crore from the Centre. The Pudukcherry Chief Minister, N. Rangasamy, has announced assistance of ₹210 crore.

It is time that the authorities concerned prepared themselves to face extreme weather events, given the rising frequency of very high rainfall. Last year, Kayalpattinam in Thoothukudi received 95 cm, whereas, this time, northern and northwestern districts faced a similar experience. A 2022 monograph by the India Meteorological Department concluded that, on an average, four depressions or cyclonic storms could be expected to affect the southern peninsula every season. The authorities should intensify their concrete and tangible long-term steps beyond the routine ways of providing relief and rehabilitation. Even though Chennai was not hit badly this time, the State government must make public the report of the Advisory Committee for Mitigation and Management of Flood Risk in the Chennai Metropolitan Area, led by former civil servant V. Thirupugazh. Other measures such as a strengthening of bunds, regular removal of silt from water courses and a relentless drive against encroachment of water bodies must be carried out. Only such steps will be purposeful to the people; taking pride about age-old irrigation management is not enough.

## Power of pardon

Political interference can corrupt the working of the criminal justice system

Ongoing U.S. President Joe Biden has signed a presidential pardon for his son Hunter, for any federal crimes that he "committed or may have committed or taken part in" between January 1, 2014, and December 1, 2024. The younger Biden was convicted earlier this year on federal gun and drug charges and pleaded guilty to tax charges in California. Addressing the cases against his son, Mr. Biden said that unless there were aggravating circumstances, "people are almost never brought to trial on felony charges solely for how they filled out a gun form." He also noted regarding the tax evasion allegations that late payment of taxes owing to "serious additions", with subsequent full payment of all taxes, interest, and penalties were typically given non-criminal resolutions, yet it was "clear that Hunter was treated differently". On the one hand, there have been legitimate questions raised about the nature of the pardon – "full and unconditional" – that goes well beyond the gun and tax charges. Most likely, the vagueness of the language is deliberate to allow Hunter Biden to evade prosecutions that the incoming Trump administration might seek to foist upon him, possibly relating to charges of unlawful lobbying, corruption-related payments and similar crimes linked to his foreign business activities. Indeed, Donald Trump has already been impeached in Congress for attempting to pressure, for the sake of political gain, the Ukraine President into conducting investigations against Hunter Biden.

On the other hand, U.S. presidential pardons are hardly uncommon, with even Mr. Trump handing out 143 during his first term – including to Republican Party lobbyist Steve Bannon, the father of Mr. Trump's son-in-law, Charles Kushner, and controversial figures such as Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, and former George W. Bush aide Lewis "Scooter" Libby. Presidential pardons to family members are not unprecedented either – Bill Clinton pardoning his half-brother Roger, convicted on drug-related charges. Yet, the larger question that Mr. Biden's latest pardon begs is whether justice can be served fairly in a political ecosystem of bitter polarisation, the kind that is presently found in the U.S. When Mr. Biden said that he believed that "raw politics has infected this process" it was a reflection upon the increasing weaponisation of law enforcement authority to score political points – ironically, a charge that Mr. Trump levels against the Department of Justice under Mr. Biden. While there is no reason to assume that Presidents will not continue to issue pardons to their allies, leaders on both sides of the aisle would do well to show restraint and prevent political interference from corrupting the working of the justice system.

The urgency of climate change has never been more evident. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has highlighted the need for significantly stronger commitments to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Current policies, if continued globally, are expected to lead to a temperature rise up to 3.1°C. The increasingly visible impacts of climate change across geographies, apart from the growing body of scientific evidence, serve as a constant reminder of the need to accelerate climate action. Cleaner fuels and technological solutions are emerging across sectors and could be increasingly accessed and deployed with adequate focus on the means of implementation. Against this backdrop with COP 29 (in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November 2024) branded as the "Finance COP", the hope was to see an ambitious outcome (specifically related to the NQCG or New Collective Quantified Goal) which strongly supported this understanding.

**Financing needs of the developing world** Finance is a critical component in accelerating the adoption of cleaner alternatives, especially in developing countries. While some of the renewable technologies pay off in the long run due to lower fuel and operational costs, the upfront costs of some of these technologies are much higher than the current options requiring government support to ensure affordability at the consumer end. Other green technologies may still be evolving and are associated with risks of failure that front-runners may need to bear. Given the pressure on government resources that need to be prioritised towards development activities, additional finance must be up-scaled urgently within this decade if transformational changes are to be expected in the adoption of clean and efficient alternatives in developing countries, as access to modern energy and infrastructure improves.

India's expenditure on green energy schemes encompass a wide range of initiatives aimed at expanding renewable energy infrastructure, promoting energy efficiency and clean fuel and technology innovations as part of its commitment to global climate goals. MNRE received its highest ever allocation of ₹19,100 crore in the Budget 2024-25, apart from about ₹40 crore being allocated for enhancing energy efficiency. In the transport sector, a subsidy of ₹5,790 crore has been provided to electric vehicle manufacturers under phase-II of Faster Adoption and



Ritu Mathur

Director, Energy Assessment and Modelling, TERI



Sanchit Saran Agarwal

Associate Fellow, Energy Assessment and Modelling, TERI

It appears to have bypassed the principles of equitable burden sharing and climate justice, having failed to have recognised the financial needs of the global south

Manufacturing of (Hybrid) Electric vehicles (FAME) scheme.

Another aspect of finance required for the transition relates to the source and type of finance. There are growing concerns regarding fiscal debt, which forms the basis of the ask, for part of the financial support from developed countries to be in the form of public grants rather than loans.

The pace and the scale of transitions are also affected by the higher cost of capital in developing countries. Financial flows from developed countries must ideally aim to strengthen fiscal capacities and enable the unlocking of financial markets in developing countries to support and accelerate their climate action. The use of debt instruments to access finance does not work well for developing countries since their high debt burdens limit their ability to successfully incentivise domestic private capital for climate action. It is well recognised that developing countries attract much higher lending rates as compared to developed countries and much of the global financial flows are restricted within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Therefore, ensuring the flow of climate finance to developing countries at affordable lending rates is important.

### Role of the NQCG

At Cancun, in 2010, developed countries had pledged to provide \$100 billion annually up to 2020. Further, at COP21 in Paris, the parties decided to establish an NQCG prior to 2025, with the Cancun commitment as the base point. The rationale for establishing the NQCG was pressing. The existing climate pledges have generally been criticised for their lack of specificity and accountability.

Therefore, the NQCG was intended to create a framework for shared climate goals, to establish clear and quantified objectives that nations could aim to achieve, with transparency and accountability at the forefront. At COP26 at Glasgow in 2021, an ad hoc work programme for NQCG discussions was established to run from 2022-24, culminating towards the discussions at COP29.

The Second Needs Determination Report by the Standing Committee on Finance under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) estimated that

between \$5 trillion to \$7 trillion would be needed by 2030 to meet half the needs of 98 countries. Developing countries had put forward a conservative ask of \$1.3 trillion annually at COP 29 (largely from public sources to enable leveraging the rest through private finance).

However, the developed world has in the NQCG agreed to provide an abysmal figure of \$300 billion annually till 2035. This quantum is not only minuscule but hardly represents any major change in real flows – probably a target that could be achieved even with current or minimally additional efforts, if we account for inflation. Further, the mobilisation of funds is expected through all sources of finance including private capital. Undoubtedly, therefore, there is disappointment with the NQCG outcome, both on the quantum and structure of finance since it does not support the narrative of transformative action. While the decision to triple the flow of public resources through various operating entities of the Financial Mechanism, the Adaptation Fund, the Least Developed Countries Fund, and the Special Climate Change Fund from the 2023 level by 2035 is a positive aspect, it could also see rather slow progress in the next few years (and not aligned to the narrative of the urgency in climate action).

### The road ahead

COP29 saw the finance commitment step up from the earlier commitment of \$100 billion a year to \$300 billion a year. While this is a step in the correct direction, it is clearly not as ambitious as expected given that climate change is clearly recognised as one of the greatest threats and challenges of our time. Overall, the NQCG outcome is rather disappointing and does not seem to have aligned well with the very core of why the goal was set up in the first place. It clearly bypasses the principles of equitable burden sharing and climate justice as it fails to recognise the financial needs of the global south.

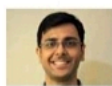
The way forward is to keep the talks ongoing. Climate change has no geographical boundaries. Thus, it is imperative that the international community cooperates towards the global good, keeping climate justice at the core and respecting the principles of the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR and RC). Developing countries must stick together and ensure that any transition is just and fair in the real sense.

# Rethinking 'representation' for a meaningful COP30

Frustration over the slow progress made during COP29 negotiations in Baku is hardly new. History has repeatedly shown us that the politics of climate change and the forces of nature rarely align. Adding to this challenge is the absence of a unified global authority to address the urgency of the issue. There is no world government or state to act on behalf of the planet. Compounding this challenge is the lack of a universal metric system capable of reconciling the diverse political, economic, and social interests of nation-states. While the jury is still out on whether COP29 was a "disappointment", "failure", or "disaster", critics have often pointed out that "business as usual" does not work. As Brazil prepares to host COP30 in Belém next year, here is an alternative suggestion on the concept of 'representation' for them.

This innovative methodology was pioneered by Bruno Latour, Emeritus Professor at Sciences Po, and Laurence Tubiana, France's Climate Change Ambassador and Special Representative for the 2015 COP21 in Paris. In the lead up to COP21, in May 2015, there was a week-long public event, hosted by Sciences Po, called the 'Theatre of Negotiations' at Nanterre-Amandiers on the outskirts of Paris. This experiment brought together 200 students from 143 universities worldwide to role play and reimagine a life-sized COP. The goal of this bold pedagogical initiative was to transform the traditional framework of climate negotiations. At its core was a radical rethinking of 'representation'.

As Irish author Sally Rooney writes, "When American colonists famously rebelled against the practice of 'taxation without representation,' [how] is environmental devastation without representation any different? Even if carbon emissions were thoroughly democratically determined – which they are not – why should voters in the world's richest countries have the right to poison the air, sea, soil, and rivers for the entire population of Earth?" People living on Polynesian islands or in Africa have no right to vote in American or European elections. Yet, they



Gaurav Daga

Associate Vice-President at Guidance, Industries Department, Government of Tamil Nadu

Future climate change conferences can achieve meaningful outcomes only if there is honest representation, actionable commitments, and a transparency of intentions

often bear the brunt of the resulting environmental damage.

### Granting equal rights

In the approach to representation, humans and non-humans – such as the atmosphere, oceans, and soil – were granted equal rights in negotiations. The idea was to give voice and agency to these non-human entities, allowing them to express their stakes in climate negotiations. Unlike conventional COP meetings, this assembly did not defer to the authority of science or nature, as these too were subjects of negotiation. The aim was to simulate a truly inclusive and representative process.

The theatre setting at Nanterre-Amandiers encouraged dynamic and creative reinterpretations of negotiation. Delegates dramatised and de-dramatised issues, explored alternative spatial-temporal perspectives, and allowed non-speaking entities to 'represent' or 'speak' through proxies. This flexibility opened new avenues for addressing climate challenges, from reframing territorial sovereignty to dramatising the interdependence of ecosystems and nations. For example, the 'Ocean' imposed conditions on the 'United States', while the 'Atmosphere' directly addressed 'China' regarding greenhouse gas emissions. These novel interactions forced participants to reconsider the boundaries of sovereignty and territorial responsibility. This writer, who was a part of the Philippines delegation, represented a civil society organisation, voicing the concerns of indigenous, rural, and coastal communities. Each delegation comprised a diverse mix of actors – state and non-state representatives, scientists, business leaders, and civil society members – thus ensuring a broad range of perspectives.

The week-long simulation yielded profound insights. For delegates, it underscored the critical need for clear communication of interests, values, and territorial concerns. For organisers, it highlighted the logistical and resource

mobilisation challenges required to facilitate a process of this scale. For students, it revealed alternative pathways for advancing the climate agenda, recognising the limitations of existing negotiation frameworks. As simulators, we achieved our goal of creating a dynamic, inclusive, and scientifically informed pedagogical tool for climate action.

One could argue that the prevailing global governance system does not allow for such 'representation', or critique it from an anthropocentric point of view. While there are gaps in the existing legal-cum-institutional framework to govern and/or implement rights, the recurrent tendency to give representation of non-humans via courts (in the case of India, Pakistan), parliament (Ecuador, New Zealand) or other institutions (Canada) is to only enlarge its legal and political agency. Such tendency stems from the fact that non-humans are 'interest bearers' having moral standing and deserving political and legal representation.

### There needs to be transparency

So, if future COPs are to achieve meaningful outcomes, honest representation and actionable commitments must be paired with a transparency of intentions. Hosting COPs in economies which are heavily reliant on oil, sends mixed signals, particularly when the host nation simultaneously promotes investment in state-run oil and gas enterprises. Such contradictions erode trust and undermine genuine progress.

It would be a significant step forward if COP30, held in Belém – the heart of the Amazon, gave representation to the 'Amazon' as an entity, exploring what possibilities this opens up. Bridging the gap between ambition and action requires not just new negotiation methods but also a willingness to align policies with the values we collectively champion. Let us hope we are not sleepwalking through the Anthropocene.

The views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Logjam ends

The success of a democracy lies in constructive discussion, engaging debates and fine questioning in Parliament. For a long time, Parliament sessions have been an arena for political vendetta, frequent walkouts and a muzzling of voices, all of which call for accountability. In this regard, the recent

agreement at a meeting between the government and the Opposition in the chamber of the Speaker is a small step in the right direction (Front page, December 3).  
R. Srivatsan, Chennai

It is a blot on democracy that the temple of democracy is not being allowed to function. If

passing Bills without meaningful discussion and debates on sensitive issues is not healthy, equally, it is unacceptable to be having frequent disruptions and misconduct.  
S. Seshadri, Chennai

I would feel bad if there is no discussion on Manipur, one of the most burning topics of the day. Better

sense should prevail among parliamentarians in all parties to discuss the various issues concerning the people of India. Why waste time and money on trivial matters, that too raised by the forces inimical to India?  
Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

It is a positive denouement that better counsel

prevailed over both the government and the Opposition. Parliamentary forums are not meant for fights between Kilkenny cats. There should be an end to scoring over the other on the basis of lung power.  
Ayyaseri Raveendranath, Aranmula, Kerala

**Presidential pardon**  
United States President Joe

Biden might have had his own excuses, justifications and reasons for pardoning his son, Hunter Biden ('World' page, December 3). However, Mr. Biden's act reminds us of the maxim, "Blood is thicker than water". How President-elect Donald Trump might deal with the Hunter Biden episode is another matter.  
C.G. Kurukose, Kothamangalam, Kerala





DECCAN HERALD

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## After drubbing, Congress still in denial

The Congress party has not been known for its ability to introspect and course-correct and has been noted, even in the face of its worst failures, as looking for excuses and scapegoats. It faced severe defeats in the recent Haryana and Maharashtra Assembly elections. The credit for the victories in Jammu and Kashmir and Jharkhand goes to its alliance partners, the National Conference and the JMM, respectively. It converted a certain victory into defeat in Haryana and could not turn the favourable environment in Maharashtra its way. The responses made by party leaders after the defeats and the reasons given by party president Mallikarjun Kharge at the Working Committee meeting last week do not show that the party has come to grips with its situation and taken the right messages from the defeats.

Kharge accepted that the party's performance was poor in all the four states. He said a lack of unity and rhetoric against each other was the main reason for the defeat. The leadership has to explain why it allowed the lack of unity to prevail. He recognised the need to strengthen the organisation. But many decisions taken at the 2022 Udaipur chintan shibir to strengthen the organisation have not been implemented. There is no system to evaluate the performance of leaders and office-bearers. It was for the high command to act on these. The president shifted much of the blame for the defeats to the state and local leaders and defended the national leadership. He said the narrative at the national level was right and it was the responsibility of the state leadership to create local narratives and convey them to the people. The central leadership should explain whether the narrative about the Constitution being in danger, which Rahul Gandhi took much pains to convey, had any impact in Maharashtra. Kharge wanted the state units to start preparations one year before the elections. Is it not the leadership's responsibility to prod them in time for that? There is criticism that the Congress did not fully shift to the election gear in Maharashtra even after the defeat in Haryana. It has been observed that even the party's website is not regularly updated.

