

BIBLIOGRAPHY



Huge honour: Indian writer Amitav Ghosh after receiving the Erasmus Prize at the Royal Palace in Amsterdam on November 26. AFP

# Amitav Ghosh tells the story of the past, present, and with dread, the future

The writer has been honoured with the Erasmus Prize, 2024, for 'imagining the unthinkable'. In his novels and non-fiction, Ghosh has put down in words the anthropometric nature of climate change, migration, colonialism, cultural possession and dispossession

Ramya Kannan

During an interview with *The Hindu* last year, Amitav Ghosh was asked if he fancied himself, as many have alluded to him, as the Emperor of the East, among novelists. His response is a true insight into the core of Ghosh's stupendous body of work: "I would say it's the other way around. The east is the emperor of us."

Among the pre-eminent authors writing on subjects 'east' and among the early modern authors to shred the stereotype of the east as mystic and chaotic, Ghosh tells the story as it was, in the past; as it is, in the present; and with trembling lips and a sense of dread, in the future. It is suitable that the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation decided to award him the Erasmus Prize in 2024, and the reasons for their decision are precisely the compelling reasons for reading Ghosh.

The citation reads: "He receives the prize for his passionate contribution to the theme 'imagining the unthinkable', in which an unprecedented global crisis – climate change – takes shape through the written word. Ghosh has delved deeply into the question of how to do justice to this existential threat that defies our imagination."

His work offers a remedy by making an uncertain future palpable through compelling stories about the past. He also wields his pen to show that the climate crisis is a cultural crisis that results from a dearth of the imagination."

## Impressive oeuvre

In the many years since Ghosh started writing, he has built up an impressive oeuvre of work, doused in a social consciousness that has seldom found such consistent exposition in the works of one author. For his fans, both of his writings and his politics, it is not a matter of argument that Ghosh is indeed the pre-eminent chronicler of the east to make an impact in recent times. It is a matter of deep faith for them.

The themes of Ghosh's work, the essays and historical novels, include the anthropometric nature of climate change, migration, colonialism, cultural possession and dispossession, how trade impacts the lives of people, and the havoc that humanity's avarice has let loose upon the world. Using polyphonic narratives, or multiple perspectives to portray the naturally rich diversity of his settings, Ghosh builds compelling stories that not only draw the reader deep in, but also keep them hooked, from start to finish, even waiting with bated breath for the next book.

## Studying the Sunderban

Perhaps we should take our cue from the Erasmus Prize and take *The Hungry Tide*, set in the tidal landscape of the Sunderban, examining the impact of rising sea levels and climate change in the deltaic mangrove area formed at the confluence of the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna rivers entering the Bay of Bengal. The novel revolves around Piya, a marine biologist researching river dolphins, and Kanai, a Delhi-based

translator, as they navigate the natural and social complexities of this unique landscape. Here, it's not merely climate change that is centrepiece, but also the tension between conservation theories and human rights, as portrayed in the struggles of the refugees of Morichghāpi.

In the context of climate change and human migration, his 2019 book, *Gun Island*, creates a world of realistic fiction, to urge, challenge, and shake up readers to act upon the urgent demands of the environment. The story starts with the quest of Deen Datta, a rare book dealer from Brooklyn, to figure out more about the Bengali legend of the 'gun merchant' (Bonduki Sadagar), and examines how ecological collapse impacts migration, and upends traditions. Repeatedly, Ghosh has relied on folklore and myth to highlight the profound messages these tales contain, including in his delightful novella-in-verse: *Jungle Nama*.

## Following a spice

In his 2021 work, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, also referenced in his acceptance speech for the Erasmus Award, Ghosh follows the journey of a spice, nutmeg, from its native Banda Islands to the world, using it as a lens to understand the imprints of colonialism upon attitudes towards indigenous cultures, and environmental change.

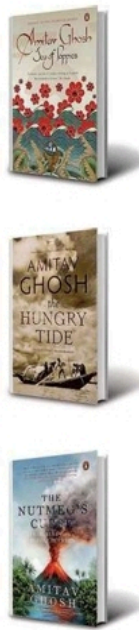
*The Ibis Trilogy*, is another phenomenal work that started with *The Sea of Poppies* (2008), followed by *River of Smoke* (2011), and finally, *Flood of Fire* (2015). Set in the 1830s, this epic sweeps

across countries, and years, outlining the factors that build up to the First Opium War across China and the Indian Ocean region, cementing his place as a historian-novelist of the east. The story begins in British-ruled India, where the cultivation of opium is changing rural lives forever. The eponymic 'Ibis' is the name of the ship that sets sail from Calcutta to Mauritius, carrying a diverse group of passengers, including indentured labourers, convicts, and sailors, some to be connected intrinsically with the massive changes that are set to happen, in east Asia. The second book shifts focus to China, the centre of the opium trade, detailing the Chinese government's attempt to curtail the trade and the resistance of British and Indian merchants.

The final book focuses on the First Opium War, recording its impact on the characters, and in classical Ghosh style, the broader geopolitical landscape. The 'Ibis', notably, serves as a metaphorical and literal link between characters as they navigate war, displacement, and personal ambitions.

In his most recent book, *Smoke and Ashes: A Writer's Journey Through Opium's Hidden Histories* (2023), Ghosh again tails one commodity, opium, focusing on its colonial history and legacy in India and China, and its connection to modern corporate practices.

There are many more books and essays from the body of work of this beloved 'sutra-dhar of the east'. For him, certainly, lying in wait are many more awards from the world he's trying to hold a mirror to.



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
Uppendran

"Yes, he's a great runner. And when you think about it, many of the great athletes from America are black."

"Very true. Some of the finest athletes are African-Americans."

"African-Americans?"

"That's right. African-Americans. There's a general feeling that people should not be referred to by their colour."

So the word 'black' is being slowly replaced by 'African-American'. And this is particularly true of the media.

Newspapers talk of the African-American community and newsmen announce that the man killed in the shoot-out was an African-American."

"It's strange how one word quickly replaces another. Well, I have to go to the barber now and..."

"Ah! Barber! That's a word one hardly hears in America."

"Really? Then what do they call the chap who cuts everyone's hair?"

"He/she is called a 'hair stylist'."

"Hair stylist! That sounds very stylish indeed!"

"Perhaps that's why they have renamed themselves. 'Hair stylist' sounds much more impressive than 'barber', doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"And if you look around, you'll find that most of the professionals have renamed or redesignated themselves. For example, the 'undertaker'..."

"You mean the chap who buries people?"

"Very crudely put. But, yes. He's the man who buries people. Anyway, he is now called a 'Funeral Director'."

"Funeral Director! Sounds impressive." "It certainly does. And the nurse who looks after you in hospitals is now being called 'Patient-Care Specialist'."

"Patient-Care Specialist! That's a mouthful."

"If you think that's a mouthful, what do you think of 'Petroleum Transfer Engineer'?"

"Petroleum Transfer Engineer! Sounds important. What does he do?"

"He's the chap who works at the petrol bunk and fills petrol in your car."

"But he's not an engineer!"

"But some have started to call themselves that now. Makes the job sound much more dignified and complicated than it really is, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does. But getting back to the word 'barber'. Is there a real difference between a 'barber' and a 'hair-dresser'?"

"I wasn't talking about a 'hairdresser', but a 'hair stylist'."

"What's the difference?"

"A 'hairdresser' usually takes care of women's hair, and a 'hair stylist', men's hair. But coming back to your question, hair stylists believe that there is a difference between a barber and themselves. A barber merely 'cuts' people's hair. A hair stylist, on the other hand, 'shapes' the hair depending upon the client's face."

Published in *The Hindu* on April 26, 1994.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

# A quiz on Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid activist, on his death anniversary

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

### QUESTION 1

What is Nelson Mandela's birthname, which meant 'to pull a branch off a tree' and 'troublemaker' in his Xhosa tribe?

### QUESTION 2

Nelson Mandela had a nickname inspired from a popular novel about a hero with a secret identity. What is it?

### QUESTION 3

Name the island where Mandela spent 18 of his 27 years in imprisonment.

### QUESTION 4

Who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Mandela?

### QUESTION 5

Name the Spike Lee movie in which Mandela appeared in a guest role?



Visual question:  
How is Mandela linked to this flower?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific panel has these many countries and was founded in this year. **Ans: 13 countries; since 2004**  
2. The name of the next cyclone that was named by this country. **Ans: Shakti; Sri Lanka**  
3. Cyclone Ockhi was named by this country. **Ans: Bangladesh**  
4. The meaning of Cyclone Dana. **Ans: Generosity**  
5. This cyclone, named by India, is regarded as the worst tropical cyclone to ever strike the Yemeni island of Socatra. **Ans: Megh**  
6. The maximum number of letters the name of a cyclone can have. **Ans: Eight**  
Visual: This 1970 cyclone was named in East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh. **Ans: Cyclone Bhola**  
Early Birds: Basavaraj Meti| Jose Jaji| Tanishka Gouri| M. Suresh Kumar| Lekshmy Hanikumar

## Word of the day

### Umbor:

an earth pigment; a medium brown to dark-brown colour; of the colour of any of various natural brown earth pigments

Synonyms: deep brown

Usage: it resembled a refurbished house with umbor bricks.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/umborpo

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ʌmbə/

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# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

### Number of people killed in the Manipur conflict

**258** The Centre has given another extension till May 20, 2025 to a Commission of Inquiry to submit its report on its investigations into the series of violence in Manipur that has claimed at least 258 lives so far. The Commission of Inquiry was set up on June 4, 2023. **PH**

### Number of suicides by CAPE, NSG and AR personnel in five years

**700** Over 700 personnel of Central Armed Police Forces, National Security Guards and Assam Rifles have committed suicide in the last five years, while 55,555 have resigned or taken voluntary retirement during the period, the Rajya Sabha was informed. **PH**

### Cheetahs released to mark International Cheetah Day

**2** Cheetahs Vayu and Agni were released into the wild in Madhya Pradesh's Kuno National Park (KNP) to mark International Cheetah Day. The presence of cheetahs in a tourism zone could offer a unique opportunity for visitors to spot these majestic animals during safari trips. **PH**

### The border length between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

**970** km. Central Asian neighbours Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan announced a border demarcation deal on the last contested frontier in the region, potentially ending decades of territorial disputes. The delegations met in the Kyrgyz city of Batken. **AP**

### Number of fatalities due to rebel groups in eastern Congo

**9** Extremist rebels linked to the Islamic State killed at least nine people, including an 8-month-old baby and a 14-year-old girl in eastern Congo and kidnapped several others, authorities said. Eastern Congo has struggled with violence for decades. **PH**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Is the caste Census a useful exercise?

Proponents argue that a caste Census would determine the population sizes of various castes and that these numbers can be used to provide a proportionate share to each caste in government jobs etc. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the caste Census would be impractical

### FULL CONTEXT

Anish Gupta  
Shubham Sharma

**T**he demand for a caste Census has become a heated political issue, fuelled by calls from opposition leaders, NGOs, and more recently, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) also adding itself to the cohort. Proponents argue that such a Census would determine the population sizes of various castes and that these numbers can be used to provide a proportionate share to each caste in government jobs, land, and wealth. This article discusses how the attempt to collect individual caste data will once again prove to be a futile exercise, and how individual caste-based proportionate reservations is a regressive policy.

**Caste Census: a historical background**  
The exercise of a caste Census in India dates back to the late 19th century when the first detailed caste Census was conducted in 1871-72. It attempted to collect caste-based information and classify various groups, and was conducted across four major regions – the North-Western Provinces (NWP), the Central Provinces (CP), Bengal, and Madras.