The question of accountability or responsibility has been fixed for the defeats in the two states is also relevant. The party was quick to hold EVMs responsible for its defeat in Haryana. It has raised doubts about the EVMs in Maharashtra. That does it no credit. It must turn its gaze inside, and not inside the machine, to locate its problems. It has also blamed the Election Commission which is not beyond reproach. But the party should not paper over the wrongs it has done to itself.

## Learning from a contentious ban

Australia's legislation to ban the use of social media by children aged under 16 is the first such law in the world on a subject that has received much attention and has been widely debated. There are rules in the US and Europe that regulate the use of social media by vulnerable sections and seek to protect their privacy as individuals, but this is the first time comprehensive legislation has been attempted on it. The Australian government has said that the law is intended to enforce social responsibility to ensure the safety of children. It seeks to prevent children under 16 from using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat but exempts some others that have educational content, like YouTube. Social media platforms will now have to set up age verification measures, and failure to prevent use by under-16 users will invite hefty penalties.

The law has become controversial for many reasons. One objection is that age verification measures will be based on the use of personal data which could breach privacy laws. There are different views on the impact of social media on young minds. It is widely held that excessive social media use can affect the normal growth of children and adolescents and create problems such as anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, and sleep disorders. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said in the Australian parliament that social media was "a platform for peer pressure, a driver of anxiety, a vehicle for scammers and, worst of all, a tool for online predators". There are cases of children doing self-harm because of excessive social media engagement. At the same time, there is an argument that the negative view is an exaggeration and many children would benefit from social media usage. But parents and adults have generally supported the curbs in surveys conducted on the matter.

Implementation of the regulatory measures will be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Bans and curbs usually have the opposite effect. Children may impersonate adults or set up fake accounts. It may also be possible to use networks that operate outside the law. Other countries will watch how effectively the law will be implemented in Australia. India has the world's largest adolescent population which is actively engaged in social media. There have been suggestions for regulation of its usage in the country. The problem with most regulations is that it is difficult to find a middle path between total ban and free use. Parents and schools can play a major role in making children aware of the need for positive and responsible social media usage. There is an opportunity now to learn from the experience of another country.

Australia's ban on social media use by children, while difficult to implement, holds interest for the world

## Methodologies that fail to factor in complex social realities can overstate the severity of hunger

GURUCHARAN GOLLERIKER

India's poor ranking on the Global Hunger Index (GHI) has been a point of contentious discourse. Despite government initiatives like the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and the Public Distribution System (PDS), India's low rank of 105 out of 127 countries in 2024, placing it under the 'serious' category would suggest that severe hunger is widespread, casting doubts on the effectiveness of our social protection programmes. It raises questions about the Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP) — one of the six services under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme. We, therefore, need an evidence-based resolution of the Global Hunger Index conundrum to counter a flawed portrayal of Indian society.

While it is true that in certain geographies and populations malnutrition persists, scrutiny of the GHI methodology exposes limitations that can misrepresent the reality, especially for a diverse and populous country like India. It is, therefore, important to understand the Global Hunger Index methodology. The GHI, jointly published by the International Food Policy Research Institute, Concern Worldwide, and Welthungerhilfe, measures hunger using four key indicators: Undernourishment (percentage of the population with insufficient caloric intake); Child Wasting (percentage of children under five who are low-weight-for-height); Child Stunting (percentage of children under five who are low-height-for-age); and Child Mortality Rate (under-five mortality rate). Each of these indicators contributes equally to the final GHI score, which is then used to rank countries. The higher the score, the more severe the hunger level. Countries are categorised into low, moderate, serious, alarming, or extremely alarming levels of hunger based on their scores.

While this approach appears rigorous, it is far from scientific, limited in scope, lacks data granularity, and can, hence, potentially misinterpret complex social issues, especially for large, heterogeneous countries. Among the limitations of the GHI indicators in the Indian context, we note that: First, the Undernourishment indicator relies on calorie intake to determine hunger, based on Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) data. However, calorie intake alone is an insufficient measure of nutritional well-being. The

dietary needs of individuals vary significantly based on factors like age, occupation, lifestyle, and health conditions. With a growing focus on dietary quality over quantity, many Indians are shifting towards diets that prioritise quality proteins and micronutrients over sheer caloric intake. Those familiar with food and nutrition know that caloric security is not equivalent to nutrition security. Thus, using caloric consumption as a primary criterion may not accurately represent hunger in India, where dietary diversity is improving among several sections of the population, including in rural India, even if caloric intake remains static or shows a decline.



Second, child wasting and stunting are significant issues in India, but they reflect broader socio-economic and healthcare challenges rather than pure hunger. For example, child stunting and wasting are influenced by a multitude of factors such as sanitation, healthcare access, and maternal health. Open defecation, poor hygiene practices, and limited healthcare access can exacerbate child malnutrition without necessarily reflecting food scarcity. Child stunting and wasting rates are sensitive to local conditions, and India's geographic and socio-economic diversity means that a national average may not reflect specific improvements in certain states or regions.

Third, the child mortality indicator can also be a misleading proxy for hunger. Child mortality in India is more often a result of inadequate healthcare infrastructure, poor maternal health, infectious diseases, and sanitation issues rather than outright hunger or starvation. The NFSA and PDS systems provide substantial food assistance; yet, the high child mortality can persist due to the lack of a robust health infrastructure or the absence of institutional deliveries in underserved regions.

Fourth, giving equal weightage to

each indicator is a methodological flaw. For a country like India, which has made substantial progress in food production and distribution through various welfare schemes, undernourishment rates alone might give a more accurate picture of hunger than child wasting or stunting rates, which are more complex indicators involving a range of socio-economic factors. The equal weighting fails to account for the unique dynamics of each country and can unfairly penalise countries like India, where structural issues contribute to certain indicators but do not necessarily reflect widespread hunger.

**Complexities not captured** Finally, the devil is in the data. GHI relies substantially on secondary data sources, including FAO estimates, health surveys, and national demographic surveys. Many of these sources have limitations, including outdated data and small sample sizes. In India's case, the most recent comprehensive nutrition survey (National Family Health Survey) was conducted in 2019-2020. Relying on such data without timely updates misses the strides India has made in food security programmes since then. Besides, many of these surveys are based on recall data and self-reporting, which may not capture the full picture. The complexities of food access, cultural dietary practices, and informal food systems prevalent in India can lead to discrepancies between reported and actual conditions.

India's NFSA provides millions of vulnerable individuals with subsidised food grains. India also runs the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and ICDS, their impact is not captured in the GHI metrics. With its excessive focus on children (three of four indicators) and applying metrics without adjusting to regional differences, the GHI ends up wrongly labelling children as malnourished just because they do not fit a global average. Similarly, it is well known that Asians tend to have a lower Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR), which is the energy we use while resting, and lower Physical Activity Levels (PAL). So, a realistic Kcal requirement would likely average 1,500 calories against the global average of 2,000.

GHI appears to overshoot the hunger problem using one-size-fits-all approach, resulting in a skewed portrayal of India's hunger levels. Without a more nuanced and empirical approach, well-intentioned efforts like the GHI risk oversimplifying complex issues, hindering the very progress they aim to measure.

(The writer is Director, School of Social Sciences, Ramiah University of Applied Sciences)

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

# The fragrant resilience of nature

The Pala tree continues to bloom, reminding us of nature's tenacity

HARI ARAYAMMAKUL

December night has lost its charm. Its lovely chill absent from the air, but that doesn't stop the Pala tree (Alstonia scholaris: Indian Ghost Tree) from blooming. Even as seasons falter, caught in a haze of disarray like a mind in the grip of dementia, flora clings tenaciously to its rhythms, striving to preserve a fragile balance.

Returning from a late-night dance performance at the neighbourhood temple, I was walking home when a sudden power outage plunged the area into darkness. The patches of clouds, unusual for a December sky, had veiled the moon. Only the little circle of glow of my phone's torch traced a narrow path on the pocket road ahead.

Strangely, I found myself rediscovering the long-forgotten joy of walking in darkness. Modern technology has robbed us of this primal delight. High-mast lamp posts, glaring headlights, and relentless LED decorations saturate the night, leaving no space for the genuine experience of nocturnal stillness. Walking alone through a dark, silent lane is unmatched; a rare opportunity to reconnect with nature. As the darkness surrounds you, your senses sharpen, attuned to the rhythm of your footsteps. Familiar sights, the outlines of houses, the lush foliage, dissolve into the night, swallowed by inky blackness, leaving only silhouettes in the void.

All of a sudden, a delightful aroma enveloped me; the heady scent of the full-bloomed Pala permeated the air. Somewhere nearby, the elusive tree, unseen in the darkness, burst into bloom. Yet, its ethereal fragrance was unmistakable, like Shelley's skylark, an unseen presence that captivates the senses. Folklore weaves tales of the Pala tree as a refuge

for Yakshi, vengeful spirits of women, claiming that its blossoms emit a scent of love and longing. I stood in the darkness, seduced by this enchanting fragrance, pausing to indulge in a lungful of the intoxicating air.

They say recent Decembers have been the warmest on record. Yet, the Pala blooms, precaturing without the romance of chilly nights, like a poet penning verses through winter's block. It is hard to imagine this ravishing scent divorced from the cool ambience it seems to demand. Still, as human activity strains the planet, nature battles to sustain its balance, holding on until it can no longer retrace its steps.

The electricity snapped back, flooding the street with harsh yellow light. Air conditioners hummed back to life, reclaiming the night with their mechanical rhythm. I resumed walking, my brief communion with the dark broken, yet the lingering scent of the Pala reminded me of nature's quiet resilience.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Parliament is functioning. But where are the MPs?

It is good that both Houses of Parliament have resumed deliberating on the issues that have been raised. However, where are our MPs? Many of them were absent when questions relevant to different parts of the country were asked and responded to. Unless all the MPs attend Parliament, how will they learn about the issues in the country and what is being done? Is there any way

public can ask about their whereabouts during the session? Interestingly, some MPs changed their seats to be near — behind or next to — the member asking a question, as if to ensure they were captured on camera. Hopefully, both Houses of Parliament will function during the rest of the session and discuss all outstanding issues.

Hemachandra Basappa, Bengaluru

### Pass on the benefit

This refers to 'Centre scraps 'windfall tax' on petrol, diesel; big relief for RIL, ONGC' (Dec 3). The abolition of the 'windfall tax' on big oil refining companies due to the weakening of crude prices in the international market has resulted in huge monetary gains for them. However, the government has not considered passing on the benefit of lower oil prices to consumers, who have been paying exorbitant prices for petrol and diesel for a long time. According to official figures, the Centre and States have together collected a whopping

Rs 35 lakh crore through various taxes on petrol and diesel over the past five years. The high cost of energy has been the primary cause of the country's rampant inflation, making living difficult for households. The exclusion of the common man from the benefits of lower crude prices is inexcusable.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

### Fund cut unfair

Your editorial, 'Fund cut betrays differently abled' (Dec 3), highlights a concerning issue. Reducing funds for disability welfare undermines

inclusion and the implementation of critical programmes. Adequate allocation is essential for rehabilitation, assistive technologies, and skill development. Policymakers must cater to these needs and uphold the rights of persons with disabilities and empower them to contribute meaningfully to society.

Zohra Sharaf, Bengaluru

## SPEAK OUT

We have restored democracy. In the last 10 years, they have totally rotted the system and emptied the state exchequer. They could not fulfil any of the promises they made during the agitation (for a separate state). Now we are restoring the system and cleansing it of all the misdeeds they have done. It is not a one-day job...



Jugal Krishna Rao, Telangana Minister

Talkers are usually more articulate than doers, since talk is their specialty.

Thomas Sowell

## TO BE PRECISE

India's laboratory to try things': Bill Gates



## IN PERSPECTIVE

# Repo rate: Will RBI heed govt call?

There are alarmist signals from the government but an unchanged rate will signal commitment to stability

T K JAYARAMAN

Macroeconomic stability (growth with price stability) is a shared goal of the government and the central bank. Both have been assigned domains of operations: fiscal policy and monetary policy. However, every fiscal policy measure affects the aggregate demand. Elected governments depend on their performance to return to power. Fiscal expenditures are funded by tax revenue, sometimes by borrowing from the central bank, which is inflationary. Central banks should have the courage to say no to fiscal abuse. Statutory independence for the bank is an important requirement for a healthy political and economic system.

Last month, the differences between the government and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on the interest regime (repo rate of 6.5%) adopted for fighting inflation since February 2023 were aired publicly. Speeches by Commerce and Finance Ministers and the Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) raised questions on the intent — are these signals to RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), before its scheduled bi-monthly meeting on December 4-6 for setting a new repo? Unfortunately, they came into the open as RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das' tenure was just four days after the MPC meeting.

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal said the RBI must cut interest rates, ignoring food inflation. He claimed considering food inflation to decide on cutting rates is a flawed approach and noted that the 6.5% rate is hurting consumption and investment. The GDP growth rate in the July-September quarter was only 5.4%, compared to 8.1% in the corresponding Q2 FY24. It is also a drop from 6.7% in Q1 FY25. The government's concerns are understandable.

On November 18, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said, at State Bank of India's 11th Annual Banking and Economics Conclave in Mumbai, that the lending rates are causing "stress to borrowers". She wanted the rates to be made affordable. Her comments were reported in the media as indicative of "intensifying" differences between the government and the RBI.

A day later, CEA Anantha Nageswaran said in the conclave that if tomato, onion, potato (TOP), gold, and silver are taken out, the headline CPI rate is 4.2%, noting that the items accounted for more than

one-third of the 6.21% inflation rate in October.

The MPC keeps in mind the inflation target rate of 4% which was jointly agreed to by the government and the RBI in August 2016 and is valid till March 31, 2025. It is calculated as the annual percentage change in the monthly Consumer Price Index based on items of final consumption at the retail level. As November inflation data will not be available until mid-December, the repo has to be decided based on the October inflation data (6.21%). Food inflation was at its highest in October: 10.39%.

**Shifting goal posts** Food inflation holds particular significance in India due to its large low-income population. The country is more sensitive to price changes in food items. Food and beverages alone constitute 46% of the total consumption goods. The CEA's selective approach to inflation calculation is based on expediency. One cannot take out "inconvenient" items and add what is convenient — it amounts to shifting the goal posts during a football game.

It was left to a bureaucrat to put the lid on an embarrassing episode. Ajay Seth, Secretary of the Department of Economic Affairs, said at a FICCI convention in New Delhi that despite sectoral slowdowns, there were no significant risks to the 2024-25 growth projection of 6.5%-7%. He acknowledged the role of weather-related factors in food inflation and pointed out that monetary policy falls under the RBI's domain. The Finance Ministry's October Monthly Economic Review is optimistic about the food situation, thanks to improved and favourable monsoon conditions, increased minimum support prices, and an adequate supply of imports.

However, the global economic landscape is changing with the return of Donald Trump as the president of the United States. His protectionist policies and plans for the deportation of illegal immigrants could lead to a rise in US inflation through tariffs, and a rise in labour shortage. Critical imports from the US would be more expensive and hurt India's exports. The RBI's role is crucial in maintaining both domestic and external stability of the rupee. By keeping the repo rate unchanged, the RBI would continue to assure financial markets of India's cautious "stress to borrowers" stance. It is vital for sustaining not only domestic but also overseas investor confidence. That would contribute to stemming the outflows of foreign portfolio investment which resulted in a decrease in the foreign exchange reserves level, and halt depreciation of the rupee.

(The writer is a former Senior Economist, Asian Development Bank. He teaches at Amrita School of Business)

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com. Only letters emailed — not handwritten — will be accepted. All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.







## Maharashtra results: Tallying the unexpected

JACODISH RATTANANI

The brewing agitation in Maharashtra, challenging the 2024 Assembly election results that delivered an overwhelming majority to the Bharatiya Janata Party (in an alliance with factions of the Shiv Sena led by Eknath Shinde and the NCP led by Ajit Pawar), is more serious than mere election denialism. It is true that gauging electoral moods is a complex exercise, both for pollsters analysing data and observers reading the field. Yet, even with these caveats, Maharashtra presents a special challenge this time.

This is because there is no denying that the mood of the electorate was and remains very different from the results delivered in the just-concluded 2024 Assembly elections. There is merit in the simple argument that this sentiment was obvious, visible, and firmly leaning towards an expected sympathy vote for the Uddhav Balasahab

Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (SHS-UBT), whose government was toppled after he made bold to break away from the BJP and challenged the BJP attempt to browbeat him into submission.