There were several arbitrarily constituted "sets" based on a very superficial understanding of caste. In the NWP, for instance, only four sets were officially recorded – Brahmins, Rajputs, Baniyas, and "other castes of Hindus". Meanwhile, in the CP, groups such as "servants and labourers" and "mendicants and devotees" were arbitrarily included under these sets. Some of Bengal's classifications included beggars, musicians, and cooks, while Madras added "mixed castes" and "outcastes" as distinct categories. Frustrated with the complexities of understanding caste, W. Chichele Plowden, who prepared the 1881 Census report, termed the whole question of caste 'confusing' and hoped that 'on another occasion no attempt will be made to attempt to obtain information as to the castes and tribes of the population'. However, the same issues persisted in the caste Census of 1931 where 4,147 castes were identified. The officials were surprised to find that caste groups frequently claimed different identities in different regions.

These challenges are not relics of the past but continue to shape the difficulties India faces to conduct a caste Census today. For instance, the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 identified over 46.7 lakh castes/sub-castes with 8.2 crore acknowledged errors. A more recent example is the controversy surrounding the inclusion of 'bija' and 'kinnar' as categories in the caste list in the Bihar Census (2022).

**Challenges to access accurate data**  
**Upward caste mobility claim** – the reporting of one's caste by respondents can be influenced by the perceived prestige associated with certain social groups and their position within the varna hierarchy. This is evident from changes in caste claims between the 1921 and 1931 Censuses, where some communities that initially reported belonging to lower positions within the varna system in 1921 later reported themselves as belonging to higher categories in 1931 (see Table 1). Another notable observation from these claims is that different members of the same



**Difficult task:** A teacher collecting details from a woman as part of the caste Census at Kandli in Sangareddy, Telangana on November 18. **NOHD ARF**

### The problem with counting caste

The system of reserving positions based on a reserved category's quota is straightforward: the reserved posts are determined by dividing 100 by the percentage of reservation allotted to that reserved category. However, significant flaws emerge when proportional representation formulas are applied to individual castes

**Table 1:** How caste names changed in different Censuses

Name of Caste	1921 Census claims	1931 Census claims
Kamar (Kumar)	Kshatriya	Brahman
Sonar	Kshatriya/Rajput	Brahman/Vaisya
Sutradar	Vaisya	Brahman
Nai	Thakur	Brahman
Napit	Baidya	Brahman
Rawani (Kahar)	Vaisya	Kshatriya

Note: The change in caste claim was not influenced by reservation policies or any other form of government benefits

Source: Census of India Report, 1931 by J.H. Hutton, Page no. 431

**Table 2:** Number of vacancies and waiting time for least populated castes based on UPSC's average annual vacancies of 1,000

Census	No. of castes	Assumption about the population distribution across castes	Estimated minimum vacancies required to provide at least one vacancy to least populated caste	Estimated years required to provide at least one vacancy to least populated caste
1931	4,147	All castes with equal population Least populated caste's number is 10,000	4,147 1,40,845	5 141
Number of castes listed by different ministries which is used for reservation	6,000	All castes with equal population Least populated caste's number is 10,000	6,000 1,40,845	6 141
2011 SECC	46,73,034	All castes with equal population	46,73,034	4,673

Source: Authors' calculation based on the data collected from 1931 census, 2011 SECC, different ministries and UPSC

community, such as Sonar, reported belonging to different social categories – Kshatriya and Rajput in 1921, and Brahmin and Vaisya in 1931, in the same region (see Table 1). These occurrences were noted in colonial Censuses but their implications remain relevant even today.

**Downward caste mobility claim** – some respondents may claim to belong to a group positioned lower in the social hierarchy, particularly when they are aware of the potential benefits associated with such affiliations. Indeed, these downward social group mobility claims are predominantly a post-independence phenomenon likely due to the advantages associated with reservation policies (such as when some upper castes demand OBC status/some OBCs demand ST status).

**Problem of caste misclassification** –

similar-sounding castes and surnames often lead to confusion in caste classification. For example, in Rajasthan, surnames like 'Dhanak', 'Dhankia', and 'Dhanuk' are classified as SC, while 'Dhanka' is listed as ST. Similarly, the surname 'Sen' refers to an upper-caste group in Bengal, whereas 'Sain' is associated with the OBC barber community. Enumerators may mis-record such surnames, inadvertently placing communities in incorrect social categories. Additionally, caste remains a sensitive issue, which may make both respondents and enumerators uncomfortable discussing it directly.

As a result, enumerators might avoid asking about caste explicitly and instead make assumptions based on surnames, further increasing the risk of

misclassification.

### On proportional representation

Proportional representation in reservations may appear fair at first glance, but upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that it is both impractical and regressive. The system of reserving positions based on a reserved category's quota is straightforward: the reserved posts are determined by dividing 100 by the percentage of reservation allotted to that reserved category. For instance, since the reservation for OBCs is 27%, every 4th position in a sequence of vacancies would go to an OBC candidate (100/27 = 3.7, rounded up to 4). Similarly, an SC candidate would get every 7th position (100/15 = 6.7, rounded to 7), an ST candidate every 14th position (100/7.5 = 13.3, rounded to 14), and an EWS candidate every 10th (100/10 = 10). However, significant flaws emerge when proportional representation formulas are applied to individual castes. According to different ministries data, there are around 6,000 castes. Assuming India's population is approximately 1.4 billion, the average population per caste would be around 2.3 lakh.

To illustrate the challenges of implementing proportional representation at the individual caste level (see Table 2), consider a hypothetical caste ranked last with a population of just 10,000 (0.0007% of the total population). For this caste to secure just one reserved vacancy in an institution, at least 1,40,845 positions would need to be advertised. Using the UPSC as an example, which typically advertises around 1,000 vacancies annually, it would take 141 years for the least populous caste to receive a single vacancy. To make matters worse, if we consider 46.7 lakh castes/subcastes as reported in SECC 2011, the number of vacancies required would be 46,73,034 and the UPSC will take more than 7,000 years to provide the first vacancy to the least populated caste.

Hence, the idea of proportional representation at the level of individual castes proves to be regressive, as it disproportionately excludes the least populous castes from accessing the benefits of reservation.

Anish Gupta teaches economics at the Delhi School of Economics. Shubham Sharma is a Research Associate at the Institute for Educational and Developmental Studies (IEDS), Noida

### THE GIST

▼ The exercise of a caste Census in India dates back to the late 19th century when the first detailed caste Census was conducted in 1871-72.

▼ Frustrated with the complexities of understanding caste, W. Chichele Plowden, who prepared the 1881 Census report, termed the whole question of caste 'confusing' and hoped that 'on another occasion no attempt will be made to attempt to obtain information as to the castes and tribes of the population'.

▼ These challenges are not relics of the past but continue to shape the difficulties India faces to conduct a caste Census today.

## False alarm

There is no real threat to the dollar

Both the allies and adversaries of the United States (US) are preparing to deal with the second Donald Trump presidency. There are clear indications that his second term could be more unpredictable and potentially more disruptive to the existing global order than the first, and India will not remain immune to that. The relevant departments in the government are reported to be reviewing India's trade position with the US and preparing for potential problems. While there is a strong case for tariff reduction, India must be prepared to engage with the US establishment more actively to present its position. Intriguingly, Mr Trump recently threatened the Brics countries with a 100 per cent tariff if they created a Brics currency or backed any other currency to replace the dollar. Earlier a grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, Brics has expanded to include other countries. While it is unclear what prompted the comment, it did create volatility in the currency market. The merits of the threat are thus worth discussing here.

First, as things stand, there is no clear danger to the status of the dollar. According to a 2022 note from the Bank for International Settlements, the dollar was involved in about 90 per cent of currency trades. Nearly 60 per cent of foreign-exchange reserves are held in dollars. Second, the desire to position a currency as a reserve currency by itself does not mean much. Further, as of now, the shape and workings of a potential Brics currency are unknown. So, Mr Trump's statement was perhaps a warning shot to discourage the members of the grouping, particularly China, from taking the currency project forward. In any case, India should be wary of such an attempt. Since China is a much bigger economy, it is likely to have a much higher weighting in the instrument, depending on how it is designed. Third, some global trade may move to the yuan over time because of the size of the Chinese economy and its trade linkages. However, the traction will remain limited because of strong Chinese capital controls. In terms of reserves, according to the International Monetary Fund data, foreign-exchange reserves held in the Chinese currency in the second quarter of 2024 were worth about \$245 billion compared to over \$6.6 trillion in dollars. Countries will always look at the ease of transactions in trade and the depth of financial markets in holding reserves, which clearly favour the dollar.

However, it is worth noting that if the dollar's position is undermined over time, it is more likely to be because of US policies. It is the weaponisation of the dollar-dominated international financial system that is forcing some countries to look for alternatives. Further, Mr Trump's preference for higher tariffs and the desire to eliminate the trade deficit can go against the dollar. It is the US trade deficit that supplies dollars to the rest of the world. The world will be forced to look at alternatives if the supply diminishes considerably. For India, while the establishment of GIFT City will help bring some financial services onshore and possibly reduce costs for corporations, its dependence on the dollar is unlikely to decline in the foreseeable future. Even if the yuan becomes more popular, the dollar will remain India's preferred currency. Aside from the inherent strength behind the dollar, India's interests are more aligned with Washington than Beijing.

## Improving national accounts

Methodology concerns must be addressed in the new series

Union Minister for Statistics and Programme Implementation Rao Indrajit Singh informed Parliament earlier this week that his ministry had set up an advisory committee on the national accounts. Members of this committee, which included representatives from the Reserve Bank of India as well as state governments, would advise the government in particular on the methodology by which India's gross domestic product (GDP) is calculated, with a view to updating the calculation of GDP and shifting its base year from 2011-12, as it is at present, to 2022-23. Attention to India's national accounts statistics is overdue, and it is welcome news that the government is taking steps to bring it up to date. The committee's work and its report should be transparent, and open to public comment and consultation.

In its work, the committee must recognise that several criticisms of the current GDP series are not without foundation. For example, it has been noted that the deflator plays an outside role in the variability of GDP from one quarter to another. But the most consequential perhaps is the concern over its estimates of value added from the private sector. This currently extrapolates from the data collected by the Union Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA). The MCA data has thrown up some odd counterintuitive results in recent years, which have cast a shadow on the broader utility of any statistics that incorporate them. When earnings, credit growth, and industrial-capacity utilisation do not move in sync with the GDP component built up from the MCA data, then naturally such doubts will multiply. The data itself has been questioned, given some companies may be misclassified or are untraceable, though the official statisticians insist the effect of this would be marginal. New mechanisms might have to be found for this estimation — perhaps the data based on the collection of goods and services tax (GST) could be mined for possibilities.

However, the GST data would not necessarily solve the broader problem that has plagued India's estimation of the private-sector value-added component in GDP. The size of the informal sector. There might be methods, however, to gauge the changes in the size of the sector by estimating the metaphorical shadow it casts on the formal sector, which pays taxes. Yet this is a moving target as the increasing impact of GST itself brings differences in the size of the informal sector. Finding a suitable method to measure the informal value-added component of economic activity in India must be a priority for the committee. When the latest GDP series was introduced, its credibility suffered partly because there was limited comparability with previous years. This can be solved in the next iteration of GDP calculations by clearly creating a back series, using the chosen method — to the extent that this is possible, given that some of the data being used might be relatively novel. Such a back series would certainly restore the flagging image of the Indian national accounts. Even better would be the creation of a suitable producer-price index that can transparently inform the calculation of the GDP deflator. Such improvements would vastly increase the quality of data that feeds into policymaking and investment decisions in India.



## The spectacular rise of Indian Americans

Their growing influence is key to deepening ties with America

At an India conference at Stanford University, co-sponsored by the Tata Group in 2022, Condoleezza Rice, former National Security Advisor, shared a surprising story about her time when George W Bush was running for President in 2000. After she and her team had briefed the then-presidential candidate on important countries, but with nothing on India, he turned to her and said, "What About India?" He noted that he met very smart Indians — doctors, lawyers, engineers — in his constituency in Texas. He suggested she go back and take another look at India. This interest in India, sparked by Indian Americans impressing Mr Bush, eventually led to the nuclear deal between him and then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, where Indian Americans lobbied their senators and congresspeople to help finalise the agreement. US-India relations have moved onwards and upwards ever since.

In 1970, there were 0.5 million Indian Americans, a number that had risen to about 1.6 million by 2000, when Mr Bush became President. Today, there are over 5 million documented Indian Americans (1.4 per cent of the US population), a tenfold increase since 1970. They now form the largest group of overseas Indians. Not only have the numbers increased rapidly, their success has been spectacular. Indian Americans — now have the highest median income of around \$145,000 in 2022 — over 50 per cent higher than that of whites, and even higher than Jews and other Asians. They are also the most educated, with 82 per cent having college degrees. They make up almost 9 per cent of the doctors in the US, lead top IT companies as CEOs, and have recently made significant strides in politics. Kamala Harris rose to become a Senator, Vice-President, and Democratic Presidential nominee.

Nikki Haley was governor of South Carolina, UN Ambassador and a Republican Presidential Contender. Usha Chilkoti Vance will be the Second Lady of the US in the next administration.

In a fascinating book, *Indian Genius: The Meteoric Rise of Indians in America* (HarperCollins India, 2024), Meenakshi Ahamed profiles Ms Haley and 19 successful Indian Americans whom she considers geniuses for finding unconventional paths to success. She focuses on three groups — Techies, Medicine Men, and Influencers. The Techies group is the largest and includes pioneers like Kanwal Rekhi, Subhas Patil, Vinod Khosla, Santosh Mehrotra, and Vinod Dham, along with three "company men," as she calls them: Shantanu Narayen, Satya Nadella, and Nikesh Arora. Mr Rekhi's most enduring contribution was the founding of TIE Global, an amazing group he co-founded to foster and encourage entrepreneurship among Indian Americans, which now has 61 chapters all over the world. Among the "Medicine Men" are Deepak Chopra, Atul Gawande, Siddhartha Mukherjee, Abraham Verghese and the two-term Surgeon General Vivek Murthy are covered. The last group "Influencers" includes two elected politicians, Nikki Haley and Ro Khanna, as well as Neal Katyal, a pathbreaking constitutional lawyer, and TV host Fareed Zakaria. Ms Ahamed also focuses on two extraordinarily successful sisters: Chandra K Tandon and Indra Nooyi, the former CEO of PepsiCo. Ms Tandon became a partner at McKinsey, ran her own bank restructuring company, was nominated twice for an Emmy Award in Music, and established the Tandon School of Engineering at NYU.

Indians have also excelled in other fields. They have won Nobel Prizes, including Har Gobind Khorana in Medicine, Subrahmanyam



IF TRUTH BE TOLD

AJAY CHHIBBER

## The Adani case: What happens next

America's Department of Justice and the Securities and Exchange Commission have indicted Gautam Adani, his nephew Sagar Adani, and six others, alleging their involvement in paying \$250 million in bribes to Indian officials and concealing the scheme from US investors. The allegations have been denied, citing a lack of evidence that the bribes were paid.

This comes within two years of allegations by Hindenburg, a New York-based short-seller. In January 2023, Hindenburg accused the Adani Group of stock manipulation and accounting fraud, claiming the group inflated its market value by using offshore funds. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) investigated the group's transactions but has not found or reported any evidence of wrongdoing. However, Sebi turned the tables on Hindenburg, telling them that the short-seller itself was being investigated for trading on non-public information from its own report.

In March 2023, the Supreme Court set up a committee under Justice A M Sapre to investigate potential regulatory failures after investors incurred significant losses due to market volatility following these allegations. While the committee did not give a clean chit to Adani on many aspects of the probe, it stated that there is no evidence "as of now" against the conglomerate. Additionally, the committee found no regulatory failure on Sebi's part in its investigation into the Adani companies.

If anything, Hindenburg's allegations were more serious, though the current allegations come from a more credible source and may have some consequences. But regardless of the facts — and the eventual outcome — the allegations strike at the heart of doing business in India.

Over the past several years, India has steadily gained from the global "China plus one" push. Under this strategy, companies, while continuing to source or manufacture in China, look to other economies — including India — as an additional (or secondary) location to diversify their supply chains.

This China plus one strategy gained currency during the Covid-19 pandemic, as it exposed the vulnerability of relying too heavily on a single country for manufacturing and logistics.

This practice has been given a leg-up as companies looked for ways to manage potential challenges in their supply chains, driven by geopolitical risks, particularly tensions between China and the US, as well as the US-China trade war and tariffs on Chinese goods. Rising labour costs in China have also prompted businesses to look for more cost-effective alternatives.

Even as India presents a compelling investment opportunity, the narrative has remained that India, despite its recent progress, cannot replace China — at least not in the short term. China offers infrastructure on an unparalleled scale, its technological prowess is the envy of the world, and it boasts an integrated supply ecosystem. It has mastered manufacturing technology and excellence, providing a streamlined business environment — all of which have enabled China to become the factory of the world.

International companies may not expect to find the same enviable infrastructure in India as in China. Nor do they see the same operating efficiency that China's well-trained labour force offers. Consequently, at its core, the "China plus one" is risk mitigation. For countries looking to benefit from the shift away from China, offering other assurances is crucial.



THE OCCASIONAL ASIDE

AMIT TANDON

The author is a distinguished visiting scholar, George Washington University, and non-resident senior fellow, The Atlantic Council, Washington DC

India promises a younger working population and a growing middle class, which will drive consumption over the coming decades, but still needs to improve its hard infrastructure, despite the recent investments — including wealth, influence, and political clout will play a significant role in shaping US policy towards India and further strengthening the ties that George Bush so presciently recognised way back in 2000.

A productive workforce requires a well-trained labour force, which means that teachers should have been present in classrooms decades ago. Basic services like healthcare, sanitation, clean drinking water, and adequate living conditions are essential areas where improvement is needed. Additionally, there are "soft" issues that demand attention, such as maintaining a strong judiciary, independent institutions, stable policies, and a consistent tax regime.

In its quest to build hard infrastructure within India, and to establish geopolitical strategic depth, the government has chosen to leverage private sector capital, knowing well the limits of its own ability to spend. As a result, large private sector groups are seen to be working in alignment with India's strategic interests — defence, renewable power, semiconductors, among others. A capital hungry India Inc will need to raise funds in global capital markets, and as a result, will be subject to global scrutiny.

Given this, global governments, boardrooms and investors will now be watching how India deals with these developments. Indian regulators are largely seen as amongst the best in class globally, and nothing should be allowed to change this reality. A swift response from the Indian regulatory system will be crucial to prevent delays in India's strategic progress. It is up to the sceptics and cynics to account for the government's progress. Only by maintaining credibility in the rule of law, and trust in the system can the vision of "Make in India" and of a Viksit Bharat be realised.

The author is with Institutional Investor Advisory Services India Ltd. The views are personal. X: @AmitTandon\_In

## Hand across the border



## BOOK REVIEW

NEHA KIRPAL

It takes courage for an Indian, especially a woman, to agree to take up the post of a diplomat in Pakistan. Ruchi Ghanashyam was the first Indian woman diplomat stationed in Islamabad, along with her husband, Ar Ghanashyam. As was expected, the journey was not exactly smooth sailing. During their tenure from 1997 to 2000, the couple was witness to turbulent events that strained relations, such as the India-Pakistan nuclear tests, the Kargil war and the hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight IC 814.

In her book, *Ms Ghanashyam provides a first-hand perspective of her experiences in these three years as an Indian woman living in "enemy country".*

Over the course of the book, she attempts to analyse the love-hate relationship between the two countries. She peppers the prose with many interesting stories and anecdotes of the local people she encountered and the conversations she had with them. Along the way, she also describes various tourist places in the country that she visited during her stay, such as Taxila, Panja Sahib, Rawalpindi, Murree, Lahore, Karachi, Mohenjo-daro, Swat Valley and Peshawar.

At the outset, Ms Ghanashyam says living in Islamabad was not easy. The family had no privacy, and Pakistani intelligence agencies had been tailing them from the day they had arrived in the city. Constantly under surveillance, they had to contend with the fact that their house and telephone were bugged. In scenes reminiscent of the movies, they would often discover someone early following them while they were shopping or moving around. Ms Ghanashyam even jokes that they sometimes felt like James Bond. Further, the agencies would periodically try different tactics, such as aggressive driving, to

intimidate them on the road.

"Annoying sense of anxiety and insecurity was a part of our daily lives," she writes. Unsurprisingly, the couple's two young boys were also deeply affected by the experience of living in Islamabad. Ironically, the American Embassy Club was the only place in the city where the family felt like "normal people, living normal lives," Ms Ghanashyam writes. Moreover, the town itself offered little diversion. To travel out of city limits required official permission, which wasn't always forthcoming.

Given that Pakistani markets are filled with varieties of fabrics and that there are extremely talented tailors and designers in Islamabad, most foreign women would keep themselves busy getting salwar-kameezes tailored or shopping for clothes, jewellery and Afghan carpets. Ms Ghanashyam found that, while Pakistani handicrafts, designer outfits and dress materials were much sought after in India, Indian brocade and Banarasi silk saris and sarees as well as Indian wedding jewellery were very popular in Pakistan.

In another instance, she once heard a song from the popular Bollywood film *Border* being played on a loudspeaker at a street corner. Even though the patriotic Indian film was banned in Pakistan, Ms Ghanashyam realised that it was easy to find DVDs of Indian movies at rental shops.

In her observations about Pakistani society, Ms Ghanashyam explains that segregation of men and women is common even in diplomatic gatherings. Young women belonging to minorities are especially vulnerable to forced conversions and marriages as well as human trafficking, with almost no justice available. In the chapter "Being a Woman in Islamabad," she writes that many women in their 40s would be apprehensive because men would often find a younger wife. In such a male chauvinistic culture, Ms Ghanashyam cites examples of empowered Pakistani women like human rights lawyer and social activist Asma Jahangir and her

sister Hina Jilani, who went on to become passionate defenders of human rights, especially those of women, persecuted minorities and children.

Possibly the most impactful incident in the book is Ms Ghanashyam's husband's visit to Kandahar after the hijacked flight IC 814 landed there in December 1999. The government had ordered him to be sent to Kandahar to communicate with the Pakistan-based terrorist outfit that had hijacked the plane. At that point, the responsibility of all the lives in the aircraft suddenly fell on his shoulders. With no certainty of what lay ahead, he decided to chronologically record each development of the extraordinary event in his notebook — a somewhat thrilling saga that he recounts himself in one of the chapters. Though it has been 25 years since the incident, with mercifully no hijack of an Indian aircraft ever since, he writes that there have been many learnings from it. "In the neighbourhood we live in, India can let

its guard down only at its peril,"

he warns. Despite all the odds, Ms Ghanashyam focuses on the positives, and shares that some of their friendships from Islamabad have lasted for over two decades. She mentions her friendship with various members of the country's liberal society, including lawyer Kaus Karim and human rights activist and columnist A Milani. In the chapter "Love across the Border," she shares one of the many love stories that have existed between an Indian and a Pakistani. The young couple in question belonged to well-to-do families and amid much anxiety from their parents on either side of the border. Ms Ghanashyam believes a bridge to help give them a happily-ever-after ending. Through the book, she also relates many heart-warming instances with landlords, tailors, doctors and shopkeepers. "With so much similarity at the people-to-people level, the distance between the establishments sometimes caused us a twinge of sadness," she concludes.