The battle had all the makings of the fabled Maharashtra pride standing firm against the sultanate from New Delhi, creating some tensions that in the normal course would have played out in favour of the alliance led by Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena. The Shinde faction of the Shiv Sena was widely regarded as betraying its roots, while Ajit Pawar of the NCP was seen as betraying his uncle, the veteran politician Sharad Pawar, to join ranks with the BJP.

There is enough material to lead many observers to argue that people disapproved of how the Thackeray government was destabilised and toppled—MLAs kept in hiding in the BJP-ruled Gujarat and Assam, compounded by the way the Thackeray-Sena symbol was taken away and the way

Pawar and his overwhelming influence were sought to be undermined. Ordinarily, none of this would fetch the BJP any votes, even with its superior money power, much-touted campaign machinery, or the RSS-ground support. In fact, even supporters of the BJP are hard put to explain away the heavy-handed tactics used to unseat Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar. The only limited leeway that sympathisers tend to give to Shinde or Ajit Pawar is that they were coerced into breaking ranks under alleged threat of action by the Enforcement Directorate, which is now widely seen as siding with the BJP. This only adds to negativity for the BJP.

It is no secret in Maharashtra that the BJP's toppling operation was led and masterminded by its leadership in New Delhi. It is also no secret that bitterness between the BJP leadership and Uddhav Thackeray as Chief Minister escalated after the latter chose to break away from the BJP and

align with the Congress. It is an admitted position that the BJP was out to reach him a lesson. The BJP leadership's Gujarat roots were seen to be responsible for further deepening the Maharashtra-Gujarat divide, which became a central theme of the Shiv Sena's campaign.

Adding fuel to the fire, the Gujarat-based Gautam Adani group, which has been building real estate projects in Mumbai, has bagged a controversial mega-contract for the redevelopment of Mumbai's largest slum, Dharavi, and runs the Mumbai airport, became emblematic of what many saw as external encroachment on Maharashtra's identity. This sentiment clashes with the Assembly results: the BJP-Sena (Shinde)-NCP (Ajit Pawar) alliance won 230 of 288 seats, with the BJP alone securing 132 seats. Such is the sweep that there will be no Leader of the Opposition in Maharashtra this time. Meanwhile, the Shiv Sena's vote share plummeted to 9.96%

from 16.72% in the Lok Sabha elections in June—a steep and puzzling decline.

The hunger strike protest by the senior and respected social activist Baba Adav, who is 95 years old, has added momentum to the allegations of misuse of EVMs, not to speak of the heavy use of money power. Adav sat at Phule Wada, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's home in Pune city, for the protest, signalling yet again that the agitation is a social-political one against the brazen use of muscle-money, and now the added charge of machine-led manipulation to deliver results at odds with the ground reality. The Election Commission is set to meet with a delegation later this week to discuss the huge questions raised on the number of people who voted, which grew in official records from 58.22% at 5 pm on polling day to 65.02% at 11:30 pm on the same day to 66.05% on the day of counting.

There is no denying that the changing numbers have dented the image of the

Election Commission, and the credibility of the election process itself under the EVM system is increasingly coming under strain. This is a blow to democratic systems, processes, and traditions in India. It makes India, the one shining democracy, look less like one. It indicates that we have weakened, not strengthened, our systems in the last 75 years. We are at a stage that the claimed advantages of the EVMs have become irrelevant in the face of the risks the EVMs bring. It is time to discard the machines and go back to a fully physical, paper-led system—the tried and tested paper and rubber stamp process of casting ballots and counting them one by one. Nothing is achieved by the ease of voting or speed of results if this speed lands us faster in the wrong place—as indeed it appears to have. To defend India, we must now destroy the EVMs.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPIJMR, Syndicate. The Billion Press)

## On Thanksgiving eve, US diplomats reunited family members who had not seen each other in years because of China's harsh policies on the ethnic group

EDWARD WONG

The police officers came for Ayshem Mamut a week ago after he had been in northwest China.

They told her to pack her bags. She could have been taken to a prison, a detention centre or an internment camp, just like many other ethnic Uyghur Muslims who have vanished, sometimes for years.

But four days later, the 73-year-old Chinese citizen was in Virginia having a Thanksgiving meal with two sons she had not seen in 20 years and four grandchildren she had never met.

She sometimes talked, sometimes cried, as they ate traditional Uyghur dishes of noodle soup, lamb stew, broiled chicken, salad and rice with chickpeas.

Last week, US officials said that China had freed three American men, one of them an FBI informant, in exchange for two imprisoned Chinese spies and at least one other Chinese citizen. But as part of that deal, China also quietly agreed to allow Mamut and two other Uyghurs, one an American citizen, to leave the country for the United States.

The hidden administration has not made public the part of the deal involving the Uyghurs, and it is being reported here for the first time.

"Waking up in America and seeing my family, especially my grandchildren, is nothing short of a dream come true," Mamut said.

The story of the Uyghurs' journey to freedom is one of persistent efforts by anguished family members and US officials in the face of an increasingly authoritarian China. US officials privately raised the cases for years in talks with their Chinese counterparts. President Joe Biden mentioned Mamut twice in face-to-face meetings with Xi Jinping, China's leader. China had barred Mamut from leaving the country because her oldest son, Nury Turkel, was involved in advocacy for Uyghur rights.

"It's amazing to me that she was able to keep it together all those years," Turkel, 54, a former US official and senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, said in an interview. He hugged his mother on the tarmac and wept last Wednesday night after she stepped off a Boeing 767 chartered by the US government at a military base in San Antonio, Texas.

"Her ability to endure, to not lose sight, to manage her disappointment is something that personally I can't do as a person," he said. After this article was published, the National Security Council said in a statement to The New York Times, "We are pleased Ayshem Mamut is home with her family. The Biden-Harris administration has continued to advocate for cases of humanitarian concern, including Uyghurs." The council and the State Department both initially declined to comment for this article.

Turkel and his family have experienced the hardships of Chinese rule for more than half a century. Mamut gave birth to him in a re-education camp in Kashgar in 1970, during China's Cultural Revolution. He came to the United States as a graduate student in 1985, was granted asylum and then invited his parents to visit him. They came in 2000 and again in 2004, when he graduated from American University's law school.

Turkel became a leading advocate for Uyghur human rights, including working on cases of Uyghurs detained by the US military in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba during the post-9/11 wars. In 2009, his parents wanted to visit him in the Washington area. When police refused to give them their passports, they realised they were barred from traveling because of Turkel's advocacy work. Turkel then began trying to bring pressure on the Chinese government to let his parents leave the country.



## A secret plan to bring Uyghurs trapped in China to US

ing the post-9/11 wars. In 2009, his parents wanted to visit him in the Washington area. When police refused to give them their passports, they realised they were barred from traveling because of Turkel's advocacy work. Turkel then began trying to bring pressure on the Chinese government to let his parents leave the country.

Chinese officials allowed Turkel's father, Ablikim Minmin, a retired professor, to travel for two weeks in 2015 to meet with his four sons in Turkey, but their mother was forced to stay at home.

Turkel spoke with officials in the Obama and Trump administrations about his parents' situation. When President Donald Trump visited Beijing in 2017, he gave Xi a list of people his administration wanted freed. Turkel's parents were on the list, as was Ilham Tohti, a Uyghur professor sentenced to life in prison in 2014 on a conviction of "separatism."

In May 2020, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, appointed Turkel to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, where he would serve for four years. Turkel told Secretary of State Antony Blinken about his parents' plight during an online meeting in fall 2021.

In December 2021, China announced sanctions against four US officials on the religious freedom commission, including Turkel, in retaliation for sanctions that the Biden administration had imposed on Chinese officials for abuses in Xinjiang.

Turkel spoke with N. Nicholas Burns, the designated US ambassador to China, before he left for Beijing. Burns later asked US diplomats to check on Turkel's parents

in the city of Urumqi. "He made a personal commitment," Turkel said.

Turkel's father died in April 2022, at age 83. Turkel was on an official trip to Uzbekistan but could not fly to China for the funeral because of the sanctions against him.

"Because of years of enforced family separation, and along with social isolation, he was losing it," Turkel said. "He was wanting to go." Burns invited Mamut, now widowed, to visit him in Beijing, but security officers told her to stay at home. Mamut was on board the plane, but she was not allowed to disembark.

"That was a public slap to all of us," he said. "It was mortally crushing for my mom." US-China relations took a sharp turn in early 2023 after the Pentagon discovered a Chinese spy balloon above the continental United States. Turkel was losing hope and expressed his frustration in congressional testimony and essays.

But US officials persisted. Turkel said that Biden mentioned his mother in a meeting with Xi in Woodside, California, last November, then again last month in Lima, Peru. Still, as recently as early last month, Turkel did not sound optimistic when he spoke at an event.

Then on Nov 24, a White House official told Turkel that his mother would be on a U.S. government plane leaving China later that week. Around the same time, police officers were visiting Mamut's home. Turkel spoke to her by phone and told her to go along with whatever the officers suggested.

Mamut spent that Monday seeing a dentist, visiting her husband's grave and packing a bag with traditional Uyghur silk cloth that she could use to make clothes for

her grandchildren in America. The next morning, she boarded a charter plane to Beijing with police officers and the other two Uyghurs, a man and his daughter.

The three of them stayed in a government guesthouse in Beijing on Tuesday night. Their planned departure was delayed by six hours, making them nervous. On Wednesday night, they were taken to the airport, where the US government charter plane awaited them.

Burns walked with them up the plane's stairs and took photos inside with them. The three freed American prisoners—Mark Swidan, Kai Li and John Leung—were on the flight, as was Roger D. Carsen, the US special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, and other US officials. One of the diplomats put Mamut on the phone with her son. The Uyghurs on the plane burst into tears after it took off.

Turkel and a younger brother, Mamutjan, boarded their own flight to go from northern Virginia to San Antonio.

At a refueling stop in Alaska, the group traveling from China got separate calls from Biden and Blinken. I was on Blinken's official plane returning from a diplomatic trip to Rome when he made that call. After we landed outside Washington, an aide told me that Blinken had spoken to the three freed Americans but did not mention there were also Uyghurs on the trip.

Mamut left a message on Turkel's voicemail during the Anchorage stop: "We are in America."

Hours later, near midnight, they were in each of their arms on the tarmac in Texas. The New York Times

## Inclusion is not possible without data

SHASHIKALA M S

The recent 80% reduction in Karnataka's disability funds is a significant setback in addition to several other challenges for inclusion efforts. Disability, listed under the state list in the Constitution, is also a Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) subject, emphasising the need for community-level rehabilitation to ensure that they live with dignity, respect, and participation in mainstream development programmes.

India has signed and ratified many United Nations conventions, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was signed and ratified in 2007. India is also committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 17, which has a special focus on the inclusion of disadvantaged persons in the development of the nation to eradicate poverty. However, these commitments are hollow without robust data. Reports consistently show that people with disabilities (PwDs) are among the poorest in any community, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions.

India's legislation has evolved, with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, replacing the outdated Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995. This shift introduced a rights-based framework and expanded the definition of disabilities from seven to 21 categories.

Yet, mere legislation and global declarations are insufficient. The absence of comprehensive data undermines all attempts at inclusion, leaving policies and programmes directionless. As a first step towards achieving this vision, the government must have data on disability incidence and prevalence. India included disability in the 2011 census, with only seven types of disabilities as mentioned in the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995. As per Census 2011, out of the 121 crore population, about 2.68 crore persons are 'disabled', which is 2.21% of the total population. For a country of India's size and population, it is grossly under-reported data. The United States, in contrast, counts 14% of its population as having some type of disability as of 2022. It is also noteworthy that disability is more common among older individuals, with around 46% of those aged 75 years and older in the US living with a disability. With an ageing population contributing significantly to disability prevalence, India's reported numbers appear grossly undercounted.

Without granular data at the state, district, and panchayat levels, planning effective rehabilitation services and ensuring equitable inclusion in development programmes remain impossible. Karnataka is a pioneer in bringing a circular and the guidelines, through an order in May 2020, for the allocation of 5% of the development budget for the preparation and inclusion of people with disabilities in the mainstream development programmes. However, this allocation can only be meaningful if accompanied by detailed, actionable data at gram panchayat and ward levels, which is currently unavailable.

**Data: More than headcounts**  
Comprehensive disability data must go beyond enumeration. It requires:  
■ Mandatory screening of all at-risk individuals and children in the 0-18 years age group.  
■ Diagnosis and assessment, which includes assessment of individual needs.  
■ Disability measurement using standardised tools.  
■ Issuance of Universal Disability Identity (UIDI) cards to ensure access to social security.

At the district level, there is a need to develop district disability inclusion road maps with data-based needs, budgets, and implementation strategies. There is a shortage of funds with 5% of the development budget allocated. However, the planning of rehabilitation services using this budget can be a reality only when all disabled persons are screened and assessed.

Technology can bridge gaps in data collection and service delivery. Karnataka's Department for Rural Development and Panchayathi Raj and the Department for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and Senior Citizens have developed screening methods, and organisations like CBR Network in Bengaluru have created software for screening, needs assessment, and district-level disability planning. Tele-rehabilitation services, supported by Internet connectivity, can link primary health centres and community health centres with multidisciplinary teams, bringing comprehensive care closer to communities.

Karnataka has the potential to become a model state leveraging its 5% development budget directive, technology-enabled screening, needs assessment, and issuance of UIDI for the development of district-level road maps for disability inclusion. But there is a need for political will.

December 3, the UN International Day for Persons with Disabilities, serves as a reminder that inclusion is not achieved through tokenism or declarations but through actionable policies backed by robust data. Without accurate data, inclusion remains a pathless walk.

### OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: DECEMBER 1974

Morariji threatens to go on satyagraha

New Delhi, December 3  
Congress (O) leader Morariji Desai today threatened to go on satyagraha in the Lok Sabha if the Government continued to go back on its own assurances by refusing to lay the CBI report on the licence scandal on the table of the House. Simultaneously, 13 Opposition members demanding the removal of Mr. Tulsidas Ram from the membership of the House have been admitted by Speaker Dhillon, including the motions in the name of A. B. Vajpayee, Samar Guba (SP), and Jyotirmoy Bosa (CPM).

25 YEARS AGO: DECEMBER 1999

Poor nations decry big powers' strong-arm tactics

Seattle, Dec 3 (AFP)  
Representatives from the developing world, including India, have lashed out at the backdrop deal which, they say, has put big powers like the US and Europe in control of all agreements being drafted at the WTO ministerial conference. "We are now totally marginalised from a process hijacked by the wealthier nations," said Mr. Clement Rober, Guyana's trade minister. He denounced the "green room" system, under which selected countries are invited to an exclusive negotiating session.

### OASIS SUDHA UMASHANKER

## Constructing peace in the midst of discord

We live in an increasingly divided world lacking harmony for the most part. Every day some news or other comes up with newer ways of boxing people in the world and setting them up against each other.

Does this do any good at all? Thankfully at the same time there are several heartwarming instances of people reaching out to another in a crisis without second thoughts.

The natural instinct of most human beings is to help or at least try to help. And when we are in a situation where family and friends are not around, we are willing to accept help from rank

strangers regardless of their station in life, community, etc. When an elderly family member who had gone for a walk just outside the house some years ago had a spell of disorientation and started bounding down the road perceiving some imaginary danger, it was the neighbourhood vegetable vendor who lifted him up when he saw that he had fallen flat and brought him home.

Our gratitude knew no bounds. No man is an island, wrote John Donne. We all need each other and are interdependent. The farmer who

grows our crops, the factory worker who makes our clothes, the cab driver who takes one to one's destination or the trained nurse who cares for a senior in the family—are important players on our lives.

Do differences even strike us in this scenario? As long as we are agreed on basic things—the need to work hard, make an honest living and not harm fellow human beings, respecting another's faith and customs etc. there is a good chance that we can live in harmony with a little effort.

It is of course not possible to agree with everyone on everything all the time—even one's own family members. Respecting another's views even if diametrically opposite, agreeing to disagree in an open, honest, hate-free atmosphere and engaging in a dialogue civilly will prevent deepening of rifts. When we are set in our views and don't acknowledge that there could be a different point of view, disharmony is bound to follow.

As the preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO says, "Since wars began in the minds of men it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." Shouldn't we begin doing that now?