The reviewer is a freelance writer based in New Delhi. She writes on books, art, culture, travel, music and theatre

## SCIENCE

# How is science affected when companies fund research?

For scientists, the challenge is toeing the line between guarding their trade secrets in the current economy and advocating for transparency and reproducibility. The fundamental tension is that IP necessitates secrecy, whereas, historically, science isn't encouraged to stay behind closed doors

Rohini Subrahmanyam

In May 2024, Google DeepMind released AlphaFold 3, a tool that could predict protein structures. It used an artificial intelligence (AI) model to predict how different proteins were shaped and how they might interact with each other and with DNA, RNA, and other biomolecules of merit. Nobel laureates John Jumper and Demis Hassabis built the new model based on DeepMind's previous versions of the tool, namely AlphaFold and AlphaFold 2. Both those models were released open source, i.e., with their associated programming scripts and inner workings open and transparent to all.

AlphaFold3 was different: its senior authors didn't release the full code when they published their findings in *Nature*. How exactly the model worked was unclear to scientists who wished to probe deeper. They also couldn't make full use of AlphaFold 3's new abilities because its protein-drug interactions simulator wasn't fully accessible.

Google had a reason to withhold information in the paper. A DeepMind spinoff company called Isomorphic Labs was using AlphaFold 3 to develop its own drugs.

"We have to strike a balance between making sure this is accessible and has an impact in the scientific community as well as not compromising Isomorphic's ability to pursue commercial drug discovery," Pushmeet Kohli, DeepMind's head of AI science and a study co-author, told *Nature* in a news article earlier this year. But many scientists weren't convinced, leading them to sign an open letter saying publishing the paper without the code prevents scientific efforts to reproduce and verify the original findings.

## A fundamental tension

The controversy brought a broader conundrum surrounding scientific research today, especially research with commercial potential. Commercialisation is driven by competition and profit, so the creators and/or owners invoke property and patent laws to protect their intellectual property (IP).

The fundamental tension here is that IP necessitates secrecy, whereas, historically, science isn't encouraged to stay behind closed doors. Science progresses when scientists are open and transparent about their work and when their methods and results are reproducible and falsifiable.

"If you make this fantastic discovery and you're the only person in the universe who can do it, nobody cares. It's not helpful for mankind," Benjamin Haibe-Kains, a professor using AI to study cancer at the University of Toronto, said. He openly advocates for scientists to be more open with their software and data when they publish papers based on AI. "How can you advance science if you keep everything closed source? Nobody can see your data. Nobody can see the algorithm. Nobody can see the model, right?"

As a scientist, there is fundamentally a major conflict between doing things in secret versus advancing science. Those things are incompatible," he added.

Then again, hospitals, research institutes, and universities also need money to operate and hence bank on commercialisation for revenue.

"Universities and research institutions are putting us [academics] in a very, very tricky spot," he said. "They actually want us to patent so that we can generate revenue and sustain this research enterprise."

## Door half-closed or half-open?

How can scientists toe the line between guarding their trade secrets in the current economy and advocating for transparency and reproducibility?

One option Haibe-Kains suggested, especially for computational scientists, is to publish all the code and details of any algorithm they are working on – but hold on to a premium, ready-to-use version of the software that could be commercialised. With the help of software engineers in his lab, he works on bringing the software to a level that's accessible to a broader group of people, which he then sells.

"Most of the discoveries have been disclosed already; it's just the packaging that I'm selling, right?" Haibe-Kains explained. "That's the way we do it in the lab – we do everything open source at the beginning, and if there is commercial potential, we work on an enterprise version that's more robust and deployable. That added value we keep secret, and that's what we would sell as a



A technician uses a microtome at the Frederick National Laboratory for Cancer Research in Maryland, USA. Intellectual property necessitates secrecy whereas science doesn't, but research institutes also need money to operate. US NCJ

product."

"I can do my mission as a scientist, but I can also commercialise and potentially generate revenue that way," he added.

Thomas Hemmerling, MD, a professor in the Department of Anesthesiology at the same university, expressed a belief that divulging some of the basic algorithms but holding back some specific source code is a way to strike a balance between the "black box" that comes with full patent protection and scientific transparency.

He also agreed there is always a risk in such cases where someone else could commercialise the published work. But other scientists will at least be able to understand and potentially replicate the findings.

## Decency and deals

Hemmerling and his team developed an anaesthesia robot in 2008 that they named "McSleepy" (after Patrick Dempsey's character Derek "McDreamy" Shepherd, in the popular medical TV drama 'Grey's Anatomy'). The robot could autonomously administer drugs to induce general anaesthesia and monitor the effects. The scientists decided to explain the algorithms at work in the robot in detail in their paper.

"Because we described it quite well, certain parts were then put into other automated machines, but they referenced our method. So that's then basically a matter of scientific integrity," Hemmerling said. "If you use somebody else's algorithm, you should at least quote them and say, 'That's based on that machine or on that technology or that finding'."

But not all scientists have access to large amounts of public funding, which can affect their inclination to be fully open about any research that can be patented. Based on the researchers' financial needs, Hemmerling said the



These firms will fund your research, so you can move it forward, but on the other hand, they will obviously tighten your studies much more into some kind of IP protection, probably more than you want to

closer they are to a commercial product, the fewer details they'd feel comfortable divulging in their paper.

Collaborations with smaller start-ups or large corporations help some researchers get more money for their science. "These [large corporations] will fund your research, so you can move the research forward, but on the other hand, they will obviously tighten your [research] much more into some kind of IP protection, probably more than you want to."

That's the dilemma in front of many researchers around the world.

Some scientists strike deals with the companies: they study and develop a product the way the company likes it. In exchange, the company gives their lab unrestricted funds to continue other avenues of research (in which the company has no say). "All over the world, there's very little governmental funding to do research," Hemmerling said. "So researchers need to find creative ways to fund funding."

## 'I think it's human nature'

More government funding is a way to circumvent the conflict between patented and open science, according to Hemmerling. "At the end of the day, it gives you a different head start. Whenever I have governmental funding, it has secured me funding for a certain time. I

don't have to declare a conflict of interest. Science is just... science – you innovate, and you're free to be creative; you're free to develop anything you want. Whereas if you have company funding, it might limit you to developing certain areas because the company might have a conflicting interest."

The government can also subsidise the costs of products made by companies such that the latter can still hold on to their IP even as the products are available for sale at a lower price. This is what happened with the COVID-19 vaccines made by Moderna and Pfizer.

But according to Haibe-Kains, even with more public funding, universities will still want to continue commercialising some research. "I think it's human nature. If you think you're doing amazing research and you see those industries generating billions of dollars in revenue, you cannot stop universities thinking, 'Oh, maybe I should generate revenue on my own stuff, right?'"

He believes additional funding will help academic researchers breathe a little easier and invest in doing science the right way: by being as open as possible. "It's more a matter of creating the right paradigm so that there is a healthy environment for researchers to do the right thing," Haibe-Kains said. "But also, there is a path to commercialisation so that we can generate revenue."

## At the end of the day

For researchers working in a company, however, the primary objective is likely to be to generate revenue, not necessarily to advance science, according to Haibe-Kains. Yet he also said it was unfair that sometimes big companies can blur the lines between industry and academia to their advantage, such as using academic tools like journals to advertise their science and also get away with withholding most of the data.

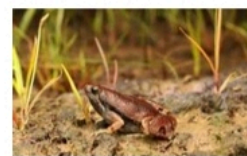
Thus, to him, the manner of AlphaFold 3's release exposed a deep misalignment of incentives between researchers, journals, and the industry.

Responding to criticism from the academic community, senior authors of the AlphaFold 3 paper had said they would publish their code within six months and did so early in November.

Haibe-Kains said publishing the paper first and fixing it six months later by releasing the full code is still a problematic move.

"But look, at the end of the day, it's a good thing they published the code out there."

(Rohini Subrahmanyam is a freelance journalist in Bengaluru. roh.subb@gmail.com)



The Niphhamari narrow-mouthed frog, which is found in the lateritic plateaus of the northern Western Ghats. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Study flags agroforestry threat to frogs

Rahul Karmakar

Researchers have found that agroforestry practices may be harmful to some species of endemic frogs, while a few are less affected by modified habitats. The study was conducted by researchers from the Mysuru-based Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF-India), and the Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG).

The study was conducted by Vijayan Jithin and Rohit Naniwadekar of the NCF. The BEAG's researchers were Manali Rane and Aparna Watve. The findings were published in *Ecological Applications*, a journal of the Ecological Society of America.

They studied the amphibian diversity and abundance in the low-elevation lateritic plateau of Maharashtra's northern Western Ghats across orchards, paddy fields, and unmodified stretches during the monsoon season between June and September 2022. Four geographically separated plateaus – Devi Hasol, Devache Gothane, Gaomhadi, and Bakale – were sampled to capture the spatial variability.

The research team found amphibian diversity was lowest in paddy and abundance was the least in orchards compared to the relatively undisturbed plateaus. Endemic species, including the CEFP burrowing frog (*Minervarya cepfii*) and Goan Fejervarya (*Minervarya gomantaki*), were less abundant in modified habitats, indicating that agroforestry practices may be particularly detrimental to these vulnerable amphibians.

"The conversion of plateaus into agricultural lands is a significant threat to these habitats and the species they support," Jithin, the lead author of the study, said.

"Given the expansion of orchards, we recommend adapting agroforestry

**Amphibian diversity was lowest in paddy, and abundance was the least in orchards compared to the undisturbed plateaus**

practices to be more frog-friendly.

Retaining natural water bodies and adding water sources in orchards, combined with sensitisation and incentives for landowners, could help mitigate habitat loss," he said.

On the other hand, species such as the *Minervarya sahyadrensis* commonly found across South Asia were more prevalent in paddy fields, suggesting shifts in community composition due to habitat changes.

"We cannot say the more generalist species are adapting [to modified habitats] since that needs a longer period in the time scale of evolution. They are spreading into such habitats," Jithin, the lead author, told *The Hindu*.

The lateritic plateaus, formed through volcanic activity millions of years ago, are rich in endemic biodiversity but largely unprotected. Traditional conversion of these plateaus into paddy fields has now given way to blasting and transforming the landscape into mango and cashew orchards.

The study highlights how these conversions reduce critical habitats for frogs, such as rock pools that protect tadpoles and eggs during monsoon dry spells.

"Low-elevation plateaus are home to endemic and threatened species of plants and animals that rely on clean water sources. Their presence indicates the health of aquatic resources, which are the lifeline of local communities. It is necessary to conserve and restore the freshwater habitats to ensure the well-being of all life forms," Watve, also the coordinator of the International Union for Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission's Western Ghats Plant Specialist Group, said.

The study was funded by the United Kingdom-based On the Edge Conservation, BEAG, The Habitat Trust, and NCF-India.

(rahul.karmakar@thehindu.co.in)

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'



Nobel laureates John Jumper and Demis Hassabis. AP

# 13 E. EXPLAINED



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## Windfall gains tax on oil put to rest: the move and its significance

SUKALP SHARMA  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 4

THE GOVERNMENT on Monday withdrew the windfall gains tax on domestic production of crude oil and export of diesel, petrol, and aviation turbine fuel (ATF), scrapping the levy that was introduced 30 months ago amid a surge in the prices of crude oil and key fuels in the international market in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Apprehensions about the availability of the fuels in the domestic market amid the global energy turmoil at the time had contributed to the decision to impose the levy. But a lot has changed since then. After the initial shock and supply concerns, global oil and fuel flows have stabilised. International crude and fuel prices are significantly lower,

and there is a robust supply in the Indian domestic market.

Primarily due to these reasons, the windfall gains tax was not generating significant revenue. In fact, the levy on petrol exports had been zero since July 20, 2022, and on diesel exports, it had been nil since March 1, 2024. On ATF exports, the windfall gains tax was reduced to nil from January 2, 2024, while on domestic oil production, the levy was brought down to zero from September 18, 2024.

For all practical purposes then, the tax was already dead — it has now been buried. When it was first introduced on July 1, 2022, the windfall gains tax on domestic crude was Rs 23.250 per tonne, which translated to roughly \$40 per barrel. Crude oil prices were well above \$100 per barrel at the time. They are now under \$75 per barrel, and are unlikely to shoot up unless there is another major supply shock.

The levy on diesel exports was initially Rs 13 per litre, and exports of ATF and petrol attracted a levy of Rs 6 per litre.

### The tax and its rationale

The term windfall gains tax was used to describe the excess under the ambit of central excise imposed on fuel exports and domestic crude oil production to tax supernormal profits of fuel exporters and oil producers.

For domestic crude oil and ATF exports, the windfall gains tax was in the form of Special Additional Excise Duty (SAED), for diesel and petrol, it was a combination of SAED and Additional Excise Duty (AED), which was also known as Road and Infrastructure Cess (RIC).

The duties were reviewed fortnightly, based on the movement in margins on fuels in the international market and global crude oil prices. The levy on petrol was reduced to nil in the first revision itself, and was not hiked afterward.

These levies were imposed as global oil and fuel prices surged in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

As the price of crude oil plummeted in India is benchmarked to international prices, domestic oil prices also went through the roof. At the same time, margins on fuels were a lot more lucrative in other markets, incentivising refiners, particularly the private sector players, to export fuels. This had resulted in fuel supply disruptions in some parts of the country.

Apart from taking a share of windfall profits

of oil producers and fuel exporters to partly soften the blow of duty cuts on domestic petrol and diesel sales, the government also wanted to ensure enough fuel supply to meet domestic demand. Several other countries too had imposed taxes on supernormal profits of energy companies at the time.

### The impact and signal

The country's oil industry was understood to have always been against the windfall tax regime. It was argued that it limited the profitability of publicly listed companies, and discouraged efforts to increase oil production in a country that depends on imports to meet more than 85% of its oil needs. The frequent review of the levies, it was argued, made the taxation unpredictable.

The windfall gains tax mop-up was around Rs 25,000 crore in 2022-23 (FY23).

But it declined to around Rs 13,000 crore in FY24, and to Rs 6,000 crore in FY25 so far.

The provision to change the tax level, however, continued to be in place even as the levy itself was nil. With Monday's move, the government has effectively withdrawn those provisions as well. This may be seen as an assurance to the country's oil industry that the taxation regime will be predictable and stable.

The scrapping of the windfall gains tax may not have any notable impact on the financials of domestic oil producers like Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Oil India (OI), and major fuel exporters like Reliance Industries (RIL) and Nayara Energy (NEL). It does, however, signal reliable and predictable taxation — and that the government now feels confident that a hard-to-manage surge in oil and fuel prices and supply shocks are unlikely going forward.

### EXPLAINED CLIMATE

## 'LAKE-EFFECT SNOW', PHENOMENON FREEZING THE GREAT LAKES REGION



A resident removes snow in Angola, New York, on November 30. The NYT

PARTS of upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, situated along the Great Lakes, have seen nearly 12 metres of "lake-effect" snow since last Friday.

The movement of a cold air mass across stretches of warm lake water triggers the lake effect, a phenomenon that has captivated weather experts. Lake-effect snow often occurs in relatively narrow bands that dump copious amounts of snow. The phenomenon can drastically increase snowfall totals, and it may slam one area and leave another just miles away untouched.

Residents along the Great Lakes, the world's largest group of freshwater lakes along the US-Canada border, are bracing themselves for even more snowfall in the coming days.

### How is the lake effect triggered?

In the US, the lake effect typically begins when cold air — often from Canada — blows in over the Great Lakes' warmer waters.

Warming air from the lakes then pushes the moisture in the sky higher into a zone most conducive to snowfall because of its temperature. That creates clouds capable of dumping lots of precipitation downwind, said Phillip Pandolfo, a meteorologist in the National Weather Service's office in Buffalo, New York.

Most of the moisture needed for lake-effect snow does not actually come from the lakes, but rather from cold air that blows over them. "It's a common misconception that the lakes are a tremendous

source of moisture," Pandolfo said. "In practice, we actually need the air to actually have enough moisture in it before it really starts going over the lakes."

### How does the moisture-laden air lead to snowfall?

With the right conditions, the rising, moisture-laden air causes clouds to form that could bring "some really intense snowfall rates," Pandolfo said.

The results typically are thin bands of clouds that can produce heavy snowfall — 5-8 centimetres per hour and sometimes more. And because the bands are narrow, towns near each other could see significant differences in snowfall totals.

Forecasting lake-effect snow can be difficult; slight changes in wind direction can have a major impact on where the heaviest snow falls, according to the weather service.

### Is the lake effect common to the Great Lakes?

Lake-effect snow goes hand-in-hand with living near a Great Lake. In many cases, about 30-61 cm of snow will fall, but occasionally it can get out of hand.

In November 2022, lake-effect storms dumped more than 1.8 metres of snow in western New York. Those wintry storms were the worst in New York since at least November 2014, when some communities south of Buffalo were hit with 2.1 metres of snow over three days, collapsing roofs and trapping drivers on a stretch of the New York State Thruway.

AP

MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA  
CHANDIGARH, DECEMBER 4

LEADER of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) Sukhbir Singh Badal was shot at on Wednesday at the entrance to the Golden Temple where he was on guard duty.

Badal, who was on a wheelchair with his fractured right foot in a cast when the attacker approached him, was not hurt.

The former Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab has been awarded religious punishment by the Akal Takht, the supreme temporal seat of the Sikhs, for the alleged misuse of the SAD government from 2007 to 2017.

Other members of the then Cabinet are also performing atonement on the order of the Akal Takht by cleaning bathrooms and utensils, etc.

What is the Akal Takht, what position does it occupy in the Sikh community, and what is the source of the authority it wields over the Akal Dal?

### When and why was the Akal Takht established?

The Akal Takht, which faces the Harmandir Sahib in the Golden Temple complex, was established by the sixth Sikh master Guru Har Gobind in 1686 following the execution of his father, Guru Arjan Dev, by the Mughals.

According to Sikh Studies scholar Manraj Singh of Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Guru Har Gobind used this platform for governance, and is believed to have issued the first directive (*Hukamnama*) from there, urging Sikh congregations to contribute horses and weapons to the Panth.

The Guru is said to have requested two swords, symbolising *miri* (temporal power) and *piri* (spirituality). The sword representing *miri* was slightly shorter, indicating the primacy of spiritual authority over temporal power.

The Akal Takht was also a symbol and representation of the Sikh defiance of Mughal authority. Historian Joginder Singh, a former professor at Guru Nanak Dev University, who has written extensively on Sikh history, noted that the 12-foot-high platform of the Akal Takht symbolised a challenge to the Mughal government in Agra (and later Delhi), where Emperor Jahangir (1605-27), on whose order Guru Arjan Dev was executed, sat on an 11-foot-high throne, and forbade anyone else from doing so.

### How did the Akal Takht function after the passing of the tenth and last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh?

The Akal Takht became the focal point for Sikhs during the difficult period following the execution of Banda Singh Bahadur, the general of the Khalsa army, in 1716, Prof Amarjit Singh said.

As the Sikhs faced massive persecution



Shiromani Akali Dal leader Sukhbir Singh Badal (on a wheelchair on extreme right) at the entrance to the Golden Temple to serve religious punishment on Tuesday. PTI

from the Mughal state, members of the community would gather at the Akal Takht on Baisakhi and Diwali for Sarbat Khalsa assemblies where crucial decisions would be made.

The tradition of the Sarbat Khalsa continued, and one of the last assemblies was convened by Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1801-39), the founder of the Sikh empire, in 1805 to deliberate on supporting the Maratha prince of Indore, Jawant Rao Holkar, against the British.

### How is the Jathedar (head) of the Akal Takht appointed?

Initially, the Sarbat Khalsa appointed the Akal Takht Jathedar during the annual congregations. After the British established control over the country, however, the appointment of the Jathedar came under the influence of the Darbar Sahib committee, which was dominated by leaders who were loyal to the regime.

Following the enactment of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act in 1925, the Jathedar began to be appointed by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), a body formed in 1920 to manage Sikh shrines and free them from British-supported mahants. The SGPC is currently the apex governing body of all Sikh gurdwaras in the states of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, and the Union Territory of Chandigarh.

### How does the Akal Takht hand out religious punishment?

As the head of the highest seat of temporal power of the Sikhs, the Jathedar of the Akal Takht is the supreme temporal and religious authority of the Sikhs, and the final word on the affairs of the community.

The Jathedar must be baptised, possess deep knowledge of Sikh history and scriptures, and should be free from moral shortcomings. Any person who identifies as a Sikh can be summoned to the Akal Takht, tried, and

sentenced. Dr Sarabjinder Singh, Dean, Guru Nanak Dev University and Jagat Guru Nanak Dev Punjab State Open University, said that the Akal Takht's justice applies only to those who voluntarily submit to its authority.

"The Takht calls only those who affirm their Sikh identity, and *tankhah* (religious punishment) is intended to remove ego and instil humility. No one has ever repudiated the Takht's directives," he said.

Among the prominent Jathedars of the Akal Takht was Akali Phola Singh, who summoned Maharaja Ranjit Singh for a moral transgression, resulting in the Maharaja receiving a public flogging at the Akal Takht.

### What is the relationship between the Shiromani Akali Dal (which Sukhbir Singh Badal leads), and the SGPC (which appoints the Akal Takht Jathedar)?

The SGPC and SAD share a historically intertwined relationship rooted in the Gurdwara Reform Movement of 1920.

The SGPC was established on November 15, 1920 to manage historical Sikh shrines, while the SAD, formed on December 14 that same year, initially acted as a task force of the SGPC to mobilise Sikhs against corrupt mahants and British interference in gurdwaras.

Both organisations institutionalised the Khalsa identity as central to Sikhism, and became pillars of the Sikh religious and political leadership.

Ashutosh Kumar, a professor of political science at Punjab University, Chandigarh, described the Akal Takht, SGPC, and the Shiromani Akali Dal as the "three poles" of Sikh politics.

The SAD has often sought to control the SGPC through electoral dominance. The SGPC's general house, with 191 members, includes 170 elected members. Controlling the SGPC, which appoints the Akal Takht Jathedar, gives SAD significant influence.

The Akalis dominated the SGPC in the 1960s and 1970s — and even in 1979, when the turmoil in Punjab had begun, they won the majority of seats in the SGPC. Akali control over the SGPC began to slip gradually after Gurcharan Singh Tohra was installed as the SGPC president in 1973, a post that he held for 27 years.

After Tohra's demise and the decline of militancy, the Akalis regained control of the SGPC. Elections to the body are supposed to be held every five years, but no elections have been held since 2011. Some critics say the SAD continues to be influential in the SGPC house primarily for this reason.

Some observers have suggested that the relationship between the SGPC and SAD is akin to the one that exists between the RSS and BJP. However, Dr Pramod Kumar, chairperson of the nonprofit research organisation Institute for Development and Communication (IDC), Chandigarh, said this is not an apt comparison.

"The RSS identifies itself as a social and cultural organisation that is more about [nationalist] ideology, while the SGPC is a religious and social organisation concerned with the management of Sikh shrines and charitable schools and hospitals," he said.

### How has SAD control over the SGPC impacted its relationship with the Akal Takht Jathedar?

On several occasions, the Akal Takht Jathedar's decisions have appeared to be influenced by the SAD.

During the 1990s, when Parkash Singh Badal led the SAD and Gurcharan Singh Tohra presided over the SGPC, concerns were expressed over the fairness and credibility of Jathedars.

In 1994, the acting Akal Takht Jathedar, Prof Manjit Singh, tried to unite fractured Akali factions, but Badal's faction resisted. Badal was summoned to the Akal Takht, leading to public confrontations at the Darbar Sahib complex.

During the Tohra-Badal feud in 1999, the Akal camp pushed for the removal of Akal Takht Jathedar Bhaji Singh, which happened on February 10, 1999.

After 2005, when the SAD leadership began deciding the SGPC president, the concerns about political interference intensified. Avatar Singh Makkar, a relatively unknown figure in Akali politics, became SGPC president and held the post for 11 years.