EXPLAINER

# What are the toxins of the 1984 Bhopal disaster?

Past reports have indicated worrisome concentrations of hexachlorobutadiene, chloroform, carbon tetrachloride, and trichlorobenzene at the site of the plant, in addition to elevated levels of heavy metals

Vasudevan Mukunth

Forty years after the Bhopal disaster on December 2-3, 1984, several hundred tonnes of toxic waste still remain around the ill-fated Union Carbide plant. Despite pleas from locals and activists – bolstered over the years by orders from the National Green Tribunal and the Supreme Court – to dispose of the waste, the Madhya Pradesh government has only been able to get rid of a small fraction. Chemical analyses of soil, air, and water samples collected from the area have revealed the presence of toxic compounds at elevated concentrations. This year, Madhya Pradesh received 126 crore from the Union government to incinerate around 340 tonnes of the aboveground material, but others have resisted the plan saying burning the compounds will release poisonous fumes that could lead to further contamination and adverse health effects.

## What toxins are associated with the disaster?

Union Carbide India, Ltd. (UCIL) built the Bhopal plant in the late 1960s to manufacture an insecticide called carbaryl using a reaction of methyl isocyanate (MIC) with 1-naphthol. MIC is a highly toxic compound. It reacts with water at high temperatures, and its reaction with water also releases heat.

On the night of December 2, 1984, a large quantity of water entered a tank storing MIC at the plant such that the MIC was soon boiling. Facilities at the plant to cool the tank were otherwise diverted, leaving MIC vapours to escape to the environment and spread through the settlements around the plant. MIC doesn't have a particular smell at concentrations at which other gases may become noticeable but it can irritate the eyes. However, given the hours, most of the people exposed to the gas were asleep.

The Union Carbide Corporation has never officially specified which gases were leaked from the plant, including MIC. This decision also compromised health workers' ability to respond effectively to the hordes of people who showed up in clinics and hospitals in Bhopal that night and the next day.

Some visual cues, including the blood-red colour of the viscera of those who died, also raised concerns that hydrogen cyanide was present in the fumes.

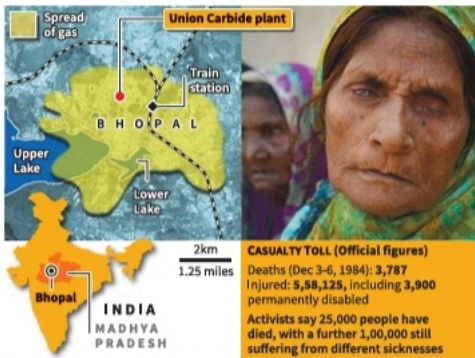
## What are the toxins at the plant?

As *The Hindu* reported on December 2, "a 2010 government-commissioned study showed that ... the factory premises also contain about 11 lakh tonnes of contaminated soil, one tonne of mercury, and nearly 150 tonnes of underground dumps" – in addition to the 340 metric tonnes earmarked for incineration.

In 2001, the *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health* published an editorial by Jayshree Chander, then at the School of Medicine at the University of California San Francisco. Here, Dr. Chander citing a Greenpeace report released in 1999, based on analyses of samples collected at the site in May that year, wrote that Greenpeace reported the presence of

## Toxins linger 40 years on

Chemical analyses of soil, air, and water samples collected from the area around the ill-fated Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh have revealed the presence of toxic compounds at elevated concentrations. Several hundred tonnes of toxic waste still lie around the plant



|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>RESPONSIBILITY</b><br>The Indian government argues that slack management and deferred maintenance caused the disaster. Then-plant owner, the U.S. firm Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), blamed sabotage<br><br>In 2010, eight former managers of the plant were convicted of negligence and sentenced to short prison terms<br><br>UCC chairman Warren Anderson, who left India soon after the disaster, was sought by the Indian government, which had called for his extradition from the U.S. He died in September 2014, aged 92 | <b>COMPENSATION</b><br>In 1989, UCC paid \$470m to the Indian government to settle litigation stemming from the disaster<br><br>But India is now backing a new court case to secure greater compensation – Dow Chemical, which bought UCC in 2001, denies liability<br><br>Payouts by the Indian government to Bhopal claimants over the years reportedly average \$550 apiece |
| <b>CONTAMINATION</b><br>Environmentalists say the toxic chemicals remaining in the abandoned plant continue to leak, causing health problems<br><br>Dow says contamination is the responsibility of Indian authorities who took control of the site in 1998  |  |

mercury, chromium, copper, nickel, and lead. According to her, the report also noted the presence of hexachlorobutadiene, chloroform, carbon tetrachloride, and trichlorobenzene, among other compounds.

Reports from the area have also said the plant was disposing of untreated liquid effluent before the events of 1984.

In 2004, the Supreme Court ordered Madhya Pradesh to supply drinking water from tankers to 14 communities around the plant; by 2013 this exercise had expanded to encompass 22 communities.

In 2017, in response to a plea from an NGO, the court ordered the Indian Institute of Toxicology Research (IITR) to test water samples in 20 more communities.

In 2018, the IITR reported higher than permitted concentrations of nitrate and chloride compounds and heavy metals. The court subsequently ordered Madhya Pradesh to expand its water-supply operations to 42 communities overall. Since then, according to Amnesty International, the same NGO and others have identified persistent organic

pollutants in 29 more communities and have described it as evidence of contamination still spreading from the plant.

## How toxic are heavy metals?

Chromium, copper, lead, mercury, and nickel are classified as heavy metals because their density is at least 5x that of water. Mercury has been known to damage multiple organs even at low concentrations by accumulating in soft tissue and preventing normal cellular function.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has said there is "sufficient evidence" for arsenic and its compounds being able to cause cancers of the urinary bladder and the lungs; for hexavalent chromium to cause cancers of the lungs; and for nickel and its mixtures to cause cancers of the lungs, nose, nasal cavity, and the paranasal sinuses.

According to a 2002 paper in the journal *Pathogens and Disease*, "Chromium is an essential nutrient required by the human body to promote the action of insulin for the utilisation of sugars, proteins and fats. ... But high

doses of chromium and long term exposure can give rise to various cytotoxic and genotoxic reactions that affect the immune system of the body."

Lead is capable of damaging chlorophyll and disrupting photosynthesis in plants and rendering structural damage to cells and hampering their ability to produce energy in animals. Also, lead from inorganic compounds has been correlated with stomach cancer and to a lesser degree with cancers of the lungs, kidneys, and the brain.

High levels of copper in the body have been known to damage the liver, the kidneys, and the gastrointestinal system.

## How are organic compounds harmful?

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, hexachlorobutadiene is a possible carcinogen in humans.

When inhaled, ingested, or brought in contact with skin, this compound can cause the liver to store too much fat (hepatic steatosis), destroy cells in the kidneys involved in producing urine, and inhibit brain activity, among other effects. It is also corrosive.

Chloroform by another name is trichloromethane, and is infamous for its effects on the central nervous system. At a sufficient concentration, it can cause an adult to faint, but at even higher ones it can cause death. The IARC has classified chloroform as a "possibly carcinogenic" on the back of limited evidence of cancer-causing potential in humans but more reliable evidence in animals.

In the PubChem database of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, carbon tetrachloride, that is carbon tet, is classified as an "acute toxin" and a "health hazard". It is notorious for its ability to damage the liver, including causing cancer. At present, a common way to be exposed to carbon tet is via contaminated groundwater. According to at least one review, ingesting 1 ml of carbon tet can blur vision, damage nerves, and/or cause heartbeat to become irregular.

Trichlorobenzene can take three chemical forms, or isomers, but all of them are volatile and spread easily through the air, although they have also been found in groundwater and in surface water bodies like lakes.

These compounds build up in the body's fatty tissues and at high concentrations can damage the liver and the kidneys.

Finally, Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) refer to organic compounds that don't break down easily and thus last for many years in the environment once they enter it. According to the Stockholm Convention on POPs, their effects include "cancer, allergies and hypersensitivity, damage to the central and peripheral nervous systems, reproductive disorders, and disruption of the immune system." Some POPs have also been associated with developmental disorders and worse outcomes in cancers of the liver, breasts, pancreas, and the prostate.

*Note: The toxic effects described in this article are not guaranteed to occur, even at the requisite concentration, because toxicity also depends on the demographic, physiological, and genetic characteristics of the exposed individual.*



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know your English

K. Subrahmanian Upendran

"How goes it? Everything O.K.?"

"Everything's pretty cool. But what is the meaning of 'how goes it'?"

"It means 'how are you and how are things going?'"

"Is it a common way of greeting people?"

"Yes. It is. 'How goes it?' is usually used with people you know fairly well."

"The standard form is 'how are you?'"

"I tell you English is a crazy language."

"Now, now. Take it easy. Don't fly off the handle!"

"Fly off the handle? Oh yes, it means a sudden outburst of anger, doesn't it? Tell me, is the handle that is referred to in the expression, a door handle?"

"No, not a door handle. But the handle of an axe."

"An axe?"

"Yes, that's right. And the thing that flies off the handle is the axe-head. You see the expression 'fly off the handle' dates back to the time when all our tools were hand-made."

"You mean a time when most of our implements were crude?"

"That's right. In the case of the axe, for example, the handle and the head were crudely fitted together. On occasions, while a person was chopping wood, the axe-head used to fly off, or come off the handle, sometimes injuring the axeman or the people standing nearby."

"That must have caused a lot of commotion."

"It did. And that's why they came up with the expression 'fly off the handle'. The commotion caused by a flying axe-head was very similar to the commotion caused by someone's sudden outburst of anger."

"So a person who becomes angry, that is, loses his head, is like a flying axe-head. Is that what you are saying?"

"Yes, because both are potentially dangerous. Capish?"

"Ca... what?"

"Capish. The first syllable 'ca' is pronounced like the 'co' in words like 'continue', 'correct' and 'corruption'."

"And 'pish' rhymes with 'fish', I suppose."

"Not quite. The 'i' is like the 'ee' in words like 'bee', 'see' and 'fee'. The word is pronounced capish, with the stress on the second syllable."

"Capish. I think I've got that. But what does it mean?"

"It means 'understand'. It's from an Italian dialect. In American English, 'capish' is usually used as a question. Here are two examples. You have to go to college tomorrow. No more arguments. Capish? If you don't submit your assignment by one on Friday, you'll get a zero, capish? By the way, you won't find the word in dictionaries. It is a buzz word. The younger generation considers it fashionable to use the word."

"I think I understand."

"Good. Ciao, then."

"Ciao? Oh yes, I remember! It means 'goodbye' in Italian."

"That's right. I've got some work. See you later."

Published in *The Hindu* on April 19, 1994.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

Cyclone Fengal has wreaked havoc across the country. The name 'Fengal' was proposed by Saudi Arabia. Here is a quiz on cyclone names and its conventions

Sindhu Nagaraj

### QUESTION 1

Cyclones in the North Indian Ocean are named by member countries of the World Meteorological Organization and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific panel. This panel includes how many countries? This system has been in place since which year?

### QUESTION 2

Following Fengal, what is the name of the next cyclone that will make a landfall. Which country has named it?

### QUESTION 3

Cyclone Ockhi was a strong tropical cyclone that devastated parts of Sri

Lanka and India in 2017. It wreaked havoc in Kerala, Goa, Lakshadweep and Tamil Nadu. The name was given by which country?

### QUESTION 4

Cyclone Dana made landfall along the Odisha coast in October 2024. Dana's name was suggested by Qatar. What did it mean?

### QUESTION 5

This cyclone, named by India, is regarded as the worst tropical cyclone to ever strike the Yemeni island of Socotra, causing destruction there after Cyclone Chapala hit the same island, in 2015. What was it called?

### QUESTION 6

What is the maximum number of letters the name of a cyclone can have?



### Visual questions:

This image plots the intensity of the affected areas. This 1970 cyclone was named in East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh. Name it.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. This country has hosted the most Day and Night Test matches after Australia. **Ans: India**  
2. This non-Test playing country has hosted Day and Night Test matches. **Ans: UAE**  
3. This country has played in the most Day and Night Test matches after Australia. **Ans: England**  
4. This player has scored the most runs and most hundreds. **Ans: Marnus Labuschagne**  
5. This player has picked up most wickets. **Ans: Mitchell Starc**  
6. This player holds the best bowling figures in an innings. **Ans: Devender Bishoo**  
7. This is the only bowler to pick up five or more wickets in each innings. **Ans: Axar Patel**  
8. The common connection between the South Africa versus Zimbabwe Test match and India versus England. **Ans: Both Tests got over in just 2 days**  
9. The connection between the achievements of Shafig Helder. **Ans: They are the only players to win the award despite ending up on the losing side**

Visual: Identify the players. **Ans: Azhar Ali and David Warner. Only batters to score a triple century**  
Early Birds: Tito Shiladitya| Tamal Biswas| Sonali Das| Dodo Jayaditya

## Word of the day

### Equable:

not easily irritated; not varying

### Synonyms:

even-tempered, good-tempered, placid

### Usage:

The climate is equable, with pleasant springs and cool winters.

### Pronunciation:

newsth.live/equablepro

### International Phonetic Alphabet:

/ɛk.wə.baɪ/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Text & Context'



# 16 | E. EXPLAINED

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## ICJ begins hearing on climate change case: Why is this significant?



AMITABH SINHA

THE RECENTLY concluded annual climate talks in Baku, Azerbaijan, ended in disappointment for developing countries. The main agreement negotiated at this conference promised to mobilise just \$300 billion a year in climate finance for developing countries, far less than the \$1.3 trillion a year they had demanded for their requirements assessed by several studies.

The refusal of the developed nations to fully meet their obligations on climate finance follows the continuing neglect of their responsibilities on emission cuts.

To hold the developed countries to ac-

count for their climate responsibilities, developing nations, particularly the small island states, have now taken their concerns to another forum, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) — the main judicial arm of the United Nations. On Monday, the ICJ began hearings in a case that seeks its advisory opinion on the obligations of countries on climate change under existing international laws, and the legal consequences of those obligations.

The case could have significant implications for the increasing number of climate-related lawsuits being filed everywhere. It could potentially also influence the negotiations at the annual climate talks.

### The case at the ICJ

The case results from a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in March last year, at the initiative of Vanuatu, a small country in the Pacific Ocean located about 2,000 km northeast of Australia. Like several other small island states, Vanuatu is one of the most vulnerable countries, with its existence threatened by rising sea levels. Vanuatu moved a proposal seeking the

advisory opinion of the ICJ on climate change in September 2021. Eventually, the UNGA adopted the resolution that was co-sponsored by 132 countries.

The resolution seeks answers to two specific questions. One, what are the obligations of the countries under international laws to protect the climate system? Two, what are the legal consequences of these obligations for countries that have caused harm to this climate system?

Although the 1994 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 2015 Paris Agreement are the two international laws that deal exclusively with climate change, there are several other legal instruments which are relevant to the issue. These include the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention to Combat Desertification, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN Charter itself.

The UNGA resolution has sought the ICJ's

opinion on the climate obligations of countries in light of these, and other related, international laws.

### Significance of the case

The two-week hearings at ICJ would result in only an advisory opinion, as sought by the UNGA resolution. But it could have far-reaching ramifications.

Currently, the UNFCCC defines the climate obligations of countries based on their share of historical emissions. A group of about 40 rich and developed countries, which had the largest share of historical emissions till 1992, were held mainly responsible for causing climate change. These countries were asked to reduce their emissions, and also help the developing nations through the provision of finance and technology in fighting climate change.

Over the years, the rich and developed countries have not just managed to largely ignore these obligations but also succeeded in transferring a part of their burden to the developing countries.

The ICJ ruling can potentially show that the obligations of the developed nations stem not just from the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, but also from several other international legal frameworks. This can become a new argument in the climate negotiations.

Defining the legal consequences of climate change can have implications for the demands of small island states also. It can help them get compensation for the damage caused by climate change.

At the very least, the outcome of this case could become a precedent for the thousands of climate lawsuits that have been filed in recent years, seeking accountability from governments and corporations. As of 2023, more than 2,600 lawsuits have been filed worldwide that seek courts to adjudicate matters on climate change, or rely on climate arguments to decide issues of public importance. A few of these have already resulted in landmark judgments. For instance, earlier this year, the European Court of Human Rights held that Switzerland had failed to meet its greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, and thus violated the human rights of its citizens.

Several countries are also enacting climate-specific legislation. In April this year, India's Supreme Court expanded the scope of the fundamental rights to life and equality to include the right to be free from adverse impacts of climate change.

### Record representations

The importance of this case can be gauged also from the record number of representations that have been made before the ICJ. The court has already received more than 90 written submissions from countries and organisations. At least 97 countries and a dozen international organisations are scheduled to participate in the hearings, which too is a record for any case at ICJ.