Akal Takht Jathedar Gurcharan Singh, along with other high priests, faced a backlash for announcing a controversial unilateral pardon to Gurmehar Ram Rahim Singh, the *Sirsa dera* chief, in September 2015, which was later revoked. Many Sikhs had alleged that the decision was influenced by the SAD — which was confirmed by Sukhbir Singh Badal during his questioning by the Akal Takht Jathedar on December 2.

As not to overlap with existing multinational environmental agreements, India outlined its stance in the opening plenary. It said it did not support any articles on "supply," referring to the discussions on curbing production. The Indian delegation also said the sustainable level of production at a global or national level was not well defined, and may become a method for imposing a cap on the production of products, chemicals, or primary polymers.

According to India, production of primary polymers was not directly linked to plastic pollution and there should be no targets on polymer or plastic production. Instead, the focus should be on reducing plastic pollution.

At the end of the talks, India said that a balance has to be struck between preventing plastic pollution and protecting the sustainable development of developing countries.

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## Production cap, chemicals ban. Why global plastic treaty talks collapsed

NIKHIL GHANEKAR  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 4

COUNTRIES NEGOTIATING a landmark treaty on tackling plastic pollution failed to reach an agreement on December 1 — more than 100 nations wanted to curb production but a handful of oil producers were prepared only to target plastic waste.

The weeklong talks, which involved nearly 200 countries, took place in Busan, South Korea. This was the fifth round of negotiations since March 2022, when the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) agreed to develop a legally binding treaty on plastic pollution by the end of 2024.

Discussions on the draft text of the treaty will continue next year.

### Why did the negotiations fail?

The main dispute was regarding the demand for production cap goals in the final treaty along with clear language on the elimination of certain plastic chemicals and products. This demand was pushed by a coalition of more than 100 countries including African and Latin American nations, and most of the European Union.

It was vehemently opposed by a coalition including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Russia, and Iran. They argued that the inclusion of provisions on plastic production cuts would be beyond the mandate of the 2022 resolution to end plastic pollution.

Kuwait said that in a bid to include such provisions in the final treaty, the mandate was being stretched for advancing trade restrictions, economic agendas, and commercial competition under the guise of environmental action. India and China also supported the stand of this coalition.

### PLASTIC POLLUTION IN NUMBERS

**430 million** tonnes of plastic are produced annually, two-thirds of which are short-lived products, which soon become waste

**10%** of the plastic ever produced has been recycled so far

**11 million** tonnes of plastic are

currently entering the ocean annually

**46%** of plastic waste is landfilled and 17% is incinerated

**20 million** tonnes of plastic litter end up in the environment every year

Source: UNEP/IOC

The draft text reflected both points of consensus and contention. Points of consensus included proposing a ban on open dumping and open burning for sustainable waste management. The

draft text also provided clear definitions of plastic and plastic products, but it did not reflect definitions of contentious issues such as microplastics, nanoplastics, primary plastic polymers, and recycling.

Despite pushback from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the draft text included options to include a goal to reduce plastic production after the treaty is finalised. References to single-use plastics and short-lived plastics were also included.

### What was India's stance?

India's stance and interventions centred on issues such as the varying responsibilities of countries in addressing plastic pollution. The country focused on the right to development of countries, and the need for the provision of technical and financial assistance to manage plastic waste. It also highlighted that the scope of the treaty should be well defined

What does the treaty's draft text say?

# The EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## FADNAVIS, CM

Maharashtra and Mumbai are a destination for aspirations – local, regional and national. He has his task cut out

AFTER WHAT SEEMED to be a prolonged period of suspense, following a sweeping BJP victory in Maharashtra, Devendra Fadnavis is set to take oath as chief minister in Mumbai's Azad Maidan. It is a moment of personal vindication for Fadnavis, whose ascent in the party has been meteoric, but has also sparked inner-party friction. From becoming Nagpur's youngest mayor at 27 in 1997 to a first-time legislator in the Maharashtra assembly in 1999, to chief minister of the state in 2014, it has been a story of rise and rise – with twists in the tale. As in 2022, when he became a reluctant deputy to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde in the government formed after the Uddhav Thackeray government collapsed and the Shiv Sena broke into two. In fact, Fadnavis is also given much of the credit, or discredit, for engineering the splits in the Sena and then in the NCP, the "tod phod (destruction)" of parties that has rearranged beyond recognition the Maharashtra political landscape. As he is sworn in as Chief Minister for the third time, the BJP is clearly in charge and its Mahayuti allies come in a distant second. There are challenges ahead for the new government, but for now, ally trouble doesn't seem to be one of them.

Maharashtra's new government will, however, have to face up to other challenging realities. Once the frontrunner in the country in terms of per capita income, GDP growth and contribution to the India story, Maharashtra has slid and slowed down. The slackening has sharpened the palpable agricultural distress in backward areas like Vidarbha in a state of striking regional inequalities. It shows up in the high unemployment figures in both urban and rural areas, a widening fiscal deficit, lower capex and rising revenue spending. Maharashtra's downturn is framed, also, in the anxieties stoked by the migration of some high-profile industrial projects to neighbouring Gujarat. In this backdrop, the new government will have to tread a tightrope carefully, be it on the issue of Maratha reservation, or the state's welfare schemes. For instance, the Ladki Bhamb Wajana, a cash transfer of Rs 1500 per month to women between 21 to 65 years of age, whose annual family income is less than Rs 2.5 lakh, is said to have powered the Mahayuti government's thumping win, and among its many poll promises, an increase of the scheme amount to Rs 2100 figured prominently. The onus will be on the Fadnavis government to balance and align its social welfare goals with fiscal prudence and responsibility in a strained economy.

The winning BJP campaign in Maharashtra featured polarising slogans – "ek hain toh sale hain", said Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Fadnavis was seen to stir the communal pot enthusiastically. As the head of a government with a large mandate and as a leader who knows better, he must now send a message that he will reach out and include, not just those who voted for the Mahayuti, but also those who did not. The onus of sobriety and large-heartedness is also on him. Maharashtra and Mumbai are a destination for aspirations – local, regional and national. From affirming identity to nurturing enterprise, agriculture to industry, physical infrastructure to social well-being, he has his task cut out.

## UNPARDONABLE PARDON

Joe Biden's exoneration of his son undermines rule of law, lends credence to charges of liberal hypocrisy

A PRESIDENTIAL PARDON in the US – and across democracies – is an opportunity to occupy the moral high ground, Joe Biden's "complete and unconditional" pardon to his son, Hunter, doesn't merely represent a retreat and abdication. It also reeks of a hypocrisy that undermines the Democratic Party, and lends weight to the criticisms that, for all their righteous rhetoric, its leaders are in it only for themselves. As recently as June, Biden had said that "I abide by the jury decision. I will not pardon him [Hunter]". The White House repeated Biden's claim several times this year. The arguments in defence of outgoing president Biden's actions – that the conviction was part of a "witch hunt" and that he was pardoning Hunter would be persecuted by a Donald Trump-led White House and Justice Department – merely echo the grouse of the Republicans over the last four years. Just that other US presidents have also questioned use the pardon is what's outrageous. Given how Washington champions a "rules-based order" worldwide, and chides other countries on this count, the pardon seems all the more unpardonable.

Hunter Biden has been convicted of lying about his drug use while purchasing a firearm, and tax evasion. His actions and conviction were indeed used by the Republicans during the election campaign – just as the cases against Trump were a major part of Kamala Harris's platform. Biden's reasoning for the pardon echoes Trump's response to the cases against him; "I also believe raw politics has... led to a miscarriage of justice." This is not merely a father ensuring his son does not go to prison. Few Democrats have criticised his action is telling. It speaks of a degradation of liberal politics which sees an action as deplorable only when it is committed by an opponent. Finally, the argument that the pardon is constitutional and legal distracts from the larger issue: A pardon that is not given for ethical reasons – for a free speech activist whistleblower or protestor – violates the justice principle.

In the aftermath of the US election – and the collapse of centrist and centre-left governments in many countries – liberal politics faces a challenge and a question: Why are voters who once supported such parties abandoning them? A part of the answer may well lie in the widening chasm between the talk of equality of opportunity and the reality of selective justice. In the US, Biden's decision and the lack of criticism from his own camp has given voters no reason to change that view.

## TATER TALES

Bengal's love for the tuber is making itself felt in the potato shortage in the east

IN WEST BENGAL, the potato is in the eye of a storm – production shortage has prompted the state to stop its export to neighbours Jharkhand and Odisha, causing prices to shoot up in those states. Bengal, which produces about 90-100 lakh tonnes of potatoes every year, also happens to be among its biggest consumers – Bengalis consume about 60 lakh tonnes of potatoes annually.

Sharing might be caring, but Bengal's love for the tuber may be at the root of its potato protectionist stance. Like mustard oil and *macher jhol*, the two go back a long way. It pops up in West Bengal's street food like *phuchka*, in the *alu posto* that precedes the Sunday mutton curry, incomplete in itself without the melt-in-the-mouth goodness of the golden fried potato, or in winter, as an accompaniment to fluffy *karaisutir kochuri*. As for the Kolkata biryani, with its boiled egg and potato, most Bengalis will pay a debt of gratitude to Wajid Ali Shah: Exiled to Bengal, with his wealth fast depleting, the last nawab of Awadh is credited with having fluffed up the biryani with an egg and potato to replace the copious amounts of meat required for the delicacy. While this might not be entirely historically accurate, it is not difficult to see why falling production might set off a crisis in the state.

There is a darker subplot too, to Bengal's connection with the potato. British enterprise had introduced the root vegetable in the state's Hooghly belt in the late 18th century. The plant's hardness meant that it would soon become widely cultivated and affordable. During the Bengal Famine of 1943, caused as much by Winston Churchill's policy failure as by drought, inflation and hoarding, it would be potato peels and gruel – food wastes essentially – that would provide subsistence to many and spawn a culture of root-to-stem economising that continues to this day.



AMITABH KUNDU

DEMOGRAPHIC PARAMETERS HAVE traditionally been considered as stable – unlike socioeconomic indicators, they change only in the long run. The narrative of the demographic dragon eating up all the benefits of development due to uncontrolled fertility has, however, changed within a decade into concerns that labour shortage could decelerate economic growth. Regional imbalances in political representation is another worry. But have we adequately examined the socioeconomic implications of the "success" in achieving below replacement fertility rate before making political exhortations for increasing fertility?

RSS sarsangchalak Mohan Bhagwat's concern about India's falling fertility rate is misplaced. His advocacy of three or more children per couple, to avoid the problems being faced by developed economies – Japan, Korea, China and several European countries – is problematic, especially in a country like India whose population threatens to cross the 1.6 billion mark by 2060. Such exhortations can only lead to a large increase in the population of poor states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand as it is difficult to raise fertility in states like Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Punjab where the total fertility rate (TFR) has come down to less than 1.9. People do not adjust reproductive behaviour in response to political slogans or to meet grand national missions.

Historically, countries have thrived with stable and even declining populations by meeting labour shortages in certain regions and in critical sectors through migration and targeted skill development. What one needs to do, therefore, is to facilitate labour mobility by simplifying the procedures for interstate migration, creating better working and living conditions for workers and improving their skills. It would be important to review the legal and administrative barriers created by the states in recent years, particularly during the Covid period, which reserved lower and middle-level jobs for local population.

Two years ago, Bhagwat had called for a comprehensive population policy and argued that there should not be disparities in population growth across communities. This concern has largely been addressed by the trend emerging from the National Family

Mohan Bhagwat's concern about consequences of falling fertility rates is misplaced

A significant fertility decline will not be witnessed in the coming decades. Kerala's TFR has increased marginally whereas that of other states is getting stabilised around the replacement level. Also, the current TFRs are much above the replacement level in several states. Even in the low fertility states, several districts will have TFR above replacement level, even as late as in 2036. The regional and subregional shortages of labour can be addressed by facilitating short and long-term mobility.