Even countries that accept ICJ's authority only in a limited manner, including India, China and the United States, are participating in this case. In a statement on Monday, the US State Department said it welcomed the ICJ hearings.

The US is scheduled to submit the case on Wednesday. India's submission will happen on December 5.

## EXPLAINED GLOBAL

### WHY CHINA OBJECTS TO TAIWAN LEADERS' 'TRANSITS' TO THE US

RISHIKA SINGH  
 NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 3

TAIWAN'S PRESIDENT Lai Ching-te arrived in Hawaii on Saturday on a two-day "transit" to the United States, for the first time since assuming power this year.

China's Foreign Affairs Ministry criticised the visit, saying, "China... firmly opposes any trip by leader of the Taiwan authorities to the US in any name or under whatever pretext... China strongly condemns the US's arranging for Lai Ching-te's "stopover" and has lodged serious protests with the US."

### China's, Taiwan's claims

Both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan (Republic of China) have historically claimed to be the sole representative of China since 1949, when the modern Chinese state was founded. During the Cold War, the US officially recognised Taiwan over the Communist-led PRC.

Over time, however, more and more countries established diplomatic relations with the PRC, instead. The US downgraded its relationship with Taiwan upon establishing diplomatic ties with China in 1979.

Today, only 12 nations recognise Taiwan as an independent country. After the transit, Lai will visit Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau in Oceania, which are among countries that recognise Taiwan.

### The US-Taiwan relationship

In past joint communiqués with the Chinese government, the US has "acknowledged" but not endorsed the "Chinese" position that "there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China." It also maintains unofficial relations with Taiwan.

The first Taiwanese transit happened in 1994 under the Bill Clinton administration, with the visit official serving as a stopover. According to a US Congressional Research Service report, the US government allowed Taiwan's then-President Lee



Taiwan's President Lai at Daniel K Inouye International Airport, Hawaii, on November 30. Reuters

Teng-hui "to stop to refuel his plane in Hawaii on his way to Central America, but not to spend the night".

The administration then said it would "[p]ermit normal transits of the US, but no visits or public activities, for Taiwan's top leadership".

The only time a private "visit" happened was when President Lee went to his alma mater Cornell University in 1995, triggering the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. China then "carried out missile launches" and a naval exercise over several months. Much later, the Taiwan Travel Act of 2018 said US policy should "permit high-level Taiwanese officials to enter the United States... and to meet with US officials."

### Recent criticism from China

Chinese criticisms over Lai's visit also arise from his party's pro-independence stance, termed "separatist" by China. The latest transit came a day after the US approved the potential sale of spare parts for F16 jets and radar to Taiwan for around \$385 million.

When then Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen met then US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy during a transit in 2023, a White House official said such visits were "not uncommon" and did not merit an "overreaction".

## EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI ABBAS

### THE SYRIAN civil war has returned.

On November 27, Syria's "Military Opposition Command" launched a fresh offensive against the forces of President Bashar al-Assad. Following fighting in the Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama governorates, the rebels seized the country's second largest city of Aleppo by Monday. As Middle Eastern leaders engaged in a flurry of diplomacy, Assad's allies Iran and Russia pledged support to his regime, and Syrian and Russian war jets have begun striking targets in rebel-held territory in northwestern Syria.

For all practical purposes though, the Syrian civil war had never ended.

In 2020, almost five years ago, following the last major counter-offensive of the Russian and Iranian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA), the rebel groups were pushed to the far north of the country, and a negotiated ceasefire came into force. An acceptable stalemate had prevailed ever since — even though frequent clashes continued among the actors in the war.

So, who are the rebels who have now taken Aleppo and are advancing beyond?

The mix of actors in Syria is so diverse that the term "rebels" is often used for analytical convenience. Among the actors leading the current offensive, three are most important.

■ First is the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group that occupies the liminal space between jihadist terrorism and separatist militancy. The HTS, which is led by Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, was founded as Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, but which broke from the parent organisation in 2016 to form the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS). The change in name was both symbolic and substantial, as it now stood for liberation of Shaam, or the Levant. Jolani at the time sought to reduce the distance from the separatist Syrian opposition groups.

By 2017, after merging with a number of other groups, the JFS became the HTS, which had a localised operational focus distinct from al-Qaeda's global jihadist outlook. Illustrative of the evolving position of the HTS is the fact that while the United States Department designated it as a terror group in 2018, the US stopped targeting Jolani himself by August that year, as the former American Ambassador to Iraq, James Jeffrey, noted in 2021.



Smoke rises in Aleppo, Syria. In this picture taken from a drone on December 3. Reuters

■ Second are the Kurdish militias organised as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the most powerful armed force in Syria after the SAA.

The SDF is the military arm of the Kurdish coalition that has autonomously governed a large part of northeastern Syria (across the Euphrates river) in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Aleppo since 2012 when the SAA withdrew. The SDF's uneasy coexistence with Assad's forces has often resulted in armed skirmishes, but its principal enemy over the last decade has been ISIS and its affiliated jihadist groups.

In the ongoing war, the Kurds, while lending off the Syrian Army, are also having to guard against the Turkey-backed militias and the HTS, despite the latter's assurances on not attacking the Kurdish forces. The SDF enjoyed significant US backing during the civil war, until Washington abruptly withdrew most of its material and personnel support under the first Trump administration.

■ Third is the Syrian National Army (SNA), which grew out of the Free Syrian Army formed by defecting Syrian soldiers in 2011, a Turkish-backed force that is fiercely opposed to both Assadist Syria as well as the Kurdish SDF.

The SNA has long been Ankara's preferred ally for its own operations in Syria. The HTS and SNA are jointly carrying out the current offensive against the Syrian Army through their semi-unified "Military Operations Command" that was formed in 2019.

And who are the external actors backing the rebels?

The external actors in Syria are hardly "external". For instance, Turkey is not merely a third state fighting in Syria through its pro-



ies — over the last five years, the Turkish occupation of northern Syria has been quasi-normalised, which makes Turkey a uniquely resident power that governs territory in Damascus's seat.

Turkey's encouragement of the rebels is a function in equal parts of its interests against the US (backed) Kurds, and the regime in Damascus. In 2016 (and then in 2018, 2019), as Assad's forces pushed back against ISIS with help from Russia and the Lebanese Hezbollah, Turkey exploited the opportunity to militarily force a buffer between itself and Kurdish-controlled northern Syria. Ankara perceives a powerful threat from Kurdish militias, and considers most of them terror groups.

Turkey's enabling of the resurgence of the civil war has been helped by the fact that the US has (largely) stood by. Washington has limited incentive to check a Turkish-backed offensive against Assad, who is backed by Moscow and Tehran. The common anti-ISIS objective that had resulted in peculiar instances of American, Russian, Syrian, and Iranian forces fighting the same enemy in the past, has now withered away.

But why has the civil war restarted at this moment?

The renewed war in Syria amidst the raging conflict in the Middle East is more than just a broken window effect. An unusual confluence of global conflicts has helped create room for the armed insurgency to mount its offensive against Assad. Two new wars in Europe and Lebanon/Gaza have helped resurrect the older one in Syria.

Over the last three years, the invasion of Ukraine has strained Russia's military positions and resources in Syria. As it was Moscow's entry in 2016 that helped Assad

turn the tables in the war, so a strain on Russia has come as an opportunity for the Syrian armed opposition.

On the other hand, the Iran-backed ground proxies that have fought alongside Assad's forces in Syria — especially Hezbollah — have been significantly weakened due to Israel's air and ground campaign in Lebanon, and the decimation of Hezbollah's senior leadership. Hezbollah is perhaps the most conspicuous absence in the renewed war in Syria, vindicating, at least for now, the rebels' timing of the offensive.

Note that Hezbollah's involvement in the earlier phase of Syria's civil war helped Damascus substantially against both ISIS as well as the rebels, especially in Aleppo (which they have now re-seized).

And what does this new phase of the war mean for Assad himself?

By mid-2012, with 100,000 killed in the war and the armed opposition closing in on Damascus, the former UN observer mission chief in Syria had declared that Assad's days were numbered. Eleven years later, Assad was welcomed back with some pomp into the Arab League, as the decisive winner of the war.

But while this spotlights the risks of writing Assad's political obituary, it is to be noted that his victory was never complete — northern Syria remained under Turkish control, and the SNA/HTS continued to be a threat to him. This is one of the major reasons why Assad himself has remained restrained in his anti-ISIS commitment during the wars in Gaza and Lebanon.

Despite Assad's inextricable relationship with Tehran, Syria's Arab neighbours Saudi Arabia and the UAE have an interest in checking renewed instability in Syria. This is not least due to their uneasy with Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey. While capitals like Riyadh and Abu Dhabi look for regional stability as they seek to diversify economically, Ankara — which has been kept out of cross-regional grand projects like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) — has enough reason to assert its regional heft as a geopolitical maverick.

India has long stood by Assad in Syria, and has historically supported Russia's military involvement. The 6th Round of India-Syria Foreign Office Consultations took place in New Delhi on November 29, two days after the civil war resumed. While several factors influence India's position, it principally stems from New Delhi's preference for stable political actors in the region.

(The author is a Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Studies, New Delhi)

## What United Kingdom's assisted dying Bill says, how it compares to Indian law

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM  
 NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 3

THE UK HOUSE of Commons on November 29 voted in favour of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which, if enacted, will allow patients with terminal illnesses to request assistance to end their own life.

The Bill will now be sent to a "public Bill committee" which will mull over proposed amendments, after which the House of Commons will vote on it again. It will then be sent to the House of Lords, where further amendments could be made before a final vote.

What led to the Bill's introduction? What does the Bill say? And how does it compare to the law prevailing in India?

### A contentious issue

Assisted dying refers to a process by

which someone can end their own life with a doctor's assistance. It is not the same as euthanasia, in which a doctor has a more active involvement in ending the life of a terminally ill patient. Currently, the UK does not permit any form of assisted dying or euthanasia, with the offence of "assisted suicide" punishable with up to 14 years in prison.

Since 2013, however, at least three Bills seeking to legalise assisted dying have been introduced in Parliament with the UK witnessing a complex and polarised debate on the issue.

Proponents argue that for terminally ill patients, end-of-life care offers very little in terms of pain and symptom management, and that assisted dying would provide patients with the agency to end their suffering in a humane way.

They argue that legalising assisted dying would deter the terminally ill from dying by suicide, or pushing their loved ones

to assist with suicide.

Critics, however, claim that a law allowing assisted dying would be prone to misuse, especially when it comes to patients with disabilities. They raise concerns that such a law might be used to coerce vulnerable persons (the elderly, persons with disabilities, etc.) into signing off on their own deaths, and say lawmakers should focus on improving end-of-life care instead.

### What the UK Bill says

At the outset, the Bill restricts the availability of legal assisted dying to terminally ill persons above the age of 18 with the mental "capacity" to make such a decision. It also says that the patient must be residing in England or Wales for 12 months before the request.

A terminally ill person is defined as someone who has a worsening illness that "cannot be reversed by treatment", and will

result in a death that can "reasonably be expected within 6 months". It also explicitly excludes persons with disabilities or "a mental disorder".

The Bill lays out a comprehensive process which a patient must go through before being given the choice. This begins with the signing of a "first declaration" in the presence of a qualified "coordinating doctor" and one other person. This doctor will make the "first assessment" to ensure that the patient is qualified to make a request for assisted dying, and has done so voluntarily.

If she is satisfied, the doctor will refer the request to a second "independent" doctor who will repeat the process after a seven-day-long "first period of reflection". If both doctors are satisfied, the request will then be sent to the High Court of Justice in London, which will determine if all require-

ments are being met. The court can question the patient and both doctors.

After the court decides to grant the request, a 14-day-long "second period of reflection" will begin. After this period, the patient will have to sign a "second declaration" confirming their request, which will be witnessed by both doctors and a third person.

It is only after this that the coordinating doctor will provide the patient with an "approved substance", the specifics of which will be provided in a separate regulation, which the patient will have to "self-administer".

### Situation in India

In 2018, the Supreme Court of India held that the "right to die with dignity" formed a part of the right to life with dignity under Article 21 of the Constitution of India, and recognised the legality of "passive euthanasia" — the withdrawal of life support from terminally ill patients or patients in a "per-

manent vegetative state".

The Supreme Court provided guidelines to give effect to this decision, both for cases when the family of a patient consents to passive euthanasia, or when the patient themselves leaves behind a "living will" authorising the withdrawal of life support in certain situations.

These guidelines include the need for multiple approvals from a local physician, qualified medical boards, and local administration. Living wills must be signed in the presence of two witnesses, and signed by a Judicial Magistrate.

However, in 2019, the Indian Society of Critical Care Medicine filed an application to modify the guidelines, calling them cumbersome and unworkable. Till date, these guidelines have seen limited implementation.

India does not legally permit assisted dying or active euthanasia.



## OUR VIEW



# RBI should adhere to its price stability mandate

Monetary policy is best suited to deliver on price control, just as fiscal policy is best suited to spur economic growth. The central bank must retain its status quo on interest rates for now

One of the lingering effects of covid—"long covid"—is that economic growth has begun to look a bit like the Senex, albeit in slow motion. So if GDP growth in the second quarter of 2024-25 surprised on the downside at 5.4%, the lowest in the last seven quarters, 2023-24 was a different story altogether, with second-quarter growth clocking 8.1%. That's the kind of see-saw usually associated with stock markets, not macro numbers like GDP. While the drivers may differ each year, underlying these swings is the 'base effect,' a consequence of making comparisons with a 'base' year, usually the previous one. So, last fiscal year's growth looked rosy in large part because growth in 2022-23 had flagged since 2021-22, when it was 9.7% but on a covid-shrunk GDP base of 2020-21. The same effect will make this fiscal year's expansion look relatively weak.

This is not to underplay the economy's deceleration in the last quarter. High-frequency data had hinted at a moderation in economic activity well before the numbers came in last Friday, just as these indicators now hint of a revival of sorts in the second half of 2024-25. But what took most observers by surprise was the extent of the slowdown. A related issue is whether this is a transient slump that policymakers—fiscal and monetary—can look through or is it part of a larger cyclical slowdown. If it is the former, there would be no need for any policy action; a knee-jerk reaction might boomerang, creating more problems later. However, if it is part of a longer phenomenon with weaknesses likely to persist, as weak consumption and investment trends suggest, there would be a case for policy action. The

problem with such dilemmas is that decisions have to be taken real time—indeed, often ahead of time, given the lags in policy actions taking effect. However, the results are only known much later, by which time it is often too late to turn the clock back. As the US Fed and major central banks discovered to their cost when they delayed raising interest rates in the belief that rising inflation in the pandemic aftermath was transitory, only to find that by the time they reversed direction and began to raise interest rates, inflation—and crucially—expectations of it had taken root, resulting in a prolonged phase of steeply rising retail prices.

This then is the conundrum that faces the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) when it meets this week from 4-6 December. Its mandate—of price control, keeping in mind the objective of growth—means it's always a bit of a toss-up between inflation and growth, with the MPC's priorities shifting from one to the other, depending on the macro situation. Its task is easy when both inflation and growth are on an upturn: It must focus on inflation control. But what if inflation is rising (6.2% in October) while economic growth is slowing, as at present? What should it prioritize? Governor Shaktikanta Das has made his preference clear. Until inflation reaches 4% durably, RBI will focus on inflation control. Not only because sustained growth is not possible without price stability or because the poor bear the brunt of instability, but because keeping inflation in check is RBI's remit, just as growth is primarily the government's. The central bank must stick to its knitting. This means retaining its *status quo* on rates for now, even if it uses other tools at its disposal to ease liquidity conditions.

## MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND

# Ballot to budget: The economic impact of cash transfer politics

Cash handouts are likely to prove sticky as a policy option and reduce our space for fiscal reforms



**VIVEK KAUL**  
is the author of 'Bad Money'.

pension one comes from. But there is more than enough data to show that a huge chunk of India has been facing hardships in recent years. The larger point is that such schemes are not going to go away in a hurry. In fact, as voters get used to them, politicians might even be tempted to up the ante and launch bigger versions, possibly leading to the central government launch a pan-India cash transfer scheme before the 2029 Lok Sabha elections.

Fourth, political lessons can have economic costs. State governments have to keep their fiscal deficit within a certain limit. Also, since the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax, the ability of state governments to come up with newer taxes to increase their revenue receipts is rather limited.

Take the case of Maharashtra. Several news reports suggest that the newly launched cash transfer scheme for women has messed up the state's finances. If the scheme has to be kept going in its present form, expenditure on other important obligations of the state government will have to be cut, or the monthly cash being given to women will have to be slashed. Politically, doing the former is easier.

Fifth, there will be other unseen effects because of these economic costs. State governments earn a large amount of money from what is referred to as the contribution of the petroleum sector to their exchequer. There are quite a few taxes and duties that fill their coffers, but a bulk of the money comes from the sales tax or value added tax (VAT) these governments charge on petroleum products like petrol and diesel sold in the state. In the first six months of 2024-25, of the ₹1.56 trillion contributed by petroleum companies to the exchequer of state governments, around 92% or ₹1.44 trillion came from sales tax or VAT on petroleum products. Now, this tax is largely ad-valorem, i.e., charged as a certain proportion of the price of the petroleum product on which it's levied. This implies that the

higher the price of petrol or diesel, the more the taxes earned by the state government. It needs to be said here that some state governments have a fixed per litre charge also built into such taxes, but a bulk of it is ad-valorem.

In 2014-15, the contribution of the petroleum sector to the exchequer of state governments stood at 1.3% of gross domestic product (GDP). It has largely seen a downward trend since then, except for the pandemic years, when it was at 1.2% of GDP. In the first six months of 2024-25, it was 1% of GDP. What does this imply? The ability of state governments to make money from petrol, diesel and other petroleum products sold in their state depends on the price at which these products are sold. Lower prices mean lower taxes for these governments. And given that more state governments are likely to turn to cash transfer programmes in the years to come, the chances of petrol and diesel prices being cut in proportion to any fall in global oil prices are very low.

Of course, the retail prices of petroleum products are decided by the central government and it isn't cut prices even though the average price of the Indian basket of crude oil has fallen from more than \$89 per barrel in April to \$73 in November. To some extent, this explains why the voices of stock market experts calling for a cut in petrol and diesel prices to push up slowing consumption growth have been falling on deaf ears.

Sixth, given that the Centre shares a significant portion of its revenues with state governments, if cash transfer programmes continue to grow in popularity, they will limit its ability to reduce personal income tax rates.

Finally, as this writer first noted in August in this column, the political success of cash transfer schemes for women in particular and citizens in general is yet another step that India has taken in moving towards a universal basic income in a disguised way.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

Sooner or later, we will have to recognise that the Earth has rights, too, to live without pollution. What mankind must know is that human beings cannot live without Mother Earth, but the planet can live without humans.

EVO MORALES

## GUEST VIEW

# Trump's tariffs would worsen the global China shock

PRASANNA KARTHIK



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Imagine we are on a game show where we're given a choice of picking any one of three doors. Behind one door is a car, while the others hide one goat each. We pick a door, say No. 1, and the host, who knows what's behind the doors, opens another door, say No. 3, revealing a goat. He then asks, "Do you want to switch to door No. 2?" Is it to our advantage to switch from door No. 1 to No. 2? In academia, this is called the Monty Hall problem. While thousands of Ph.D. scholars had initially argued that there is no advantage in switching doors, probability theory and computer simulations demonstrate the opposite.

Since there are three doors, initially, our odds of selecting the car are 33.3% or one-third, while the odds of it being behind one of the other two doors are 66.7% or two-thirds. Once the game-show host reveals a goat behind one unselected door, we find ourselves dealing with a question of conditional probability. So the likelihood of the car being behind door No. 2, given that No.

3 only has a goat, goes up to 66.7% or two-thirds. Sticking to the original choice would have ignored new information and led us to lose. This highlights the importance of adapting decisions to fresh evidence—a critical skill in systems thinking. Such failures to adapt resonate strongly with the mistakes that policymakers have historically made in ignoring systemic complexity.

A striking historical example is the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, implemented during the early part of the Great Depression in America to shield US farmers from foreign competition. It imposed steep import tariffs on European imports, but provoked retaliatory duties from 25 nations, leading to a 66% collapse in global trade. This economic isolation exacerbated the Great Depression, caused widespread unemployment and destabilized Europe's economy, indirectly paving the way for World War II. The lesson is clear: intricate solutions fail to account for the intricate inter-dependencies of complex systems.

A more recent parallel lies in US President-elect Donald Trump's 2018 tariffs, which aimed to boost domestic manufacturing and protect US jobs. The 20% tariff imposed during his last stint as US president on washing machines, for example,

increased their prices by 12%, while the cost of complementary goods, such as dryers, also rose. Although the US collected \$82 million annually in tariff revenues, American consumers bore an additional \$1.5 billion in higher costs. Further, the tariffs ultimately resulted in an estimated loss of 142,000 jobs

on account of broader economic disruptions caused. Though initially intended as temporary measures, tariffs often persist. For example, President Joe Biden extended many of Trump's tariffs, reflecting how such policies can get entrenched even when their long-term consequences are harmful. These decisions underscore the risks of ignoring systemic complexity—just as we saw with the Monty Hall problem, where a failure to re-assess the situation in the light of new data leads to suboptimal outcomes.

Now, Trump has threatened new tariffs targeting imports from China, Mexico and Canada, and also warned that Eric's nations could face even steeper import barriers if

they try to replace the US dollar as a trade currency. China accounts for a substantial chunk of the world's gross output and contributes significantly to global value addition. China's political system enables its manufacturing prowess, but at a local cost. Local governments in China have accumulated \$11

trillion in off-the-books debt to fund infrastructure and industrial production, creating a debt-driven, state-backed manufacturing sector. This allows Chinese manufacturers to flood global markets with underpriced goods, undermining domestic industries elsewhere and causing global supply to exceed demand across several product categories. Unlike fair competition among private firms, manufacturers competing with Chinese producers are effectively competing against the Chinese state on a highly uneven playing field. With China's manufacturing surplus now accounting for approximately 2% of global GDP, and with the US being China's biggest trade partner, Trump's tariffs could result in

ers competing with Chinese producers are effectively competing against the Chinese state on a highly uneven playing field. With China's manufacturing surplus now accounting for approximately 2% of global GDP, and with the US being China's biggest trade partner, Trump's tariffs could result in

cheap Chinese goods flooding other markets, further undermining industries in other countries.

The systemic challenge of tariffs mirrors the Monty Hall problem. Trump's unilateral tariffs, like refusing to switch doors in the game show, demonstrate a failure to adapt to evidence and systemic realities. These import barriers risk creating new burdens for US consumers while destabilizing global markets. A more effective strategy would involve fostering a global coalition to address China's state-backed manufacturing practices. Reframing the issue as 'China versus the rest' instead of 'America versus the rest' could encourage collaboration with allies, ensuring fair competition while promoting global economic stability. Such an approach would not only benefit US consumers but also incentivize China to adopt more sustainable practices, strengthening its long-term economic health.

As with the Monty Hall problem, success lies in reassessing decisions based on new information. By pivoting from unilateral actions to collaborative strategies, Trump could open the door to a more equitable and robust global economy—one that is truly aligned with his election-campaign goal of making America great again.

**A collaborative global response to Chinese exports would serve the world better than US unilateralism**



# Adani saga and the dharma of bureaucracy



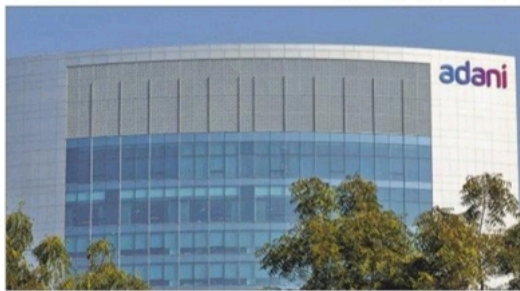
VIVEK KATJU  
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY  
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

QUESTIONS were put to the official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) during his media briefing on November 29, on the indictments issued in the United States against the Adani Group's chairman and others. The queries focused on (i) whether India was informed about these investigations and its cooperation sought by the US authorities, (ii) if India has now requested evidence so that investigations can take place here because the alleged crimes were committed in India, (iii) whether India considers the US action as 'overreach' and (iv) if the US has requested the Indian mission to serve warrants or summons against persons mentioned in the indictments. The spokesperson, reading out from prepared notes — not unusual in sensitive matters — stated, "We see this as a legal matter involving private firms and individuals and the Department of Justice. Obviously, there are

established procedures and legal avenues in such cases which, we believe, would be followed." He clarified that the Government of India had not been informed in advance and nor has it had any conversations with the US Government on this issue. In respect to the service of summons, he said, "Any request by a foreign government for service of summons or arrest warrants is part of mutual legal assistance but such requests are examined on merits and we have not received this request from the US side."

These responses would have been cleared at the highest levels of the political leadership, especially as the matter has stalled Parliament since the beginning of its present session. They were technically correct because the indictments are against private individuals. A government company, the Solar Energy Corporation of India, was in the middle of both the Power Purchase and Supply Agreements, but no shadow has been cast on it. Significantly, the spokesperson did not answer questions raised in the media briefing about India seeking 'evidence' or on possible US 'overreach'.

While in matters such as the Adani indictments there are obvious political angles, they also have diplomatic and bureaucratic underpinnings. Even while politics is taking place, diplomats and bureaucrats have to objectively assess different facets



DUTY-BOUND: Even in the midst of intense politics, the permanent civil service has to perform its job in keeping with its mandate. If it does not, the national interest suffers. REUTERS

of such issues to ascertain their impact on national interest. Once the indictments became public, what would or should have been the diplomatic and bureaucratic actions by senior civil servants? Government prescriptions on how diplomats and civil servants should handle such issues may change over time, but such changes cannot be substantial; for the basics of diplomatic and bureaucratic dealing of such matters do not admit a fundamental change.

The indictments cleared by grand juries were two in number. One was filed by the District Attorney of the Eastern District of New York in the Eastern New York District Court for alleged infringement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA). District

The Adani matter is a test case for the civil service. Even if this issue has been politicised, the bureaucracy should work uninfluenced by politics.

attorneys are appointed by the President and come under the Department of Justice. The other was by the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) for infringement of its statute. The SEC is an independent body. It would, therefore, not be as easy for an incoming President to influence it as he can the Department of Justice. It is noteworthy that the MEA spokesperson did not mention that the SEC, too, had filed an indictment through a grand jury.

Once the indictments became public, the Indian mission in Washington DC was duty-bound to take cognisance of them. This was because they involved one of India's leading business conglomerates with a global presence. Hence, judicial

action against it by US official institutions would resonate through the US and the global business community, as it has done. There was also the possible impact of the indictments, specifically on other Indian companies which wished to raise capital in the US and generally do business with US companies.

Irrespective of the supposed political connections of a business house, it is the dharma of an Indian diplomatic mission to officially convey such information to the MEA and other ministries concerned in Delhi. While doing so, it has to also give its assessment of its impact on Indian interests.

It would be legitimate to ask if the Indian mission took these actions.

Assuming that the Indian mission's input in this case was received in the MEA, the secretary or secretaries concerned, following official dharma, would bring the matter to the notice of their counterparts in the ministries concerned. (If the mission was silent, it was, and presumably still is, customary to demand that it sends its inputs urgently). In this matter, it would be the New and Renewable Energy, Commerce, Finance and Home Affairs ministries. In addition, the MEA secretary/secretaries would have to keep the Prime Minister's Office and the Cabinet Secretary informed. While conveying the assessment of the mission, they would

have to give their own assessment and its consequences on the country's interests worldwide.

The point is that even while this issue has been politicised, it is incumbent on the permanent bureaucracy to do its work uninfluenced by the winds and currents of politics. Naturally, under India's constitutional scheme, the political leadership takes the final decision on all issues for it is accountable to the people through Parliament. But even in the midst of intense politics, the permanent civil service, at its senior-most levels, has to perform its job in keeping with its mandate. If it does not, the national interest suffers.

I confess that when I have mentioned these ideas of the dharma of civil servants belonging to all cadres, I have been told that I am talking of an era that does not exist anymore. If this is true and leading civil servants now take their cue from the political leadership, they have turned away from tradition. Ministers who were civil servants would know this.

The Adani matter is a test case for the civil service. What the current secretaries do may not get to be publicly known. It would, however, be sad if some of the present band of civil service leaders, who have a well-deserved reputation of being straight and true, abandon bureaucracy's dharma — to convey its unvarnished views to the political leadership.

## Mounting domestic discontent spells trouble for Xi



JAYADEVA RANADE  
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BARELY had the dust settled after the disappearance of the Chinese State Councillor, the Foreign Minister and Chinese President Xi Jinping's protégé Qin Gang that three months later, Chinese Defence Minister Li Shangfu was 'removed' from his post. Li Shangfu, too, was a close associate of Xi Jinping.

Confirmation has now come on November 28 that the Political Commissar of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Admiral Miao Hua, another close associate of Xi Jinping, is under investigation. Till being placed under investigation, Miao Hua was the top official in charge of ensuring compliance with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s ideology and regulations throughout the PLA.

The sudden fall of three of Xi Jinping's close associates points to dissatisfaction with Xi Jinping in the senior echelons of the CCP and certainly signals that all is not

well inside Zhongnanhai — the residential walled compound in Beijing of the senior-most Chinese leaders.

The recent dismissals in the PLA Rocket Force, together with the removal of some senior generals, suggests problems in the PLA. Indicating that the circle of enquiry among senior PLA officers has expanded, latest reports, though as yet unconfirmed, state that the Commander of the PLA Eastern Theatre Command, General Lin Xiangyang, and till now Chief of Staff of the CMC Joint Staff Department and CMC member Liu Zhenli are both being investigated. The Eastern Theatre Command is the frontline command for operations against Taiwan. Liu Zhenli is the senior-most PLA officer. Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun is already under investigation.

Rumours have been circulating for some months of a power struggle in the PLA's top echelons. There are two strands of rumours. One is that General He Weidong's 'helicopter' promotion as one of the two CMC Vice-Chairmen has been resisted by senior PLA officers, who feel that he was not adequately experienced or senior. The other is that there is rivalry between General Zhang Youxia and General He Weidong. The former is a war veteran, hav-



SIGNAL: The sudden removal of Xi Jinping's three close associates points to dissatisfaction. AP

ing fought in the war with Vietnam and General He Weidong has experience of confrontation with Taiwan. The latter is influential in the Southern and Eastern Theatre Commands. He Weidong also forged close personal ties with Xi Jinping and the two were drinking buddies when Xi Jinping was posted in Fujian Province. The rumours claim that He Weidong represents a "Taiwan faction" in the PLA.

Zhang Youxia, the senior Vice-Chairman of the CMC, is also a 'princeling' and close second-generation family friend of Xi Jinping. Their fathers served together in the 1940s. This proximity and Zhang Youxia's reputation as a military

There is enough popular dissatisfaction, including within the CCP, with Xi Jinping's policies. The slowdown of the economy has aggravated societal discontent.

professional prompted Xi Jinping to retain him in the CMC as Vice-Chairman at the 20th Party Congress in 2022, though he had crossed the retirement age. Zhang Youxia was also re-appointed as one of the two PLA officers to the CCP Politburo. As the senior-most General in the PLA, Zhang Youxia commands considerable respect among PLA personnel and veterans.

Miao Hua, who held the PLA Navy rank of Admiral, was, till his removal last week, the Director of the CMC Political Work Department and a member of the CMC. He was retained as Director of the CMC Political Work Department and CMC member at the 20th Party Congress. Miao Hua is

the first among an elite group of officers who earned their spurs in the PLA's 31st Group Army in the Nanjing Military Region near Xiamen. He and others, like former People's Armed Police Commander Wang Ning and new PLA Army Commander Han Weiguo, came into contact with Xi Jinping who was the Deputy Party Secretary of Fujian. All their careers were fast-tracked.

Miao Hua is a close associate of Xi Jinping and their tenures overlapped when Xi Jinping was Party Secretary of the Zhejiang province. In mid-2012, Miao Hua was promoted as Deputy Political Commissar of the Lanzhou MR and Secretary of its Discipline Inspection Commission and, within months, was appointed the Political Commissar of the Lanzhou Military Region. Considering that the Lanzhou Military Region was long regarded as a powerbase of Guo Boxiong of the Jiang Zemin faction, Miao Hua would have had a role in the investigations against Guo Boxiong and removing remnants of his influence in the region. Miao Hua was among the senior PLA officers who published articles in April 2014, pledging loyalty to Xi Jinping. General Miao Hua was given a double promotion by Xi Jinping to become one of

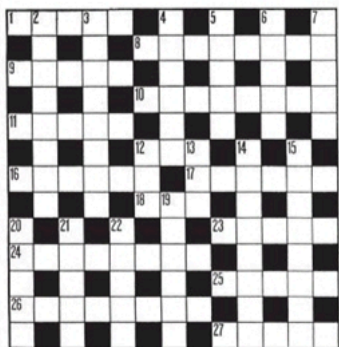
the PLA's youngest officers to be promoted to the rank of PLA General.