SUKHMANI MALIK

IN 2016, KLAUS Schwab, executive chairperson of the World Economic Forum, announced the arrival of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Describing this explosion of ease of access to information and the collapse of the boundaries between the physical and digital, he said, "[i]t will change not only what we do but also who we are." That the possibilities of this moment are infinite is clear. People and states alike are trying to find the best pathways to navigate this disruption. At the same time, the global order as we know it has begun unravelling. Outside the suited-boots world of international forums, for the layperson, this unravelling looks cruel, unrelenting, overwhelming. The war in Ukraine and the assault on Gaza, have both been livestreamed, as was the fall of the pandemic and its devastating impact on the economy and the people that sustain it. How does one reckon with this inheritance? What is the appropriate response? Is there one?

There is a famous song by a famous singer that often comes to mind these days. Finneas in The 90s sings, "I think about the 90s/When the future was a testament/To something beautiful and shiny, now/We're only counting down the time that's left/With everything behind me".

The Oxford University Press seems to agree with Finneas. Its selection for Word of the Year is also a nod to a generation that has inherited absurdity and chaos. Picked after widespread discussion, the 2024 word is "brain rot" – as in

## BRAIN ROT IS THE ANSWER

For a generation grappling with the chaotic world it has inherited

The anxiety of not wanting to be caught off-guard, like when Facebook and its ilk took off in the bad old Noughties, is palpable. Everybody, from governments to journalists to citizens, seems to want to take this culture apart and understand exactly what's going on as it is going on – and what it all means. Hence, the many words of the year, all announcing the arrival of a moment we've been in the middle of for a quarter of a century.

## DECEMBER 5, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### BHOPAL TOLL

AN OVERPOWERING SMELL of death enveloped parts of Bhopal, as the death toll in the December 3 gas leakage tragedy was feared to have crossed the 1,000 mark. Half of those choked to death by gas from a local pesticide manufacturing plant of Union Carbide were children. The Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, interrupted his electioneering schedule and flew to Bhopal to take stock.

### EXPERTS IN BHOPAL

THE CENTRE HAS sent two teams of experts, including environmentalists, to Bhopal to as-

sess the state authorities in the investigation of the causes of gas leakage from the Union Carbide's pesticide plant. The Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilisers have deputed its chemical industry advisor, plant protection advisor, and an official of the directorate general of technical development to help the local officials in dealing with the leakage.

VIOLATIONS IN BHOPAL THE UNION CARBIDE pesticide factory in Bhopal violated the environmental guidelines for the siting of such a hazardous industry. In the guidelines issued in July, the department of environment says that at the

time of the sitting of a hazardous industry, if any major settlement's notified limit is within 50 kms, the spatial direction of the settlement must be assessed for at least a decade. The industry should also be sited at least 25 km from the projected growth boundary of the settlement.

EXTREMISTS' TRIAL OVER 400 EXTREMISTS were arrested by security forces during the army action in Punjab, on charges of waging a war against the government and sedition. They will be tried by a Special Court outside Punjab. The trial is expected to begin mid-December.

WORDLY WISE  
A 10-POUND SACK OF POTATOES  
LASTS A LONG TIME.  
— OCTAVIA E BUTLER

and Health Survey. The data reveal that although the fertility rate for Muslims is higher than all other socio-religious groups, the rate of its decline has been very fast. Studies suggest that a policy of educational, social and economic development would reduce the TFR of Muslims, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, resulting in their convergence with the fertility rates of other communities in the next two decades.

Bhagwat has also voiced concern about the southern states losing political space at the national level due to their declining share in population – the delimitation process of parliamentary constituencies and seat allocation is based on population. This apprehension is shared by several leaders in the South, cutting across the ideological spectrum. They have also expressed concern about their ageing population, although the dependency rates of the elderly in these states are way below the global average. In the last three months, the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu have voiced such concerns and urged people to have more children. Yet another concern of the southern states is the devolution of funds by the Finance Commission wherein population is accorded high weightage – the formula puts the southern states at a disadvantage. These are political-administrative problems and states should propose alternate ways to retain their political space within the federal structure and demand assigning more weightage for efficiency of administration instead of population by the Finance Commission – going into a competitive mode to increase population is no solution.

Would a sharp fall in fertility result in a labour shortage? This is unlikely. A significant fertility decline will not be witnessed in the coming decades. Kerala's TFR has increased marginally whereas that of other states is getting stabilised around the replacement level. Also, the current TFRs are much above the replacement level in several states. Even in the low fertility states, several districts will have TFR above replacement level, even as late as in 2036. The regional and subregional shortages of labour can be addressed by facilitating short and long-term mobility.

The work participation rate for women, despite showing some improvement in recent years, is much below the most developing economies. The demographic transition would certainly open up opportunities for women to develop skills and take their place in the labour market. One must not forget that a large segment of India's workforce is in informal activities and stuck in the quagmire of poverty, owing to their low productivity. With a reasonably high economic growth in modern manufacturing and tertiary activities, as projected currently, there will be a shift of workers away from the low productive and household-based activities. The country has a big reservoir of semi-employed and home-based workers. The stress in the labour market could catalyse the process of skill development for them.

The other challenge is to create decent full or part-time work for people in the age group of 60 to 75 years. Presently their work participation is higher than most developing countries and the world because household survival strategies force them to enter the labour market. The imperative, instead, should be to relieve them from the drudgery of work while also providing decent employment. The country's healthcare system needs to improve and building old age homes for the elderly single and couple is long overdue.

Strategies to link the elderly with their families are being considered a stronger option, given the Indian cultural context. The government could consider giving the family members a lump sum amount under the Shram Yogi Maandham Yojana, after the demise of the member and spouse. The scheme has not become popular as there is no benefit for families at the demise of the members.

It seems that the panic button is being pressed for reasons that are not socioeconomic or related to demographic parameters. Nonetheless, it is important that a committee at the highest level is set up to analyse the trends and patterns of demographic transition in different states and work on a roadmap for the future.

The writer is Professor Emeritus at LJ University, Ahmedabad

all gonna die". "Brain rot" makes up part of another digital puzzle – this year, like previous ones, saw many dictionaries and platforms pick words that are attempting to capture the swell of technological changes we are living through. The runners-up for Oxford were "lore", "demure", "romantasy" which are all either born out of the internet age or have regained prominence and new meaning thanks to it. The anxiety of not wanting to be caught off-guard, like when Facebook and its ilk took off in the bad old Noughties, is palpable. Everybody, from governments to journalists to citizens, seems to want to take this culture apart and understand exactly what's going on as it is going on – and what it all means. Hence, the many words of the year, all announcing the arrival of a moment we've been in the middle of for a quarter of a century.

The absurdists have it, folks. We are all hurtling towards an unknowable, probably unpleasant, oblivion. Choking on the air we are trying to breathe, alarm bells are being rung about the dangers of the (mis/dis)information age, and the cruelties we witness while it all goes on – there is a sour taste in the mouth, and not much hope to work with. But while the world blindly panics, one generation's strategy seems to be, "this is fine". As long as we are laughing – and engaging – "this is going to be fine". There may be a lesson in that.

sukhmani.malik@expressindia.com



# THE IDEAS PAGE

# Bangladesh is unlike Pakistan

Stray incidents notwithstanding, its history, constitution and people are a shield against radicalism and extremism



SYED MUNIR KHASRU

THE RECENT CONTROVERSY involving the Bangladesh chapter of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) has underlined the country's challenges in maintaining its legacy of tolerance in the aftermath of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ouster who has been provided shelter in India. Misrepresentation by some media outlets of the arrest of ISKCON leader Chinmoy Krishna Das Brahmachari and the tragic death of Advocate Saiful Islam Ali on November 26 has fueled debates about communal harmony in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is the world's eighth-most populous country and 35th-largest economy. It is the second-largest exporter of ready-made garments (RMG) and home to BRAC, the world's largest NGO, and Grameen Bank, founded by Nobel Laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus, a pioneer of microcredit finance and head of the interim caretaker government. Following Hasina's departure, concerns have emerged in certain quarters over the resurgence of Islamist political parties and whether Bangladesh could shift toward theocracy in a nation where over 90 per cent of the population is Muslim. There have also been some comparisons with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The story of Bangladesh's independence is rooted in a struggle against communal identity imposed by the then-Pakistani rulers. Unlike Pakistan, where religious ideologies are central in shaping governance structures, Bangladesh's identity is anchored in Bengali nationalism. During the liberation war of 1971, Bangladeshis emphasised linguistic and cultural distinctiveness rather than religious uniformity.

The call for autonomy, often symbolised by the term "Bangladeshi" since the early 1960s, reflects this desire for a unique national identity. This historic resistance reinforces Bangladesh's foundation built on cultural plurality and assertion of a distinct Bengali identity, which continues to shape its political and social landscape even today.

The recent unrest centres on a public demonstration held by ISKCON members, during which a saffron flag — often associated with Hindu nationalism — was hoisted above the national flag of Bangladesh at a rally in Chittagang on October 25. This act was widely condemned as a violation of national sovereignty and an affront to the country's secular identity, leading to the Brahmachari's arrest.

The situation escalated when ISKCON's supporters, reportedly enraged by the court's decision to deny bail to Brahmachari, surrounded a prison van and began protesting. These protests quickly turned violent, with demonstrators allegedly vandalising vehicles, throwing bricks, and causing damage to public property, including windows at the court mosque complex.

During the clashes, Advocate Saiful Islam Ali, a member of the Chittagang Bar Association, died and his body was desecrated, which further inflamed public sentiment.

While communal tensions can arise in Bangladesh, like in other parts of South Asia, international media often misrepresents these incidents, overlooking Bangladesh's commendable, if not perfect, track record in up-

holding and promoting tolerance. Reports exaggerating the situation, such as claims of systematic suppression of Hindu organisations, ignore the local context and Bangladesh's unique socio-cultural identity.

Bangladesh's constitution uniquely balances secular principles with Islam as the state religion. The Supreme Court's 2016 judgment reinforced that Islam's recognition does not contradict the state's secular obligations and that all religious communities must enjoy equal protection and rights under the law. The social fabric reflects this balance, visible in the shared courtyards between mosques and temples in regions like Lalmonirhat.

Bangladeshis are known for their moderate, devout faith and progressive outlook. Influenced by Sufi traditions, the country's religious landscape promotes spiritualism and peaceful coexistence, contrasting with hardline interpretations in some neighbouring regions. The state's emphasis on religious neutrality ensures respect for religion without it dictating public life, in sharp contrast with the theocratic shift in countries like Afghanistan. Even during the political turmoil following Sheikh Hasina's ouster, community leaders and students have united to protect the religious sites of the minorities.

Despite the emergence of radicalism in many parts of the world, these sentiments remain on the fringe and have not received widespread support in secular Bangladesh. Counterterrorism efforts have dismantled networks like Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), preventing the rise of a unified Islamist front.

This resilience stems partly from Bangladesh's experience with extremist violence, such as the 2016 Holey Arson Bakery attack. The state's firm response, combined with the community's rejection of extremist ideologies has ensured that such an incident has not occurred since.

The interim government's emphasis has also been on maintaining order and safeguarding minority communities. Both Professor Yunus and Army Chief General

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Water-Uz-Zaman visited several temples and shrines ahead of Durga Puja. Except for a few isolated incidents in a country of nearly 180 million, attacks on minorities, including Hindus, have been limited and largely neutralised. Hence, structural conditions and public sentiment in Bangladesh do not favour a Taliban-style takeover or Pakistani-style quasi-military rule under the cloak of so-called democracy.

In addition, the country's vigorous engagement in international peacekeeping missions highlights its commitment to stability beyond its borders. While Afghanistan's governance has often been marked by shifts between authoritarianism and radicalism, Bangladesh's trajectory has been one of balancing democratic aspirations with a firm stance against militancy.

If religion alone could shape a state's trajectory, Bangladesh would not have parted ways with Pakistan. Instead, people's free-spirited nature and a rich tradition of cultural celebration have created a space where being devout doesn't conflict with being open-minded and progressive. Bangladeshis have trod this path with blood and sweat since February 21, 1952, when martyrs gave their lives to resist Urdu being imposed as the national language by Muhammad Ali Jinnah until Bangladesh liberated the country in 1971. Today, February 21 is universally observed as International Mother Language Day.

As the interim government steers the country towards elections, the challenges it faces are real, but the strengths it possesses are equally significant. While vigilance is necessary, the core values that have shaped Bangladesh's independence remain its greatest asset in navigating these uncertain times with cautious optimism. There is no need for anybody, regionally or globally, to be overly concerned as history shows, despite setbacks and challenges, Bangladeshis know how to shape their destiny.

The writer is Senior Director of the international think tank IPAG India, which also has a presence in Dhaka, Melbourne, Dubai and Vienna

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The rising need for social care in an ageing population is widely recognised to be among the UK's biggest public policy challenges. But that hasn't stopped repeated delays to policies to address it."

—THE GUARDIAN

## The shadow of division

Cutting off certain parts of our past can only dilute and diminish the national ethos



SALMAN KHURSHID

TWO INTERESTING, PERHAPS challenging versions of our constitutional understanding have been expressed by J Sai Deepak ("Constitution is not at ease with civilisation", IE, November 29) and Faizan Mustafa ("It looks forward, rooted in civilisation", IE, November 29). Without doing injustice to the writers, both accomplished legal analysts, it would be useful to summarise their thoughts.

J Sai Deepak believes "replacing civilisational consciousness with... constitutionalism is bound to denude society of... collective memory and a sense of history". He writes, "Simply put, in independent India, colonial concession went on to don the cloak of constitutional morality whose purpose has been to reform the native identity out of its existence with the aid of allegedly immutable preambular values such as secularism."

Faizan Mustafa believes the Constitution looks forward and is rooted in civilisation, and that the Constituent Assembly debates reflected the framers' deep knowledge of India's civilisation. He writes, "We are indeed proud of our glorious civilisation that gave birth to the idea of India that underlines protection to, and preservation of diversity, tolerance and acceptance."

Curiously, both authors can claim to be expressing points of view commonly held by people who see them as nuanced shifts of emphasis, sometimes for analytical reasons and at others to score an ideological emphasis. What is often lost sight of is the fact that our past, as in every comparable civilisation, cannot be described as uniformly applaudable, and our recent past relatively short compared to the thousands of years of ancient Indian civilisation, cannot be treated as requiring to be ignored in this discussion as irrelevant except when it poses a challenge to a preferred world view. To be frank, every time we speak of our civilisational heritage, we refer to "Indian" in terms of Hindu or Vedic precepts. Periodically, some commentators strive to make a point about the features of the Constitution being unnecessarily borrowed from the West when our ancient systems provided both democracy and the rights associated with it. In the streets of the country, one hears aspirations for a Hindu Rashtra but the attributes and character of such a state are not ever articulated.

Must we accept freedom of conscience and equality under Articles 15 and 16 to be subservient to a way of life with starkly different parameters? Simply complaining about colonial experience seems senseless 75 years after Independence and decades of robust democratic functioning. The problem can only be for people who see the Muslim period of history as an aberration, rejecting Partition for its lack of a comprehensive solution of the Two Nation thesis. But for those on the other side of the intellectual and philosophical aisle, it is time to call the modern political spade by its name, instead of resorting to the euphemism of good intentions.

It is time, then, for patriots to raise their voice in unison to proclaim that India's glory is as much in its ancient past as in medieval civilisational integration. For that matter, rejection of colonial impositions on our cultural heritage need not be limited to proponents of ancient Indian civilisation, but must include Muslim civilisation that fought the bloodiest battle against it in 1857. India's civilisation is equally enriched by Emperor Ashoka and Emperor Akbar. Each generation can decide how much of the past needs celebration and reaffirmation; it would be a matter of collective choice. But red lines to cut off certain parts of our past, arbitrarily drawn and encouraged and supported by political powers of the day, can only dilute and diminish the glory of the idea of India we cherish.

Further, these red lines cannot be allowed to be drawn in a manner to excavate the past and redesign the present to obliterate centuries of composite culture. There is no such entitlement to the popularly elected government, and certainly not for people who take the law into their own hands. The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act sought to provide a guardrail at the stroke of the midnight hour on August 15, 1947 — the moment when India stepped into freedom. It was a deeply inspirational act of nation-building on behalf of the new generation of free Indians. If ever there was a departure from the shackles of colonialism, it was that.

Sadly, we lost the moment and momentum in submitting ourselves to the exercise of establishing afresh the status of contested sites at the time of Independence, undermining the far-sightedness and fairness that informed that pragmatic act. Once again, it is no longer a matter of exhuming the past but allowing it to cast a shadow on our march towards becoming a modern, liberal, collaborative nation. Rejecting the Constitution, even in questioning its intent and capacity to deliver justice, social, economic and political to all, we are undermining a valuable asset of nationhood. With great effort and fortitude, we overcame the Partition of our land in 1947 because we did not let our soul be divided. Power, not principle, caused the great divide. Pursuit of power is once again threatening to impose a divide within it. Is our Constitution and not self-serving or self-conscious arguments that will prevent that. The final word in the Constitution's Preamble is the promotion of fraternity, assuring the integrity of the individual and unity of the nation. That is an obligation of the citizen, unlike the delivery of justice which is upon the state. Let us look within and ask ourselves, "Have we done that?"

The writer is a senior Congress leader and former Union Minister for External Affairs

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A WAKE-UP CALL

THIS REFERS to the editorial "Punishing the party" (IE, December 4). The Akal Takht's recent rebuke of Shimroni Akali Dal (SAD) leaders, including Sukhbir Singh Badal, raises critical questions about the intersection of religion and politics in Punjab. Once a dominant political force, SAD now faces allegations of corruption and failure to uphold Sikh principles. The Akal Takht's reprimand could push SAD towards introspection, but also raises concerns about the blurring of lines between religion and politics. The Akal Takht should remain focused on guiding the community spiritually, and political parties should commit to ethical and effective governance. This episode should serve as a wake-up call for SAD and other entities to realign their actions with the values they claim to represent.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### NEED FOR CAUTION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "High and low" (IE, December 4). CBSE's proposal to introduce a two-tier study for the sciences and social sciences will cater to diverse learning capabilities and will facilitate inclusive education. It will also allow students to focus on their areas of interest and potential career paths. At the same time, there is a fear of early specialisation, limiting exposure to interdisciplinary learning, a cornerstone of holistic education. Moreover, segregation based on academic performance might create labels, detrimental to one's self-esteem and peer dynamics. It will be prudent to implement the proposal as a pilot project in select schools to evaluate its impact and challenges before going forward with a comprehensive roll-out.

Vijal Pant, Hempur.

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### TIMELY RATE CUT

THIS REFERS TO the article, "A long overdue cut" (IE, December 4). India's economy grew at a measly 5.4 per cent in the July-September quarter. Economists expect a stronger growth in the second half given government spending and rising rural consumption. High borrowing costs are hurting the economy. This weak growth will make it difficult for India to cash in on its demographic dividend. The unexpected slump raises the possibility of a rate cut at the Central Bank's December meeting.

Sankar Paul, Noida

### DEMISTIFYING AI

THIS REFERS TO the article, "AI challenge in classroom" (IE, December 4). The aim of integrating AI should be to enhance and improve human interaction and decision-making. It is also important to emphasise its responsible and equitable application in education. Educational institutions should educate students about the potential benefits of AI and mitigating its risks. They should provide guidance by establishing clear guidelines for the safe and responsible use of AI and focus on student privacy and AI's ethical usage.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh



SARJAN SHAH

IT HAS NOW been a decade of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dispensation in New Delhi, and during this time, most no observers of international politics can have failed to notice a gradual, though accelerating shift in not only India's international stature, but also in its posture. In foreign policy analysis, one must consider both what a nation does and what its diplomats say. It is always the great powers of the time that define the frameworks and narratives within which all actions and decisions end up being seen. Sometimes, great powers explicitly publish their doctrines. The United States had a Monroe Doctrine in the 19th century, and a Wilson Doctrine during and after World War I. In many ways, Henry Kissinger and Ronald Reagan each brought their own doctrines to US foreign policy. On the other hand, we can recall Soviet Union's Brezhnev Doctrine at the height of the Cold War, and the Nehruvian era.

India's non-alignment was the product, post-Independence, of both our capacities as a nation, and our ideological idealism. We were an impoverished nation with little ability to actively pursue outcomes in geopolitical terms, and didn't have the sort of ideological clarity during the Cold War to commit to an alliance system. The result, labelled non-alignment, was designed more than any-

## The Modi-Jaishankar doctrine

Its challenge: It must reflect India's values as much as its interests

thing else to minimise adverse effects of geopolitical events on our ability to go through the painstaking process of domestic socio-economic and political development. We wanted to keep out of trouble rather than achieve anything in particular.

Non-alignment has in many ways remained an implicit feature of Indian foreign policy even in the decades since the end of the Cold War. However, with our legacy of security cooperation with the Soviet Union being transferred to the new Russian Federation, while our diaspora and economic linkages with the West continued to strengthen, the logic of India's relationships on two ends of the geopolitical spectrum has continued to be questioned. Never more so than since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

While many have seen more continuity than change in this stance under PM Modi, some of India's recent geopolitical engagements have displayed perhaps the creation of a new "Jaishankar-Modi Doctrine". To quote our external affairs minister: "A multipolar world requires a multi-vector strategy and multi-alignment by India... 'non-alignment' is being replaced by 'multi-alignment'". Especially during his most recent visit to the US, Jaishankar seemed to explicitly lay out a new vision for our engagement with the world. When pressed during a long format interaction on how

India could hope to be all things to all people, Jaishankar quipped that we intended to be ourselves to all people. What he meant was, we don't merely have interests, we also have values, and both will matter in how we deal with countries and situations.

Perhaps the key distinction between non-alignment then and multi-alignment now is not about whether India is absolutely closer to or less close to any particular nation or group of nations, but instead about how India now interacts with all nations. As opposed to wanting to keep our heads down, hoping that no geopolitical event batters us, India now actively formulates a forward-looking view on global engagement, and pursues outcomes in the national interest. It is signalling a new intensity of effort and the availability of capacity to be leveraged to generate such outcomes. It is saying, we are here to play.

Take, for example, the case of the India-Russia-Iran-Israel-United States-Canada equation. India has in the last few years simultaneously taken an anti-war stance in general, while condemning outright neither Russia nor Israel; it has bought Russian crude at beneficial prices while also acquiring advanced US defence equipment; it has been accused of an assassination programme in both Canada and the US and deals with each entirely differently; it has

continued discussions on an Indian port in Iran, while supporting Israel's right to respond in Gaza. Somehow, India is in a sufficiently favourable geopolitical position in terms of today's calculus, that all sides seem to tacitly be accepting the practical expression of India's approach.

The key test here is whether India is using its newfound elbow room to pursue naked interest, or whether there is what the doctrine says there should be — a moral stance as well as a rational one. When pressed, can Indian diplomats and other spokespersons present a narrative that reflects India's values as much as it reflects India's interests?

This test might end up being applied when push comes to shove, and the emergent multi-polarity collapses into a new form of bi-polarity, or a Cold War 2.0. Given that the Jaishankar-Modi Doctrine seems to allow for deep partnerships with nations along either common interests, or common values, or both, yet seems to eschew explicit alliances, there may come a time when India's hand is forced. The current approach may serve India well if Jaishankar's key assumption of a multi-polar future proves correct. If not, then we have to remember that one cannot have one's cake and eat it too.

Shah lives and works in Mumbai