The ouster of Miao Hua, for whatever reason, could mean that his associates, proteges and persons appointed on his recommendation would now be subject to renewed vetting. This could include CMC Vice-Chairman General He Weidong. Given Miao Hua's long tenure as Political Commissar in the CMC, he would have had a key role in the elevation and appointment of many senior PLA officers.

But the implications of these removals would be wider. They point to either poor judgment of personnel by Chinese President Xi Jinping, or that Xi Jinping is himself under attack. There is enough popular dissatisfaction, including within the CCP, with Xi Jinping's policies. The slowdown of the economy and consequent joblessness, graduate unemployment and rising cost of living have aggravated societal discontent.

A lot depends on the extent of support Xi Jinping enjoys in the PLA and whether there is substance in the rumours of differences between Zhang Youxia and He Weidong. The looming unpredictability in China-US relations amid mounting domestic dissatisfaction point to difficult times ahead for Xi Jinping.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



#### ACROSS

- Short trip for pleasure (5)
- Truthfulness (8)
- Stoop-neck-face (5)
- Spent lavishly (2,2,4)
- Easily frightened (5)
- Droop under pressure (3)
- Put aside (6)
- Large fish-eating hawk (6)
- Say further (3)
- Made progress (3,2)
- Terminate prematurely (3,5)
- Glad (5)
- Disappointed expression (4,4)
- Belittle (5)

#### Yesterday's solution

- Across: 1 Side by side, 6 Chic, 10 Frown, 11 Disrepute, 12 Cashmere, 13 Sweep, 15 Omniscious, 17 Denmark, 19 Treadle, 21 Sell out, 22 Again, 24 Paraffin, 27 Entertain, 28 Taint, 29 Each, 30 One and only.
- Down: 1 Soft, 2 Drop a line, 3 Bench, 4 Sadness, 5 Decend, 7 House, 8 Checkmate, 9 Personal, 14 Contravene, 16 Ordinary, 18 Abolition, 20 Explain, 21 Syringa, 23 Atroc, 25 Nodded, 26 Starry.

#### DOWN

- Satisfactory (3,5)
- Basic, without embellishment (2-6)
- Title of Spanish married woman (6)
- Generally accepted rule (5)
- Loose piece of turf (5)
- Situated (5)
- The ocean (3)
- Deity (3)
- Including latest information (2-2,4)
- In worse than usual health (5,3)
- Give formal order to (6)
- To climb (5)
- Elaborate confidence game (5)
- Banter (5)

### SU DO KU



#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

#### CALENDAR

| DECEMBER 4, 2024, WEDNESDAY          |      |  |
|--------------------------------------|------|--|
| Shaka Samvat                         | 1946 |  |
| Margashirsh Shaka                    | 13   |  |
| Margashirsh Purnimashi               | 19   |  |
| Hijri                                | 1446 |  |
| Shukla Paksha Tithi 3, up to 1.11 pm |      |  |
| Ganda Yoga up to 1.56 pm             |      |  |
| Purnvashadha Nakshatra up to 5.15 pm |      |  |
| Moon enters Capricorn sign 11.20 pm  |      |  |

### FORECAST

| WEDNESDAY 07:22 HRS |     |     |
|---------------------|-----|-----|
| THURSDAY 07:54 HRS  |     |     |
| CITY                | MAX | MIN |
| Chandigarh          | 28  | 30  |
| New Delhi           | 26  | 31  |
| Amritsar            | 24  | 32  |
| Bathinda            | 28  | 31  |
| Jalandhar           | 25  | 30  |
| Ludhiana            | 26  | 33  |
| Bhivani             | 26  | 31  |
| Hisar               | 26  | 29  |
| Sirsa               | 29  | 34  |
| Dharamsala          | 22  | 07  |
| Manali              | 14  | 01  |
| Shimla              | 16  | 07  |
| Srinagar            | 13  | 0   |
| Jammu               | 24  | 10  |
| Kargil              | 06  | -08 |
| Leh                 | 04  | -08 |
| Dehradun            | —   | —   |
| Mussoorie           | 20  | 07  |



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Sewadar Sukhbir

Clergy gives him chance to revive political fortunes

A rap on the knuckles — that's what the Sikh clergy has given to Sukhbir Singh Badal and other Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leaders for the 'sins' committed by their government in Punjab from 2007 to 2017. The token punishment — washing dishes and cleaning shoes as well as washrooms at the Golden Temple — has been awarded nearly three months after the former Deputy CM was declared 'tanbhaiya' (guilty of religious misconduct) by the Akali Takht. The five high priests have stopped short of taking drastic action, such as excommunication, despite the gravity of the misdeeds that Sukhbir and the others are accused of. Making them perform 'sewa' as atonement may not be enough to pacify the Panth, which continues to be angry with the Badals and the SAD over the tumultuous events of 2015.

While Sukhbir has been granted an opportunity to revive his political fortunes, the withdrawal of the Panth Rattan Fakhr-e-Quam title — bestowed on then CM Parkash Singh Badal by the Akali Takht in 2011 — is a setback to the Badal family. With this extreme step, the clergy has done what it failed to do when the senior Badal was alive. The high priests have also asserted their authority by directing the SAD working committee to accept Sukhbir's resignation as party chief and form a panel to hold organisational elections. This indicates that the clergy won't desist from intervening in party affairs.

Both Sukhbir and his party are desperate to shed their ignominious baggage — the failure to punish the perpetrators of the sacrilege incidents and the pardon granted (later revoked) to Sirda dera chief Gurmurt Ram Rahim in a blasphemous case. The SAD wants the Panth, its traditional vote bank, to forgive and forget. All is not lost for the Akalis — people of Punjab have repeatedly voted the Congress to power despite its role in the horrors of 1984. The key question is whether the SAD is open to reforms in a bid to regain credibility.

Cost of freebies

Fiscal populism drains Punjab and HP

BOTH Punjab and Himachal Pradesh are reeling under severe financial stress, a crisis stemming from populist promises made during electoral campaigns. In Punjab, the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) commitment to provide 300 units of electricity free of cost to the consumers has resulted in a subsidy bill of over Rs 20,000 crore for the current financial year. Himachal, where the Congress is in power, revived the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), adding a significant burden to an already strained exchequer.

Punjab's predicament is worsened by delayed subsidy payments, with the pending bill crossing Rs 4,500 crore. The Punjab State Power Corporation Limited is struggling with a dip in collection efficiency, dropping from 100% to 73%, and soaring transmission losses. Attempts to raise revenue, including recovering dues from defaulters and government departments, have yielded little relief. With the state nearing its borrowing limit, the sustainability of the free electricity scheme is under question. Himachal Pradesh faces a similar plight. The restoration of OPS has inflated the state's financial obligations, requiring Rs 2,000 crore monthly to meet salary and pension commitments. Exhausting its loan limit of Rs 6,200 crore, the state is now relying on future borrowings to manage day-to-day expenses. The situation is set to worsen as the Centre's revenue deficit grant is expected to be halved next fiscal year.

Both states accuse the BJP-led Centre of withholding funds and showing a discriminatory attitude. Himachal's exclusion from the Special Assistance for Capital Investment Scheme has sparked a political outcry, while Punjab alleges bias in the allocation of development funds. However, the root cause lies in unsustainable fiscal policies driven by electoral populism. As state governments grapple with mounting debt and shrinking revenues, it is imperative to shift focus from doles to structural reforms. Fiscal prudence, efficient tax collection and targeted subsidies are the need of the hour.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 4, 1924

A hope and a warning

TO us in Punjab, the address delivered by Sir JC Bose at the Patna University convocation, salient extracts from which will be seen elsewhere in this issue, is of peculiar importance, not only on account of his eminent position in the world of thought and science, but also because our own university has invited this distinguished Indian savant to deliver the convocation address. The intrinsic value of the address, however, was far greater than the importance it derived from either of these circumstances. In addition to an illuminating discourse on the responsiveness of inorganic matter and the world of plants, it contained a message of hope to all those, whether educationists or patriots, who are so apt to despair of progress because of the difficulties that have to be encountered and overcome, and a warning to those others who, in their indifference and listlessness, take no heed of the danger that lies ahead. The first is all the more important because it is not an abstract or academic discourse on the superiority of optimism over pessimism and cynicism, of the man who accepts, confronts and overcomes his difficulties over the man who only complains and gives way to dependency. It is essentially a revelation of Sir Bose's personal experience, the battle he has fought and the success he has won. When he commenced his investigations more than 30 years ago, he told his hangers-on, the circumstances were most discouraging. In the first place, no one believed that any great contribution to exact knowledge could be made in India since the Indian temperament was supposed to be merely speculative.

Constitution has stood us in good stead

This is not a minor achievement, but we cannot afford to rest on our laurels



KRISHNA KUMAR  
AUTHOR AND FORMER  
DIRECTOR, NCERT

THIS year's Constitution Day coincided with pleas that a mosque and a dargah be surveyed to verify whether they had temples underneath. Pleas like these remind us how far we remain as a nation from realising the dream the Constitution symbolises and represents. As a symbol, it stands for a transformative vision. No wonder it evokes criticism from people who cannot differentiate between a civilisation and a modern nation. Both the drafting and adoption of the Constitution represent a possibility — that as a society, we can accomplish complex tasks that require a difficult and long dialogue. This is what our neighbour and historical cohorts on either side could not successfully manage. Their struggle to achieve stability continues, reminding us that we should not take ourselves for granted.

The search for temples beneath mosques and shrines also points out that we must appreciate how exceptionally lucky we were to have a document that has stood us in good stead for 75 years. This is not a minor achievement, but we can't afford to rest on our laurels.

Our difficulties arise partly because the means available to us for passing on ideas and values to younger people have not been robust or all that reliable. The Constitution is, of course, taught in considerable detail and is frequently mentioned in schools and colleges, but teaching it is not easy if you want to bring it alive. To enable young people to recognise that it is a transformative



HOPE: The Constitution represents the possibility that we can accomplish complex tasks that require a difficult dialogue. REVIEWS

document, they must know what it tries to transform and why. This is where most debates of the present times arise. A lot of people who see India as essentially an old civilisation don't like it being called a new nation. Between these two positions, an interesting dialogue is possible, but it doesn't occur. Like everything else in our times, this polarity is also treated as frozen. The two sides exist in independent orbits. The possibility of a bridge does not get a chance to be explored.

Of course, the makers of the Constitution were aware of this polarity. And those who did not directly participate in the final drafting also knew that India was both an old civilisation and a new nation. One such person was Mahatma Gandhi. He drew inspiration from India's civilisational resources in his struggle to seek freedom from colonial rule and revivify India's internal strife and contradictions in a peaceful manner. It was a monumental struggle, as one can imagine. The Independence movement was arduous and long; and it was the first movement of its kind in the colonial world. India's Independence inspired many other colonised nations

Makers of the Constitution were aware of the risks that the politics of representation would pose to values encoded in the ethical framework.

and still does, because it had no precedent. No doubt it involved several violent episodes, but the key political moves that led towards freedom created a new discourse of liberation through peaceful argumentation.

Several new ideals and values arose during the freedom movement, and the Constitution offers to the young the best repository of these ethical achievements. If a teacher uses the Preamble to study the history of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Constitution would come alive — in the sense that the deep difficulties its draft-

ing posed would all surface. How Dr BR Ambedkar, who chaired the drafting group, inoned out various positions and assertions is an amazing story of consensus-building. Terms like 'equality' and 'justice' are not mere words conveying key values that the Constitution asserts as fundamental. A critique of society and the urgency to transform it so that it can be governed democratically is embedded in these words.

Is justice possible among grossly unequal groups? Is equality possible in the middle of destitution and exploitation? Such are the questions hidden in the Preamble. And then, there is an overarching question: Is fraternity possible when chasms are so deep and they often get flooded with volatile emotions? Makers of the Constitution were aware of the risks that the politics of representation would pose to values encoded in the ethical framework.

I once tried to impart the experience of Constitution-making to my students by presenting a family map. It featured three generations living under one roof but with different worries brewing in their hearts. The older generation had just two members left, while the middle one

consisted of four members whose capacities and interests radically differed. Then there was the third generation, consisting of the children of three siblings of the middle generation. Among the children, too, there was great variation in pursuits and capacities. They had an unmarried aunt and an uncle who was financially weak and routinely needed help from the rest of the family, including the two grandparents. It was a complex task to prepare a document about the future arrangements that the grandparents wanted to be put in place with consensus before their death.

I made four discussion groups and assigned drafting to a fifth group. I returned to the room after an hour and found the place quite noisy and chaotic. One hour was left for the exercise, but there no sense of hurry among any of the groups. So, I went away and came back an hour later. I was told that more time was required, so we decided to meet again the next day. The same thing happened next day, and we needed more time. Finally, when we met to discuss the draft Constitution, I noticed as many as six notes of dissent appended to it. Everything was read out and the discussion began. There were several angry voices, and some were sulking. The drafting group was also unhappy because every discussion group was blaming them for unfair recording.

Teaching about the real Constitution became easy after this exercise. These students were in the first year of Delhi University's legendary B.El.Ed. (Bachelor of Elementary Education) course. The collective attempt to create a document that was under so many contending demands and pressures had given the class a considerable taste of what the drafting and passage of the real Constitution of India must have been like. I didn't need to tell them that for a newborn nation, it was quite an achievement.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. —BR Ambedkar

The mother of blood donation movement

MANMOHAN LAL SARIN

KANTIA Krishen, wife of Haryana's first Chief Secretary Saroop Krishen, was the founder of the voluntary blood donation movement in India. A blood donor herself, she made her biggest donation — her body — to the PGI after breathing her last on November 30. She joined a small band of people (including her late husband) who feel that mortal human remains should be used for science instead of being cremated or buried.

Not happy sitting idle at home, she wanted to serve society. The PGI had just been set up in 1962, and Dr Jai Gopal Jolly, director of the Blood Transfusion Department, was keen that blood should be collected from voluntary, non-remunerated sources only. Kantiaji (as she was commonly known) got half a dozen housewives together and set up the Blood Bank Society, PGI. Educating and motivating people to donate blood was their mission. No leader was too big to be approached for help. They ensured that not even a drop of blood was collected from blood sellers in Chandigarh. In recognition of her yeoman service, the government bestowed the Padma Shri on her in 1972. This gave her the incentive to spread the movement first all over North India and then throughout the country. She spearheaded the establishment of the Indian Society of Blood Transfusion & Immunohaematology and served as its secretary for decades.

When attempts to convince political leaders in New Delhi to ban commerce in blood and its components failed, she approached Common Cause, an NGO, with the help of HD Shourie and me. A public interest litigation was filed, seeking a ban on buying and selling of blood countrywide. The directions issued by the Supreme Court in 1996 were a game-changer. Consequently, no unlicensed blood bank can be set up and trade in blood is prohibited.

Despite the judgment, the struggle did not end. The directions had to be implemented. Kantiaji led a delegation of MPs and voluntary workers to then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee; this prompted the government to frame the National Blood Policy. To ensure the supply of safe blood from voluntary sources, the Blood Bank Society joined hands with Rotary to set up the Rotary & Blood Bank Society Resource Centre in Chandigarh; it is open 24x7 and supplies blood to anyone in need.

Since she was our children's grandmother, all of us started calling her 'Nani'. Her interests also included gardening, cooking, sewing and classical music. She motivated all of us — her children, their spouses and grandchildren — to promote voluntary blood donation, be it by donating themselves or motivating others to donate. Thanks to her, 60 years after her birth, the Blood Bank Society's secretary general is her daughter, Niti, and its president her son-in-law. She helped save millions of lives by her selfless efforts. 'Nani' will be missed, but the voluntary blood donation movement will go on forever.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Responsible family planning vital**  
Apropos of 'Population push', RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's ill-ogical suggestion that Indian families should aim for three children as the current fertility rate has dipped below 2.1 is shocking. While the intention behind such remarks may be to address demographic concerns, the broader implications could have a detrimental impact. India is already grappling with overpopulation, strained resources and environmental degradation. An increase in the birth rate could exacerbate these challenges, putting greater pressure on healthcare, education and infrastructure. Rather than promoting higher fertility, we should prioritise sustainable development, responsible family planning and equitable distribution of resources in the country.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

**Negative impact of overpopulation**  
With reference to 'Population push', the call by Mohan Bhagwat amid a decline in the TFR is ill-founded. Asking people to bear more children seems paradoxical in the world's most populous country. The consequences of population growth are far-reaching — scarce jobs, strained public services and worsening environmental crisis. We need to have a comprehensive population control policy, including educating people on family planning measures. In this era of scientific advancements, the thrust should be on building a strong nation based on the fundamentals of peace and prosperity for all.

NIRMALJIT SINGH CHATRAATH, KAPURTHALA

**Population root cause of poverty**  
Refer to 'Population push'; India has earned the dubious distinction of being the most populous country in the world — surpassing China. Almost all ill being faced by India have been attributed to the burgeoning population. Economists are unanimous in their view that population is the root cause of poverty and slow progress. All our efforts to tackle the problem have failed miserably due to our orthodox mindset. Our infrastructure is falling short of our growing demand. Our leaders are well advised to refrain from airing such views.

KARNAL, SINGH, KHARAR

**Commuters in a gridlock**  
Refer to 'Stuck in traffic'; farmers marching towards Delhi, political leaders travelling to Chandigarh by air, commuters stranded in a traffic gridlock on Delhi's borders as Parliament resumes functioning — all this gives a feel of Indian democracy moving forward, upwards, crossways simultaneously. The impasse over farmers' demands should have led to initiatives on the part of the government. It is time to change the archaic approach of organising protests to seek redressal by the authorities. Problems and public issues are expected to be resolved without providing undue mileage to vested interests who thrive on chaos, confusion and distraction. Causing inconvenience to the public is not acceptable.

JAGVINDER SINGH BRAR, PATIALA

**Leaders unmoved by farmers' woes**  
Apropos of 'Stuck in traffic'; farmers' protests over their genuine demands, such as legal guarantee for MSP and loan waiver, have disrupted life for the common man but failed to rouse our politicians and policymakers. Winning elections to grab power is perhaps the only purpose that keeps politicians preoccupied. Heads don't roll over pressing issues like the distress of the farming community. There may be no chance of any farmer figuring among the richest persons in the world, but we must not ignore the fact that the Indian economy is mainly agriculture-based and farmers' issues should be prioritised for redressal.

HIRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

**Communal violence on the rise**  
With reference to 'Courts letting ancient sores erupt afresh', the dangers of reopening wounds is clearly seen in the manner events played out at Sambhal. There are around 40,000 Muslim places of worship in the country. Some of them would have been built on temples by invaders. But conducting surveys everywhere is an onerous task. This is causing communal tensions to rise alarmingly. In trying to correct historical wrongs, we are putting peace and public order in danger. The courts have unnecessarily allowed this problem to fester when it was as good as buried by The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI





MY VIEW | ECONOMIC GRAVITY

MINT CURATOR

# The great choke: Pollution levels overshadow our economic gains

To meet its higher aspirations, India must act with alacrity on multiple fronts to lift this haze over the success of its economy



**PRACHI MISHRA**  
is professor of economics at Ashoka University and head of Ashoka Isaac Center for Public Policy.

India has achieved remarkable economic success, ranking as the world's fifth-largest economy. Economic experts predict India will rise to third place within five years. However, this economic growth stands in sharp contrast to its environmental challenges. India ranks as the third most polluted country globally and has the worst air quality among major economies. Many Indian cities regularly top global lists of the most polluted urban areas. The costs of air pollution are well known globally. A recent study in *Lancet*, the medical journal, reported increased effects of PM2.5 on daily mortality with strong evidence for such an association in India.

Air pollution's impact on education is an overlooked crisis, comparable to the learning setbacks of the covid pandemic. In Delhi alone, when poor air quality forces schools to switch to online classes, students lose at least an estimated 267 million hours of effective learning annually. This accumulates to a staggering 1.3 billion hours over five years. These massive educational disruptions threaten to impair students' long-term potential. This comes at a particularly challenging time, as schools are still working to overcome unprecedented learning gaps created by the pandemic and India's learning outcomes significantly trail global averages.

Every winter, as air pollution peaks, public discussion on the crisis intensifies, but this seasonal debate has failed to produce meaningful improvements in air quality. What's striking is that these discussions haven't translated into organized public pressure for change. Instead, citizens have resigned themselves to accepting poor air quality as inevitable, which is a remarkable paradox in the world's largest democracy.

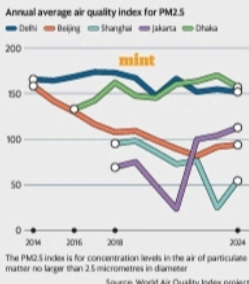
Several commentators have noted action plans devised and successfully implemented by China, and contrasted it with India (see the accompanying chart). In September 2013, China introduced a significant national policy to address severe air quality issues that included emission-reduction targets with a focus on key industrial sectors like coal, steel and cement, a regional focus on heavily polluted regions such as Beijing and Tianjin, new regulations for industry (stricter emission standards and cleaner production technology), an energy transformation by reducing coal consumption, and specific measures for the transportation sector.

While India's democratic system is often cited as an obstacle to implementing and enforcing a comprehensive pollution control programme like China's, public pressure actually played a key role in the Chinese government's action plan. The years leading up to it saw public protests and online activism over air pollution, particularly in urban areas. China's 'airpocalypse' controversy erupted when the US Embassy reported pollution readings that starkly differed from official Chinese data. Middle-class residents held demonstrations



## Can Delhi do a Beijing?

A public outcry forced government action to curb air pollution in Beijing but Delhi's air remains unbearably since the Indian electorate seems to have reconciled itself to it.



The PM2.5 index is for concentration levels in the air of particulate matter no larger than 2.5 micrometres in diameter. Source: World Air Quality Index project.

against projects they feared would raise pollution, even as social media, NGOs and citizens all pushed for greater transparency in the Air Quality Index (AQI), making PM2.5 a widely known yardstick.

Why hasn't clean air become a major political priority in India, given its strong democratic traditions? The evolution of electricity access provides an instructive parallel. Initially, only the wealthy could afford generators, but eventually widespread public demand from citizens made electricity access a key election issue, with politicians promising free power to win votes. In contrast, the clean air debate hasn't gained traction. While affluent citizens can protect themselves with air purifiers and air-conditioned cars, those who rely on two-wheelers or use public transport remain exposed. However, if the electricity example is any guide, public demand for clean air could follow a similar path.

How can we accelerate this path? While stable burning has dominated discussions, effective solutions likely require deeper structural changes, particularly in agricultural practices, minimum support prices and procurement systems. Meanwhile, several low-hanging fruits remain unexplored. India could significantly reduce pollution by

bringing order to its chaotic traffic systems, enforcing stricter construction regulations and increasing its urban green cover. These simpler solutions offer immediate opportunities for improvement while we work on the more complex agricultural challenges.

Traffic chaos in Indian cities is a major source of air pollution. Despite significant investments in road infrastructure, average speeds in major cities remain below 20kmph. This slow movement is not just due to volume, but widespread disregard for traffic rules. Drivers routinely ignore lanes, travel in wrong directions and stop idly. When traffic needs to merge, it becomes a disorderly scramble rather than an organized flow. The constant starting, stopping and idling of vehicles creates far more pollution than smooth-flowing traffic would. Yet, surprisingly, the connection between India's lawless roads and air pollution levels remains largely unstudied. Estimates suggest that vehicles operating at low speeds can produce up to 4-5 times more emissions than vehicles moving at optimal speeds. Inefficient traffic signals, frequent stopping and starting, poor lane discipline and extended journey times all add to fuel consumption and put pressure on air quality. This is especially relevant in a fast-growing economy with dramatic increases in vehicle ownership.

Construction sites in India are also major contributors to air pollution due to poor practices. Even in premium areas with sky-high property prices, construction materials are often left uncovered, creating clouds of dust on nearby roads. Basic pollution control measures like dust management, careful material handling, water sprinklers and waste disposal are rarely implemented. This problem is worsened by rapid urban development that has stripped cities of green spaces. Without adequate trees and vegetation to trap dust, our cities have essentially become mega dust bowls.

Addressing India's pollution crisis requires strict enforcement of all regulations, not just environmental ones, through a balance of rewards and punishments. This challenge cannot be met by passing responsibility between different government agencies and departments. It demands coordinated action across the entire system. Currently, even Supreme Court-mandated bans are openly flouted, highlighting a severe weakness in regulatory enforcement.

As India sets ambitious goals like hosting the 2036 Olympics, we must ensure that our environmental practices align with these high aspirations. These are the author's personal views.

# Actually, Republicans are the masters of US identity politics

Democrats are falsely being blamed for what Trump's party did



**NIA-MALIKA HENDERSON**  
is a politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion.

A question. Which party played identity politics in the 2024 campaign? Donald Trump and the Republicans or Kamala Harris and the Democrats? Left-leaning pundits think they know. Political consultant James Carville blamed Democrats' defeat on their 'stupid, God-damn ideational mission.' CNN anchor and Washington Post columnist Fareed Zakaria argued that one of the big mistakes Harris made was 'elevating identity politics.' *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd declared that 'woke is broke.'

This one-sided attack on identity politics happens like clockwork when Democrats lose an election, even one where they were actually pretty quiet on issues of gender, race or sexual orientation. But what is rarely acknowledged is that Republicans also play identity politics. They just do it better — especially under Trump's leadership. 'Today, white identity deeply influences American politics,' writes political scientist Ashley Jardina in her 2019 book *White Identity Politics*. 'White identity is sometimes latent, but it is also reactive — made salient by threats to the dominance of whites as a group.'

Trump is the master of this strategy. His brand of identity politics — centred on Caucasian and male identity — has proven an effective and divisive way to win. The Republican party is 84% Caucasian, yet for years, mainstream national Republicans mostly rejected playing the race card overtly. Senator Bob Dole famously told racists to leave the party during his 1996 convention speech. And former Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman apologized in 2005 for his party's history of using racial polarization to gain an electoral advantage.

Trump has behaved quite differently. For example, in August, Trump shared an image of dark-skinned people simply walking with a caption that said: 'If you're a woman you can either vote for Trump or wait until one of these monsters goes after you or your daughter.' That's Trump's version of identity politics — and it worked. There is a reason that Harris largely sidestepped her racial and gender identity, as Trump leaned in, frequently highlighting her identity markers. The intentional mispronunciation of her name was part of this strategy. So were comments like this: 'I didn't know she was Black until a number of years ago when she happened to turn Black and now she wants to be known as Black. So, I don't know, is she Indian or is she Black?' Trump said in July to a room of African-American journalists.



Trump's 2024 electoral formula played on Caucasian and male identity

On her gender, Trump, who talked about the appeal of the 'strongman,' had this to say: 'She'll be so easy for them. She'll be like a play toy. They look at her and they say we can't believe we got so lucky. They're gonna walk all over her,' he said in an interview with *Forbes* in July. 'I don't want to say as to why, but a lot of people understand it.' Trump, obviously, didn't have to say it. He was right that people understood where he was coming from. His identity made him the better choice to sit across from world leaders.

Since Trump's rise to political prominence, the electorate, particularly Caucasian voters, has shifted their views to either match or oppose Trump's views. Caucasian conservatives have become more extreme on issues like immigration and civil rights and liberals more progressive.

The sentiments that motivated voters in this campaign and how different groups voted won't fully be known for months (exit polls are unreliable), but if 2024 is anything like 2016, it's likely that 'whiteness' and maleness as identities were motivating factor for some voters. Yes, Trump made inroads among a multiracial coalition of men, and he did this by appealing to traditional notions of masculinity — cue Hulk Hogan ripping off his shirt at the Republican convention. Even Trump's emphasis on transgender issues, while ostensibly about women's sports, is at its core also about fragile gender roles and the idea that certain groups now enjoy an elevated status.

Democrats, with their multi-racial and diverse coalition, don't have a good answer for Trump's style of identity politics. They must attract more Caucasian voters to win, but are wary of wading into the Caucasian grievance politics at the centre of Trump's version of populism. As Democrats point fingers and devise a way forward, they should take some solace in this: Parties and culture evolve and new leaders emerge. Trump's culture war rhetoric might make voters feel better, but it has yet to make their actual lives better. This will be the biggest of his second term. Democrats in the opposition must develop a broader but still inclusive message, while hoping that Republicans who come in Trump's wake are less adept at his brand of identity politics.

MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

# India's growth slowdown demands an RBI response

NIRANJAN RAJADHYAKSHA



is executive director at Artha India Research Advisors.

The Indian economy is in the midst of a cyclical slowdown. The government statistics office reported last week that economic growth had declined for a third quarter in a row. There were enough indications from the ground by then that the economy was losing momentum; but hardly anybody expected such a sharp slowdown — from 6.7% in the first quarter to 5.4% in the second quarter of 2024-25.

Economic growth in the second quarter was 3.2 percentage points below the rate of economic expansion in the December quarter in 2023-24. India had experienced seven quarters of declining growth just before the pandemic struck. It is still not clear whether the ongoing slowdown will be a similarly lengthy stumble or a momentary wobble because of transient influences.

A lot of the discussion these past few days has been about how policymakers should respond to the growth shocker, but first it would be useful to examine the nature of the slowdown. Private sector demand has

been weakening for some time. Urban consumers have paused for a breath after a wave of hectic spending following the end of pandemic restrictions. Companies have still not been keen to build new capacity in their operations.

The government had stepped in to bolster domestic investment through spending on new roads, ports, airports and other types of infrastructure. However, government capital expenditure in the first half of the current financial year is lower than what it was in the same period last year, perhaps because of national elections in 2024. The net result is that fiscal support has further weakened.

The question that is buzzing in the air is whether the government needs to step in quickly to stimulate spending. The space for either higher government expenditure or meaningful tax cuts is limited. The Indian government is still in the process of getting public finances back into shape after the pandemic shock, when it had to support economic activity even as tax collections collapsed. Public debt ballooned. This burden has to be gradually reduced through a combination of fiscal discipline and maintaining economic growth above the cost of government borrowing.

The fiscal option is thus limited for now.

That leaves the monetary policy lever. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) faces a dilemma. Headline inflation is above its formal target, largely because of high food prices. Core inflation has been well under control, a sure sign that domestic demand is weakening.

There is a compelling case for the monetary policy committee (MPC), which is meeting this week to decide its next move, to look past temporary jumps in food prices, often the result of one-off factors such as seasonal rains or heat waves, to reduce interest rates.

However, there is one catch. There is a possibility that high food prices will spill over into the rest of the economy, as workers demand higher wages to cover the higher cost of living or companies increase their prices to protect their profit margins. Is that happening in India right now? Neither the data from the labour market nor from corporate financial statements suggests that such an upward inflationary spiral is building up.

The central bank is more wary. In RBI's latest monthly review of the Indian economy, it notes that the prices of processed foods have been moving up in response to a surge in edible-oil prices. And there are early signs that higher food prices have begun to push up the wages of household services such as domestic help or cooks. 'The hardening of input costs across goods and services and their flow into selling prices needs to be watched carefully,' says RBI.

## The central bank could buy bonds to ease Indian liquidity conditions well before it goes for a rate cut

There is a strong consensus in financial markets right now that the six members of the MPC will not immediately respond to the sharp decline in economic growth in the second quarter of the current financial year. In that case, RBI should take a first stab at the challenge by easing financial conditions, which have become tighter in recent weeks, in other ways.

The easing of Indian monetary policy can then be seen as a play in three acts.

First, the MPC in its October meeting changed the policy stance from 'withdrawal of accommodation' to 'neutral.'

Second, the central bank can ease financial conditions by releasing liquidity into the money market via more purchases of government bonds (open market operations).

Third, it could go for a rate cut in the first half of 2025. Indian monetary policymakers are negotiating the twists and turns of economic life with faulty equipment to guide them. The inflation-targeting central bank depends on a consumer price index that is dated. The index is usually updated every five years, as the relative importance of what people spend on changes with time, especially the fact that a family's food bill tends to become less important as its income increases. The other issue is how free or subsidized food should feature in the Indian measure of retail inflation.

In a recent article in *Business Standard*, Rarendra Kumar Bhoi, a former head of the monetary policy department at the Indian central bank, has estimated that retail inflation would be half a percentage point lower if it had been measured correctly, with an updated consumer price index. It is worth speculating if interest rate policy would have been different — in effect, less tight — if a renewed consumer price index had been released on time by the government.